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Setting You Up to Fail?

Are Your Subordinates Setting You Up to Fail?

Subordinates sometimes make it extremely difficult for their bosses to be good leaders. Executives who fail to understand the forces at play may find their careers in jeopardy.

BY JEAN-FRANÇOIS MANZONI AND JEAN-LOUIS BARSOUX

THE LAST 15 YEARS have seen an explosion in the number of popular books focusing on "bad bosses." These publications have not only described the "leader from hell" but also advised subordinates on how to handle toxic or incompetent managers.

More scholarly writers on management have preferred to adopt the perspective of bosses, but much of their writing shares the same underlying emphasis on "what managers are doing wrong," highlighting the many ways that bosses fail to engage their employees, through lack of communication, authenticity, imagination or emotional intelligence. No matter who is doing the writing, the employees are usually portrayed as well-intentioned, competent individuals who, if half-decently managed, will perform well. There is, of course, some talk about the small proportion of "dead wood" — employees who cannot meet the company's minimum performance threshold — but the rest are assumed to have what it takes to succeed under the "right kind" of leadership. Implicitly or explicitly, subordinates are treated as receptive individuals waiting only for the boss to offer a productive channel to their intrinsic energies. Indeed, much of our own writing has highlighted

Even reasonable subordinates sometimes play a leading role in triggering and perpetuating unproductive and often painful relationships with their bosses.

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THE LEADING QUESTION
Plenty is written about the mistakes leaders make. But sometimes they fail mainly because their subordinates undermine them. How can good managers prevent that?

FINDINGS

▶ **Employees — sometimes deliberately, sometimes subconsciously — take steps to sabotage their boss's success.**

▶ **Leaders make the situation worse by not understanding why an employee might act this way.**

▶ **Concerted efforts to engage employees in particular ways can forestall the problem and help you keep your job.**

the boss's responsibility for creating unsatisfactory relationships — a phenomenon we labeled the *set-up-to-fail syndrome*.[1] Bosses trigger this dynamic inadvertently through a combination of premature labeling ("I know I've been working with him for only three weeks, but it looks like he won't be very effective"); over-monitoring; and cognitive biases (expecting the employee to fail, the boss looks for places where the employee is underperforming and attributes the employee's successes to external elements). These three factors distort the way bosses notice, interpret and remember events.

Although we initially identified the subordinate's contribution to this dynamic, we saw it mostly as retaliation for the boss's actions. We did not suspect that reasonable subordinates would in some cases play a leading role in triggering and perpetuating unproductive and often painful relationships with their bosses.

Yet, working on boss-subordinate relationships for more than a decade, we have encountered many situations where subordinates, individually or collectively, placed their bosses in no-win situations. (See "About the Research.") Bosses need to understand why subordinates would engage in such self-defeating behavior in order to avert or intercept these dysfunctional dynamics — not only to make sure their companies perform well but also, sometimes, to save their own jobs.

Fast Impressions

The appointment of a new boss creates anxiety for subordinates. They feel a strong urge to size up the person to determine what they will have to do to thrive under the new regime. They closely scan the new boss's comments and behavior for signs of what *type* of boss this is. Is she here for a while or just passing through? Is she approachable? Does she listen? Is she consistent? Subordinates rapidly form impressions of their new boss's competence, judgment, fairness, receptiveness and interest in developing others; these labels guide their interactions with the boss.

How fast do subordinates start to make up their minds? Researchers asked employees to rate their first impressions of their boss, based on questions such as whether they and their boss shared their outlook, perspective and values, or whether they expected the boss to do well in the organization. The

findings showed that subordinates' expectations of the boss measured *in the first five days* of their relationship were strong predictors of subordinate assessments of the quality of their working relationship measured two weeks, six weeks and six months later.[2] The problem with these first impressions, based as they are on the slender evidence of a few early interactions, is that they serve as a prism for processing ensuing information. Once subordinates *suspect* that they have a "difficult boss," they will find the necessary proof — and through their behavior (passivity, defensiveness, aggressiveness) can eventually *turn* the manager into a difficult boss — at which point the circle closes and the prophecy is fulfilled. Here's how the process unfolds.

