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MANAGEMENT CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Bosses who turn their staff into failures

Some managers contribute to poor performance by subordinates, says **Lucy Kellaway**

 Michael and Suzanne both had first class Oxbridge degrees, considerable pluck and firm handshakes. Both looked set to achieve great things at the consumer goods company that had just hired them. And yet two years on, Suzanne is on the fast track while Michael is looking for a job. What happened?

Early on both had been given routine tasks. Suzanne did hers with care, Michael was more sloppy. Michael's boss responded by giving Suzanne freedom and interesting assignments, while landing Michael with a string of dull tasks.

Having classified Michael as a problem, the boss started to monitor him closely. First Michael felt constrained, and then demotivated and aggrieved. The standard of his work continued to fall, and his boss's trust dwindled further. As the months went by, Michael spent increasing parts of every day moaning to his colleagues, none of whom were surprised when eventually he decided to quit.

Suzanne, meanwhile, was given

more responsibility, and was increasingly included in management meetings where her contributions were welcomed. Within a year she had been promoted.

This is a tale of everyday life. Workers like Michael are failing not because they are untalented, but because they have been set up to fail by their unwitting bosses.

According to an article in the latest Harvard Business Review, as many as nine out of 10 managers may be guilty of the set-up-to-fail syndrome: treating some workers as an in-crowd and others as an out-crowd. The in-crowd are trusted, given autonomy and have their boss's confidence. This group thrives. The out-crowd are managed in a more routine way, burdened with rules and policies. These employees tend to live down to the low expectations their bosses have of them.

The pattern may be widespread, but has attracted little attention as a management problem. Most managers assume that if an employee is failing it is because he or she is not good enough at the job, not committed

enough. It has not occurred to the managers that they themselves could be to blame.

The costs of this syndrome are high. Not only does it demotivate employees and obscure their skills, it wastes management time as bosses put a disproportionate amount of energy into "helping" the weaker members of

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the group. Furthermore, it demoralises other employees who see that their colleagues are being dealt with unfairly, and may damage any team spirit.

The start of the set-up-to-fail process happens discreetly enough. Sometimes an employee fails to meet a deadline; sometimes they may simply not get on particularly well with the boss. The boss responds by increasing supervision of the subordinate, which in turn saps their motivation, and encourages the boss to

mark them down further for their lack of initiative – and so the process goes on in a self-perpetuating downward spiral.

When the researchers asked bosses to characterise their weaker performers they said they were less motivated, less aggressive and innovative, more passive, parochial and more likely to hoard information than their highly rated colleagues. Yet these are precisely the qualities that are directly affected by approval – or lack of it – from the boss.

But when asked about their own actions, the bosses could not see they were doing anything wrong. Instead, they argued that weaker employees needed constant supervision, and insisted they were careful not to betray any lack of trust. The subordinates told a different story: to them their bosses lack of confidence was only too apparent to them.

So, what is to be done? The researchers stress that some labelling of employees is natural. It is a shorthand which makes it possible for a boss to decide who should do what task. The problem is that having decided who is in and who is out, managers

seem incapable of subsequently changing their minds.

The cycle can be broken, but it is not easy, and is not something the employee can do single-handedly. Given that the boss has decided against them, they would need to perform dazzlingly well over a sustained period to bring about a re-evaluation.

Instead, the first step is for bosses to recognise what is happening. In particular they need to see that their own actions may be contributing to the failings of their employees. This is hard; but the second step is harder still: they must have a frank conversation with the employee about what has gone wrong.

Such a discussion must be handled carefully. A wrong approach could make matters worse. The authors point to five steps that may help: first, the meeting must be held at a neutral time and place, and presented as dialogue, not feed-back. The boss must admit to some responsibility for the situation.

Second, both sides must agree on areas where the subordinate has done well and on areas where they have not.

Third, they should analyse the causes of the weak performance.

In-with the in crowd, out with the out

Boss's behaviour toward perceived stronger performers	Boss's behaviour toward perceived weaker performers
Discusses project objectives, with a limited focus on project implementation. Gives subordinate freedom to choose own approach to solving problems or reaching goals	Is directive when discussing tasks and goals. Focuses on what needs to get done as well as how it should get done
Treats unfavourable variances, mistakes or incorrect judgments as learning opportunities	Pays close attention to unfavourable variances, mistakes or incorrect judgments
Makes himself available, as in "Let me know if I can help." Initiates casual and personal conversations	Makes himself available to subordinate on a need-to-see basis. Bases conversations primarily on work-related topics
Is open to subordinate's suggestions and discusses them with interest	Pays little interest to subordinate's comments or suggestions about how/why work is done
Gives subordinate interesting and challenging stretch assignments. Often allows the subordinate to choose his own assignments	Reluctantly gives subordinate anything but routine assignments. When handing out assignments, gives subordinate little choice. Monitors subordinate heavily
Solicits opinions from subordinate on organisational strategy, execution, policy and procedures	Rarely asks subordinate for input about organisational or work-related matters
Often defers to subordinate's opinion in disagreements	Usually imposes own views in disagreements
Praises subordinate for work well done	Emphasises what subordinate is doing poorly

Source: Harvard Business Review

They should discuss how the boss's behaviour has affected the subordinate.

Fourth, both the boss and subordinate should agree on a performance target and express a desire to improve their relationship.

Finally, they must both agree to be more open in their communication with one another.

In practice such face-to-face discussions are rare – both sides are usually anxious to avoid confrontation. Nor are these sessions always advisable. Sometimes the relationship has deteriorated so

far that it is beyond help, and sometimes the employee is genuinely not up to the job.

The best solution of all is prevention. This does not mean that bosses should treat all employees equally. That would be absurd. Instead it involves them supervising closely everybody at the beginning, and being prepared to change their minds as they go along.

* *The Set-Up-to-Fail Syndrome* by Jean-Francois Manzoni and Jean-Louis Barsoux