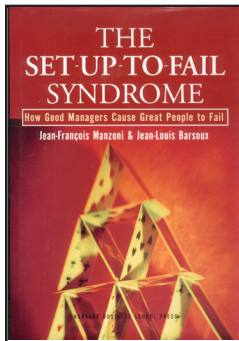


# Book Reviews for Managers

## The Set-Up-To-Fail Syndrome

*How Good Managers Cause Great People to Fail*

by Jean-François Manzoni & Jean-Louis Barsoux



Harvard Business  
School Press, 2002  
ISBN #0-87584-949-0

*"...shines a light on what  
we often just don't see"*

### REVIEWED BY IAN COOK

Does this cycle sound familiar to you?

1. An employee misses a deadline or messes up in some way.
2. You begin to have doubts about him (or her).
3. Meaning well, you start closely managing him.
4. The employee thinks you don't trust him, loses self-confidence and harbors resentment.
5. The employee's performance slips and he minimizes contact with you.
6. You see this as validating your initial concerns.
7. Hence, you increase your vigilance, to the point of micro-managing him.
8. And so the cycle continues to spiral downward...

This is what the authors call the "set-up-to-fail syndrome." It is a (sometime dramatic) process that occurs every day in our organizations. Yet, it is costly because it ends up killing the potential contribution of what are, in most cases, good employees. The authors' fifteen years of research reveals that the syndrome is a common pattern among managers.

Here a few highlights of what they found:

- A manager typically has two groups of employees in his (or her) mind: the in-group (who he perceives as his stronger performers) and the out-group (perceived weaker performers who are not really making the grade).
- He can very quickly (within mere days) label an employee as a strong or weak performer.
- He rarely realizes that he has done this.
- Once a label emerges in the boss's mind, it is extremely hard to change it.

- When an employee performs poorly, the boss typically assumes it is the employee's fault entirely.
- The boss behaves differently towards members of the in-group and the out-group.
- Bosses tend to think poor performance persists in spite of their best efforts to coach; often it persists because of their "best efforts."

The thesis of this book is that bosses are very often complicit in the weak performance of their people. Managers need to recognize and counteract their tendency to, in fact, make things worse for their weak performers.

Just how do managers make things worse? Once they begin to lose trust and confidence in an employee's ability and/or willingness to perform, here is the behavior you often see:

- Giving unsolicited advice to the employee about his performance
- Directions only thinly disguised as suggestions. The employee "gets" this, however.
- Not asking for the employee's input and disregarding ideas he/she offers
- Readily pointing out where the employee is falling short in performance
- Responding to any employee's success skeptically ("I don't know how you managed that.")
- Harsher, more dismissive tone than is used with the better performers

Some of you who have read widely in management will recognize a connection between the Self-fulfilling Prophecy and the "Pygmalion" effect, here a negative Pygmalion effect. The low expectations of the boss towards an employee are transmitted, often unconsciously, to the employee. The employee then lives up

(or, should we say, down) to those expectations and gives an accordingly low level of performance.

What always amazes me are those situations I have encountered with clients where a weaker performing employee is transferred to a new boss—a positive and self-aware manager—and that same employee’s performance takes off. Someone with a reputation for not producing becomes, almost overnight, a star!

Because the authors’ studies found the set-up-to-fail syndrome to be so widespread, I think it behooves us to ask ourselves, two questions: “Which of my staff have I mentally labeled as disloyal, having a bad attitude, insensitive, lazy, unintelligent, unenthusiastic?” and “Does this syndrome apply to me?”

Now, if the answer is, “Yes, it does,” what can you do? How can you turn things around with a weaker performer without giving any ground on your performance expectations? First of all, don’t expect the employee to come to you about the management style she is experiencing from you. Even if she wants to, she probably doesn’t feel it is a safe thing to do. Secondly, depending on how far your relationship has deteriorated, be prepared for what might be a difficult encounter.

The book offers a series of ideas for what it calls “cracking the syndrome,” turning a poor performance situation around without having to move to discipline or termination. These include some questions to ask yourself as you analyze the history and current state of your relationship with the weaker performer. They also include accepting the possibility that you

may be wrong about their actual performance or perhaps right about it but there are legitimate reasons. And you may be one of those reasons!

But will the employee be receptive to your feedback, even if she views the outcome of your discussion as unfavorable? She will be, say the authors, if she sees the process as fair. “Fair” means that her views were heard, you were consistent, reasonable and fact-based in your decision, and you came across as genuine.

This book is an important one for managers because it shines a light on what we often just don’t see: how we put the weaker performer in a negative “box” in our mind and then interact with them in a way that makes it next to impossible for him to climb out of that mental box. We perpetuate the very weak performance we so sincerely want to turn around:

The weaker performer...

- Asks for feedback and advice, and we regard it as insecurity or lack of initiative.
- Works long hours and we see a slow worker who can’t prioritize.
- Offers to run an errand for us and we interpret it as bootlicking.
- Compliments or thanks us for something and we see a brownnoser.

Do we see our better employees in the same light when they do these things? I think not.

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