How Good Bosses Get Mislabeled

It is surprisingly easy for an individual or even a group of subordinates to mistake a good boss for a bad one, thus initiating a downward spiral. The process may be set in motion because of pre-existing conditions or developments after the boss takes charge. For example:

1. The Boss Walks in Prelabeled. This can occur for two reasons:

Oversensitive Employees: The way individuals view their new boss is likely to be influenced by how they've been (mis)managed previously. Certain individuals may feel they have never received due credit, or blame their failure to advance on a previous manager (perceptions that may or may not be totally unfounded). This can breed a strong sense of betrayal and cynicism.[3] From day one, these subordinates may be on the lookout for the same kind of disrespect or mistreatment they received (or believe they received) from the predecessor. For different reasons, former "favorites" may also prove thin-skinned. Never having been challenged on their shortcomings by an overindulgent predecessor, they may be susceptible to negative feedback and may find the incoming boss hypercritical or unfair. New bosses also need to beware of subordinates who were actual or undeclared contenders for the leadership role, or allies of a manager who didn't get the promotion. They too may enter the relationship primed to focus on the new boss's shortcomings rather than strengths. Consciously or not, these individuals may expect — or indeed want — the new boss to fail.

Team Preconceptions: The new boss will sometimes be adversely affected by the reputation of his predecessor(s). In one company we studied, the new incumbent was the fourth general manager in three years. Team members had lost faith in bosses and were reluctant to reengage because they didn't want to be disappointed yet again. The new boss came in with a "dead man walking" label already hanging over him. At the other extreme, incoming leaders may suffer from the contrast with a much admired predecessor. When the previous boss has created a strong collective view of what the ideal leader looks like, it's difficult for a new leader to match that image, regardless of the traits and abilities the newcomer brings to the role. Research shows that incompatibility between the actual and ideal images of a boss strongly correlates with dissatisfaction with the boss and lower-quality relationships.[4] The circumstances surrounding the predecessor's departure also matter. The more unexpected the event, the more intense the employee emotional reaction. The new boss may have to contend with feelings of anger, grief, betrayal or anxiety, especially among those who saw the outgoing leader as a mentor, friend or coach. Research suggests that negative emotions are associated with detailed gathering of evidence that typically leads to unfavorable evaluations of the target.[5] Finally, even before the new boss arrives, team members may tap their internal and external social networks for information. Incoming bosses can find themselves preceded by their own reputations — or in some cases harsh nicknames (often awarded for ripping out costs). Carlos Ghosn's reputation as "Le Cost Killer" preceded him at Nissan Motor Co., as did that of John Mack "the Knife" when he moved to Credit Suisse Group.

2. How the Boss Makes Things Worse. Subordinates can also misconstrue the actions of their bosses. This can happen to new and established bosses alike.

New Bosses: Subordinates pay close attention to how their boss behaves, not just toward the team collectively, but especially toward them as individuals. They are on the lookout for indications of their relative standing within the group and how well they're doing. They watch their boss interact with their colleagues. They notice who the boss spends time with, what the boss says or does not say. This extreme vigilance, particularly early on, can encourage

subordinates to make too much of casual comments, rushed feedback or perceived slights. Routine oversights — such as the boss's failing to follow up on a suggestion or remarking on a success without mentioning everyone who contributed — can prompt speculation that the boss is a "phony," a "hard-ass" or "plays favorites." In their rush to protect themselves from threats, subordinates may discern false or exaggerated patterns in the new boss's behavior. Such snap judgments reflect the "fundamental attribution error," where people tend to latch onto and overestimate dispositional or personality-based factors when explaining the behavior of others, while underestimating situational factors.[6] The leader's early decisions will also be scrutinized for meaning. Given the new boss's incomplete understanding of the context, some of these decisions are bound to have unforeseen consequences. Subordinates often underestimate the time and attention constraints on the new boss, and the cost of delay or of acquiring more ample information. Consequently, if some individuals suffer as a result of an early decision, the boss may

