

Are You Setting Your Employees Up to Fail?

When employees aren't performing as expected, managers often cite various reasons such as a lack of understanding, talent or ambition. But is the manager also partly to blame?

We've heard of the Pygmalion effect in which individuals live up to high expectations. Have you heard about the opposite — that is, the “set-up-to-fail syndrome”? This dynamic is created when managers perceive that an employee is not a strong performer and inadvertently transmit their views to the individual causing the performance to continue to spiral downward.

Here's how it works. When a manager perceives that an employee is a poor or mediocre performer, he does what he believes is the right thing. He monitors the employee's performance more closely, requires him to get approval before proceeding and critiques his actions more intensely. The manager believes this is the way to ensure improved performance. In fact, the opposite occurs. The employee senses the low expectations, begins to question his abilities and loses motivation.

The cycle then continues. The boss sees this lack of motivation and indecision as further proof of the employee's poor performance. So, the boss increases his scrutiny and pressure, and the employee becomes paralyzed and is afraid to take risks or make decisions. The manager spends more and more time and energy trying to “manage” the poor performance and prevent mistakes from occurring. In more serious situations, the employee is fired or resigns; in other cases, both individuals end up tolerating the situation.

Jean-Francois Manzoni and Jean-Louis Barsoux, both of INSEAD, conducted two studies on this phenomenon several years ago. The first study included 50 pairs of managers and subordinates, the second included 850 senior managers who attended INSEAD executive development programs over a three-year period. Their findings were published in a 1998 Harvard Business Review article.

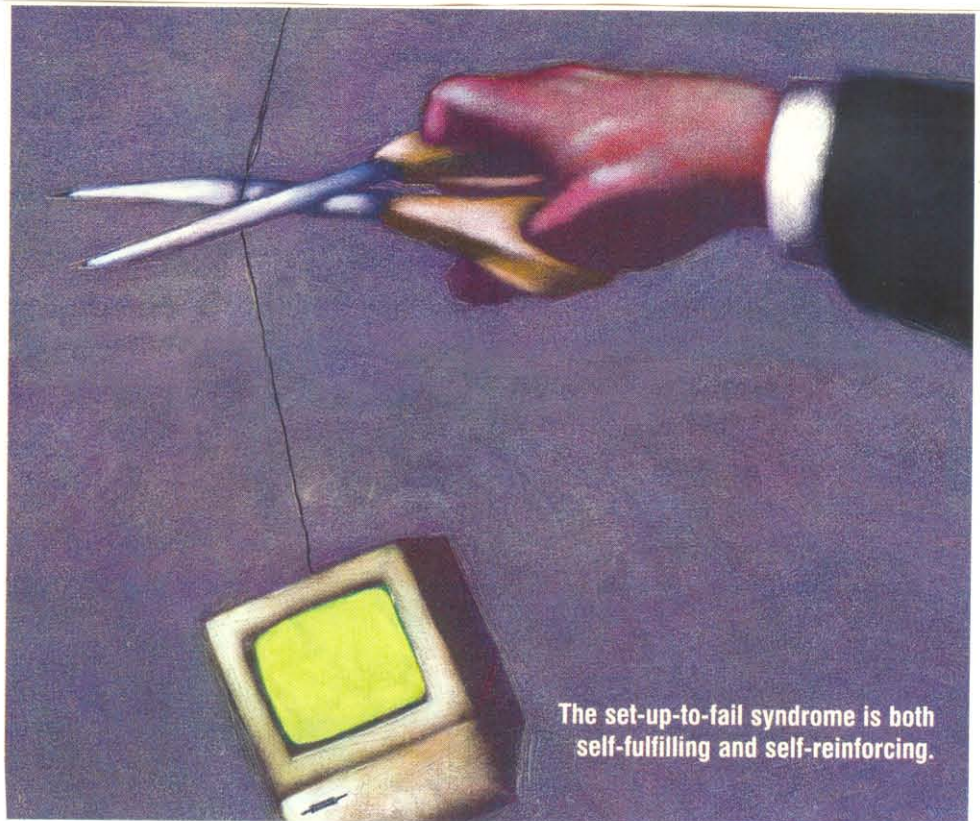
Their research found that the set-up-to-fail syndrome is both self-fulfilling and self-reinforcing. It is ironic that the manager's behavior actually helps to drive poor performance rather than improving it. The employee's continued poor performance in turn reinforces the manager's need for continued scrutiny.

This syndrome not only hurts the employee, but it also saps up the boss' energy and hurts the productivity levels of the team and of the organization. So, how can you combat the set-up-to-fail syndrome? It is possible, but very difficult for the subordinate to break the cycle. He would need to deliver such consistent superior results that the boss is forced to change his perceptions. It's also difficult to impress the boss when the employee is assigned unchallenging tasks and limited autonomy. The employee may try to impress the boss by setting unrealistic expectations, which he is unlikely to achieve.

To turn around the syndrome, the manager must understand the dynamic and most importantly, accept responsibility for his role in it. Then, the manager and employee would need to engage in a series of conversations designed to understand the situation and bring issues to the surface.

1. Set the right context for the discussion such as meeting in a neutral location and using a positive, collaborative tone. The manager might express his concern about the relationship and his desire to improve it.

2. Agree on the symptoms of the problem and come to a mutual understanding of the areas in which the subordinate is struggling. The manager would need to back up his views with specific examples, rather than refer to vague impressions of performance.



The set-up-to-fail syndrome is both self-fulfilling and self-reinforcing.

3. Agree on the causes for the performance issues. The manager needs to bring up his own behavior as a potential cause.

4. Agree on performance objectives such as what needs to be done to improve the performance; how the manager's behavior might need to be modified; and how to improve the relationship. While continued supervision may still be needed, the employee is more likely to welcome this when the objective is to help him improve and develop.

5. Agree to communicate more effectively in the future in order to help build a more honest relationship.

As one might imagine, this type of intervention doesn't happen that often. Managers often lack self-awareness of their role in the performance issue. It is also difficult to engage in any discussion about performance concerns. Some managers won't have the discussion, but instead try to modify their own behavior. Without the collaboration between both parties, real, sustained progress is unlikely. And, in some cases, the employee is clearly not capable of performing the job and may need to be removed from the role.

While it is possible to turn around the set-up-to-fail syndrome, the best strategy is to try to prevent it in the first place. Managers who consciously question their own assumptions and behavior, set clear expectations and work at establishing open communications are more likely to avoid the syndrome. They will also receive better performance results overall and serve as role models to others in the organization. ♦



Diana Rivenburgh is president of Talent Strategies & Solutions, Inc., a management consulting firm that specializes in enhancing organization effectiveness. The firm designs and implements training and development, talent management, strategy and transformation programs. Contact her at dri-venburgh@talentpotential.com or 516-679-0419 to share experiences or for information.