be assumed to have created the situation knowingly or else to be "sending a signal." The decision process may also come under scrutiny. The boss's failure to consult or inform one or more subordinates about a decision may be enough to trigger an impression that the boss "doesn't seem very open." At the same time, the new boss will be looking for areas of potential improvement. In some cases, the new leader will have been appointed with an explicit mandate to make changes. As a result, the new boss may be tempted to move too fast, under the mistaken assumption that members of the team are aware of problems and agree on the level of urgency. Very quickly, the new boss can elicit a negative label, branded as the "clueless" newcomer who wants to "change everything" and does not understand or respect the culture.

Established Bosses: While the mislabeling of a boss is more common early on in the relationship, it can also happen in the midst of previously satisfactory relationships. Established bosses may reach a point where their style starts to irritate one or more of their subordinates, who may begin to feel as though the boss has "overstayed his welcome." A hard-charging style, for example, is terrific when the company is in turnaround mode, but can be tiring once the ship has been righted. A subordinate's negative reaction may be the result of a boss's particular decision, action or comment that serves as a "final straw," or it may simply be the result of residual wear and tear in the relationship — a buildup of toxins that can no longer be evacuated by the social system. In another case, the leadership needs of the situation may be *perceived* by some subordinates to have changed. Arguably, this is what happened to Scott McNealy at Sun Microsystems Inc. Well suited to the mobilizing role required during the boom years, he lost the confidence of close colleagues as the right person to lead Sun out of the problems caused when the tech bubble burst. Problems also may arise when the boss has led the team at an intense pace or pushed through a lot of painful measures and has run out of good will with some or all of the team. At this point, it's as though a switch has tripped in subordinates' minds. They lose both empathy for the boss and confidence that this is the right person to lead them into the next phase. The pep talks that used to create a buzz and re-energize employees may begin to feel forced and formulaic, and innovative propositions may come across as disconnected

from reality. Whether for an incoming boss or an established one, once a negative label is activated, the situation tends to go from bad to worse. A number of reinforcing mechanisms kick in, making it unlikely that the negative label will be overturned.

Perceiving the Boss's Behavior

Organizations are complex, ambiguous and information-rich environments. To avoid being overwhelmed, people simplify, quickly identifying the most salient characteristics or most plausible explanations and discarding others. While this allows them to reduce information-processing requirements, it leaves them open to well-established errors known as *confirmatory biases.* These biases influence the information processing of subordinates in four ways.

1. What They Notice. Organizational reality produces a constant flow of signals — some observed directly (both verbal and nonverbal), some reported by others and some inferred from data. With too much information to process, individuals in organizations have to focus on what matters most. Labels help people to filter out data that seem "less relevant." Classic experiments in social psychology and visual cognition show how people's attention is guided by their expectations — and to what extent they can remain oblivious to even the most discrepant information (like the intrusion of someone in a gorilla suit) when they're concentrating on other things.[7] If such blindness can occur on straightforward, time-bound and uninterrupted observation tasks, it's all the more likely in situations where people are under *real* pressure, tired, distracted, and have an emotional history with the person they're observing. Under these conditions, it is hardly surprising that subordinates who regard their boss as meddling or coercive will tend to notice instances when the boss interferes or speaks abrasively, but pay much less attention when the boss acts in a more empowering fashion.

2. What They Make of It. Organizational reality is not just rich but also highly ambiguous, leaving considerable room for different readings of the same data. Subordinates who have an unfavorable impression of the boss are liable to interpret the boss's actions or comments negatively. For example, should the boss favor them in some way, they will see it as having been forced

upon the boss ("he had no choice"); if the boss does them a disservice, they will exaggerate the intent ("he had lots of alternatives"). One of the psychological traps subordinates fall into is "over-intentionalizing" — projecting hidden intent where there is none. The same actions can be interpreted very differently depending on how subordinates view their boss. (See "Boss Behavior From Different Angles.")

As a result of these attribution biases, bosses may find that they are disproportionately blamed for actions or decisions that have a negative impact on subordinates, while they don't receive due credit for positive initiatives. In one case we studied, the introduction of a new working-from-home policy intended to benefit employees was viewed by some team members as yet another cost-cutting measure, since it reduced the company's need for office space.

3. What They Remember. The tendency to "over-intentionalize" leads subordinates to make negative inferences about boss behavior. Research on memory suggests that those inferences may be stored away as *likely* causes and are later retrieved as *actual* causes.[8] In other words, suppositions gradually harden up to become facts. Moreover, information that is stored away does not remain uncorrupted. It decays; it gets confused with other memories. It even becomes contaminated by information received after the behavior has occurred.

Research on false memories shows that people can "remember" things that did not happen but are generally consistent with their view of how things are. Memory turns out to be a reconstruction of the past, not simply a reproduction of it.

4. What They Discuss and With Whom. The preceding cognitive biases can be reinforced by subordinates' interaction patterns. What begins with a single detractor or strained relationship can easily spread to the rest of the team. Subordinates compare notes. When they feel let down or disrespected by the boss, one of the first things they do is to seek a "reality check" with a colleague. Typically, to get such feedback, they turn first to those who may be least inclined to defend the boss — rather than to the boss's informal lieutenant(s). Research shows that members of the boss's "out-group" spend more time than the "in-group" discussing and analyzing the leader's

differential treatment of subordinates.[9] Of course, their choice of informants determines the kind of feedback they get. Their views of the boss are not only corroborated but also reinforced by further reports of lapses or misdeeds. Discussions around the coffee machine or water cooler ensure that disgruntled team members develop an even more negative view of the boss. If the boss puts a foot wrong, they will be told about it. Over time, even subordinates who try to maintain a more balanced view may find themselves caught up in the general negative mood.[10]

Driving the Boss's Behavior

Beyond biasing their perceptions of the boss's actions, labels also guide subordinates' behavior toward the boss — and hence the boss's responses toward them. Consciously or not, subordinates can *provoke* their bosses in two ways.

BOSS BEHAVIOR FROM DIFFERENT ANGLES

Organizations are complicated, overwhelming environments. To survive, sometimes employees oversimplify — jumping to conclusions about a boss's behavior based on whether they were already inclined to think the boss was "good" or "bad."

| OBSERVED BEHAVIOR	SUBORDINATE INTERPRETATION	
	Good boss	**Bad boss**
Gives critical feedback	Honest	Abrasive
Makes a unilateral decision	Decisive	Autocratic
Instructs work to be redone	Demanding	Impossible to please
Imposes performance metrics	Disciplined	Control freak
Works weekends	Driven	Obsessive
Sticks with a dubious course of action	Persistent	Stubborn
Ignores his boss's advice	Self-confident	Arrogant
Gives unsolicited advice	Helpful	Meddlesome
Asks specific questions	Informed	Micromanager
Delays response to proposal	Reflective	Unsupportive
Does not punish a mistake	Compassionate	Spineless
Loses temper in public	Passionate	Temperamental
Manages by walking about	Empathic	Clueless
Breaks a promise	Opportunistic	Untrustworthy
Limits interaction times	Structured	Unapproachable

Passive Provocation. Subordinates who begin to see their boss as incompetent (which incoming bosses generally are for several weeks) or difficult may be less forthcoming about problems and less prepared to ask the boss for help. The lack of contact lessens the boss's sensitivity to either the difficulties faced or the progress made by the subordinate. It also diminishes the boss's ability to contribute to the decision-making process and to obtain reassurance that the subordinate has things well in hand. This

the boss's critical feedback on the grounds that it is driven by the boss's disposition rather than their own performance flaws.[11] Of course, on realizing that the feedback has been ignored, the boss may be tempted to turn up the volume and issue even more forceful instructions — thus further confirming the subordinates' negative view of the boss.

Active Provocation. Subordinates who suspect that the new boss may be "just like" the old one may test out the new boss, perhaps by bringing up past injustices, including those related to pay or promotion decisions. Such behavior is clearly frustrating for the new boss. Why should he be held responsible for or feel obliged to repair the alleged misdeeds of others? Yet the aggrieved subordinate is still living with the consequences — in terms of missed training or career opportunities, diminished status, lower pay and so on. Even if the boss sympathizes with the subordinate, it may be difficult to "put matters right." Hence, the new boss may be blamed not for what he has done, but for what he "refuses" to do — while the subordinate quickly acquires a reputation for being "whiny" or "aggressive." Going one step further, subordinates who view their boss as unreasonable have ways of eliciting reactions from the boss that could be construed as unreasonable or unfair. They may choose to raise issues that the boss does not want raised (past hiring or promotion decisions) or that, in the boss's mind, have already been settled. Subordinates may make proposals in the wrong forum or at a time when the boss simply does not have the mental bandwidth to process what he perceives as a digression. Subordinates who think that their boss "never listens" can prove it to themselves and others by making a suggestion at a time when the boss *cannot* listen. Although "irrational" from the boss's perspective, such behavior allows subordinates to deflect the blame for this dysfunctional relationship onto their "impossible" boss and to lessen their own responsibility. This behavior can be curiously reassuring for subordinates and is consistent with research into *self-handicapping*, which suggests that people's motivation to protect their self-esteem and sense of competence will sometimes lead them deliberately to sabotage their own chances of success.[12]

CAUSAL MAP

It's true that subordinates will sometimes form an inaccurate, negative picture of their boss. But it's also true that bosses can make the situation worse by the way they respond. Whether they withdraw or become more coercive, bosses typically end up behaving in ways that match their subordinates' negative expectations. The ultimate result? The negative perception becomes a reality.
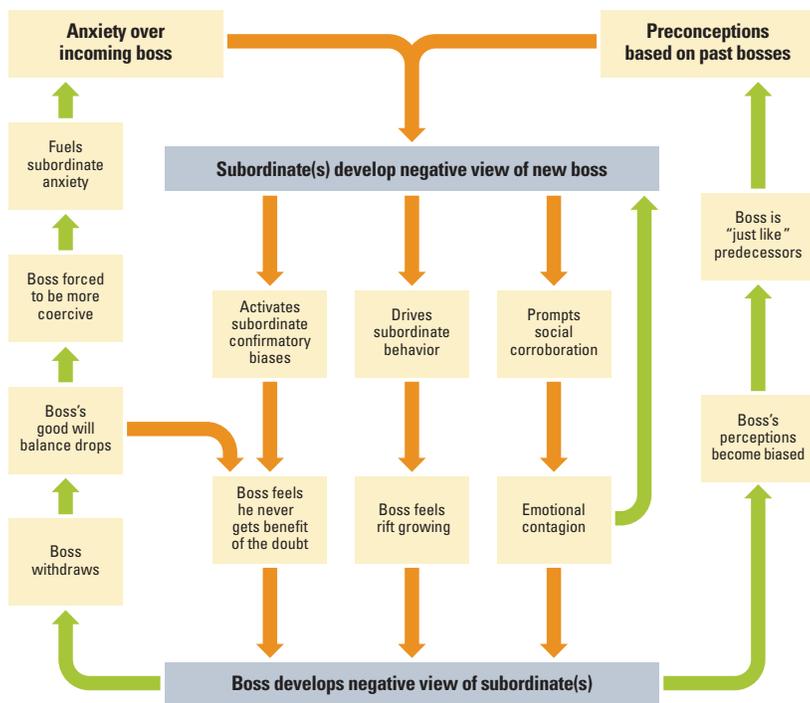
lack of contact is likely to raise the boss's anxiety about being blindsided and frustration with the subordinate, who comes across as evasive or uncooperative. As a result, the boss may feel compelled to intensify monitoring and to ask more pointed questions of the subordinate, thus confirming the subordinate's view that exchanges with the boss are generally unpleasant. Similarly, subordinates who find the boss "harsh" or "unfair" may decide to discount

How Unwary Bosses Get Trapped

It's easy for bosses to get drawn into this process. As they start to sense that they're not getting through to some of their subordinates, they fall prey to the very same biases and blinders that afflict their subordinates — including labeling, selective observation and recall and biased attributions. Research shows that people are more inclined to make simplistic cognitive judgments when they are overstretched, distracted or pressed for time.[13] New bosses want to know who they can depend on for support and will quickly pick up on signals that certain relationships are going to prove complicated or "high maintenance." The propensity of bosses to start sorting their subordinates into an "in-group" and an "out-group" is highlighted by a body of research known as leader-member exchange theory.[14] Field studies suggest that these distinctions emerge quickly and remain surprisingly stable over time.[15] Once a boss has begun to doubt the attitude or motives of certain subordinates, he will distort the incoming evidence to match the existing label. The same behavior or actions from subordinates will therefore trigger very different attributions depending on what the boss thinks of the individual(s) concerned. Working long hours, for example, can be interpreted as a sign of dedication from a person the boss regards as "smart," but as evidence of an inability to prioritize or a slow mind from someone for whom the boss has less respect. As bosses develop a negative image of part or all of their team, they will tend to adjust their behavior accordingly. New bosses who experience difficulty in engaging with a mistrustful team may overcompensate in other directions. They may invest their energies with other stakeholders (their bosses, clients, suppliers, analysts) or may choose to focus on facets of their job that they have mastered (strategy, operations, marketing, finance). In other words, they may retreat into a comfort zone and disconnect from the team. Another common reaction when bosses feel a lack of engagement from subordinates is to become more forceful and coercive. Bosses may react especially badly if the signals coming back are sufficiently disconnected from their own self-concept. For example, if a boss is suspected of bias when she has done everything possible to be transparent or is reproached for not listening when he thinks he *has* been listening, the boss's response may be aggressive

rather than conciliatory: "You think I'm being harsh? I'll show you harsh!" At which point the subordinates respond, "We rest our case." Whether they withdraw or become more coercive, bosses typically end up behaving in ways that match their subordinates' negative expectations. While a subordinate may be primarily responsible for triggering the process, both parties keep it going with their mutual biases — and become locked in a double self-fulfilling process. (See "Causal Map.")

Because the resulting vicious circles are difficult to interrupt and unlikely to self-correct, preventing their occurrence must be a priority for bosses.

Implications for Bosses

Our research shows that bosses must be mindful of, and should explicitly manage, their own labeling, expectations and biases. However, that is not enough. For boss-subordinate relationships to work, bosses have to mind not only their own mental processes but also those of their subordinates. To avoid acquiring an undeserved negative label, individual bosses must take four important steps.

1. Understand the Situation. New bosses need to be aware of what they are walking into, both in business and human terms. Is this a turnaround, a realignment or an upholding-success challenge? Prior to taking charge, bosses must find out whether there is a perceived need for change in their organization and, if so, how widely shared is that view. Prospective bosses should also ask how their arrival is likely to be perceived. What was their predecessor like, and what were the circumstances of the predecessor's exit? Coming after a weak boss, a tough boss or someone who has grown stale, the newcomer is likely to be welcomed and to start out with a positive "opening balance." Conversely, the new boss who comes after several bad bosses may start out "in the red." Similarly, when succeeding a well-liked boss who was removed for not being hard-nosed enough, the new boss can expect a cautious reception. Incoming leaders need to figure out where they stand. When Bob Eckert took over as CEO of Mattel Inc., he asked his top team to submit anonymous questions. One question read: "I've heard you are an in-the-trenches manager who listens to the lower levels. Does this mean you'll go around us and make decisions without involving us?" Eckert realized, "I had completely

underestimated their wariness … They had done as much homework on me as I had done on Mattel."[16] Fortunately, a question-and-answer session allowed him to dispel that preconception.

2. Invest Early in Subordinates. New bosses must spend significant time one-on-one with subordinates for three reasons.

To understand them. The new boss needs to find out how subordinates see the company's challenges; how they related individually to the previous boss and what they expect of the new boss; and what strengths, weaknesses and other characteristics they bring to their jobs.

To get to know them. Incoming leaders can choose to be either more or less involved in the creation of their subordinates' first impressions. Frequent contacts in the developmental stages of the relationship help bosses to establish the rules of engagement with their subordinates, clarify their expectations and explain key aspects of their leadership style. This kind of clarity goes a long way toward preventing bad dynamics, which are so often fueled by unstated expectations and misunderstandings over priorities.

To establish a rapport. Time is the new leader's scarcest resource. Investing precious time in individuals signals the boss's commitment to them. Developing a rapport with subordinates reassures them that employees will be respected as individuals even if their performance falls short of their own and their boss's expectations. It also helps to decrease anxiety and defensiveness associated with feedback, as well as reluctance to approach the boss for advice.

3. Be Mindful of One's Own Behavior. New leaders often overestimate the extent to which their good intentions and good character will shine through. Demonstrating one's "authentic self" does not mean "being natural." Rather, it requires managers to seize everyday opportunities to *demonstrate* that they are trustworthy, supportive and fair. The subordinate of one outstanding leader in our study recalled: "When I first started working with him, I had the feeling that he was not very open to employee input. So I would go: 'Yes, yes, OK. I'll do that. Whatever you say.' And the second or third meeting he said: 'You can push back on me, you know. I'm not always right.' So I've

tested him on this over time, and he's never reacted badly." Managers need to establish and maintain a positive goodwill balance with their subordinates, both individually and collectively. They draw on that store of good will every time they ask subordinates for special efforts, impose their will or make "unforced errors." To be able to afford such withdrawals, managers need to make regular deposits — especially by taking actions that help subordinates in their work, demonstrating openness to subordinate input or supporting them in their careers. The timing of these deposits also matters. A few well-chosen efforts early on in the relationship will create momentum and help the boss to acquire a positive label. Once team members see the leader through a benign lens, everything becomes simpler for the boss: positive actions receive more goodwill credit, while unexpected demands and errors incur smaller losses. Conversely, as we have seen, early errors can prove particularly damaging.

4. Intervene Early. When bosses feel that they're not getting the credit they deserve from subordinates or sense that certain subordinates are not engaging, they have to make an effort on two fronts:

Beware of labeling. Some subordinates may be more marked by past experiences than others and may take longer to come around to the new leader's approach. This puts the onus on the boss to maintain sufficient mental bandwidth to react productively to the reticence of these subordinates and resist jumping to hasty conclusions about them or writing them off prematurely. Bosses must remind themselves why they want to give subordinates — particularly those who had complicated interactions with prior leaders — a real chance to connect, and must realize that this process cannot be instantaneous.

Act quickly. If in spite of the leader's proactive efforts a malaise seems to be developing, it is critical to act quickly. Managers often withhold negative feedback at the outset, assuming that it might spoil the development of a working relationship. But if a subordinate is doing something that concerns the boss, that employee needs to be told sooner rather than later. While it may not be pleasant for either party, corrective feedback delivered early can be accepted as part of the normal adaptation process. Delayed intervention only raises the threat and embarrassment

attached to the issue. It gives the feedback a punitive edge and reduces the chances that the subordinate will react constructively. Often, what prevents bosses from entering this discussion is the assumption that they *know* what is driving the behavior or outcome they perceive, be it lack of skill, judgment or effort. When bosses make the effort to check, they often discover that they have misread the situation, misunderstood the subordinate's conduct or motives or overlooked mitigating factors (e.g., lack of training, lack of time, too many responsibilities, unclear instructions or personal circumstances, such as family problems). The fact that the boss is willing to double-check to see if his initial reaction is right gives employees proof that they will be evaluated fairly.

Forewarned Is Forearmed

While bosses certainly need to work on their own behavior, the other side of the equation is equally important: subordinates are not blameless or powerless victims. The fact is that they have collective histories and individual sensitivities, as well as anxieties and mental biases, and that these sometimes can make it extremely difficult for bosses to be effective leaders. Bosses, therefore, must try to understand the interpersonal context they are walking into before they get sucked into a vicious circle with one or more subordinates. As Mahatma Gandhi famously put it: "The moment there is suspicion about a person's motives, everything he does becomes tainted."

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