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TOOL KIT

A Better Way to Deliver Bad News

Critiquing weak performance is a job nobody likes. But by taking a more open approach, you can be a better boss—and get a lot more from your team.

by Jean-François Manzoni

A Better Way to Deliver Bad News

The Idea in Brief

That dreaded moment has come: You're delivering critical feedback to an employee. Despite your best efforts, the conversation is a disaster: tempers flare, the employee gets defensive, your relationship grows strained.

What happened? Like most managers, you probably inadvertently sabotaged the meeting—preparing for it in a way that stifled honest discussion and prevented you from delivering feedback effectively.

In other words, you most likely engaged in **restrictive framing**—a *narrow*, *binary*, and *frozen* approach to feedback: You initiated the conversation without considering alternative explanations for the problem behavior, assumed a win-or-lose outcome, and rigidly maintained your assumptions during the conversation.

Delivering corrective feedback doesn't have to be so difficult—if you use a more open-minded, flexible approach that convinces employees the process is fair.

The Idea in Practice

RESTRICTIVE FRAMING

When preparing to give feedback, you may picture relevant events, decide which information to discuss, and define a solution—all *before* the conversation. This framing sets the stage for trouble.

EXAMPLE:

Liam, a VP, hears complaints that Jeremy, a product manager, isn't delegating enough. Liam's framing—"Jeremy's too controlling"—is *narrow* (Liam excludes other possibilities; e.g., Jeremy wants to delegate but doesn't know how) and *binary* (he assumes Jeremy must delegate or his subordinates will leave and he'll burn out). During the conversation, Liam's framing is *frozen* (he neither hears nor addresses Jeremy's objections). Result? Neither Liam nor Jeremy learn from the meeting.

TWO BIASES

Why do we frame feedback narrowly—despite predictably poor results? Two biases color the feedback process. And the more stressed we are, the more powerful these biases become:

- **Fundamental attribution error.** We often attribute problems to subordinates' disposition ("Jeremy's too controlling") rather than their circumstances (e.g., perhaps Jeremy is delegating, but his subordinates have some other ax to grind). Too busy to identify all potential causes and solutions to a problem, we grab the first acceptable one.
- **False consensus effect.** We assume others see situations as we do, and fail to revise our framing during feedback sessions.

REFRAMING FEEDBACK

To avoid the restrictive-feedback trap, watch for these biases. Consider alternative explanations for problems rather than leaping to conclusions.

EXAMPLE:

Liam frames his concerns about Jeremy openly: "I've heard complaints that Jeremy isn't delegating—and some of his employees are feeling sufficiently frustrated that I'm afraid we'll start losing them. I'd like to find out if Jeremy knows about the complaints, and get his take."

This framing isn't *narrow* (Liam hasn't leapt to conclusions about the problem's causes) or *binary* (it avoids a win-or-lose outcome). And since Liam avoids a preconceived outcome, he has nothing on which to *freeze*. He initiates the conversation openly: "I don't know if you're aware of this—or if it's true—but I've heard that Frank and Joan are anxious to take on more responsibility. What do you think?"

WHY OPEN FRAMING WORKS

Open framing shows you have good intentions, the feedback *development* process was fair (you collected all relevant information), and the *communication* process was fair (you listen to and respect employees).

When employees feel they're getting fair feedback, they accept it more willingly—and work to improve performance.

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Giving feedback to your employees, particularly when their performances fall short of expectations, is one of the most critical roles you play as a manager. For most people, it's also one of the most dreaded. Such conversations can be very unpleasant—emotions can run high, tempers can flare. And so, fearing that an employee will become defensive and that the conversation will only strain the relationship, the boss all too often inadvertently sabotages the meeting by preparing for it in a way that stifles honest discussion. This is an unintentional—indeed, unconscious—habit that's a byproduct of stress and that makes it difficult to deliver corrective feedback effectively.

The good news is that these conversations don't have to be so hard. By changing the mind-set with which you develop and deliver negative feedback, you can greatly increase the odds that the process will be a success—that you will have productive conversations, that you won't damage relationships, and that your employees will make real improvements in performance. In the pages that follow, I'll describe what goes wrong during these meetings and why. I'll look in detail at how real-life conversations have unfolded and what the managers could have done differently to reach more satisfying outcomes. As a first step, let's look at the way bosses prepare feedback—that is, the way they frame issues in their own minds in advance of a discussion.

Framing Feedback

In an ideal world, a subordinate would accept corrective feedback with an open mind. He or she would ask a few clarifying questions, promise to work on the issues discussed, and show signs of improvement over time. But things don't always turn out this way.

Let's consider the following example. Liam, a vice president at a consumer products company, had heard some complaints about a product manager, Jeremy. (Names and other identifying information for the subjects mentioned in this article have been altered.) Jeremy consistently delivered high-quality work on time, but several of his subordinates had grumbled about his apparent unwillingness to

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delegate. They felt their contributions weren't valued and that they didn't have an opportunity to learn and grow. What's more, Liam worried that Jeremy's own career prospects would be limited if his focus on the day-to-day details of his subordinates' work kept him from taking on more strategic projects. As his boss, Liam felt a responsibility to let Jeremy know about his concerns. Here's how the conversation unfolded:

Liam: "I'd like to discuss your work with you. You're doing a great job, and we really value your contributions. But I think you do too much. You have some great people working for you; why not delegate a little more?"

Jeremy: "I don't understand. I delegate when I think it's appropriate. But a lot of people in this company rely on quality work coming out of my department, so I need to stay involved."

Liam: "Yes, and we all appreciate your attention to detail. But your job as a manager is to help your employees grow into new roles and take on more responsibility. Meanwhile, you're so focused on the details that you don't have time to think about the bigger picture, about the direction you're taking this product."

Jeremy: "That's not true. I'm always thinking about the future."

Liam: "I'm just saying, you'd have more time for strategic thinking if you weren't so mired in the day-to-day stuff."

Jeremy: "Are you saying I'm not a strategic thinker?"

Liam: "You're so busy dotting every i and crossing every t that I just don't know what kind of thinking you're capable of!"

This type of exchange is surprisingly common. Each side pushes his point of view more and more aggressively, and the conversation escalates until a relatively minor difference becomes much more dramatic. (For a visual representation of a deteriorating discussion, see the exhibit "Scripted Escalation.") Often, as Liam did in the preceding conversation, one person or the other unintentionally says something overly critical. Of course, it may not get to that point—one or both parties may choose to give in rather than fight. But either way, escalate or fold, the subordinate probably hasn't accepted the news the boss set out to deliver. Managers tend to attribute such nonacceptance to employees' pride or defensiveness. Indeed, it's not unusual for people to feel defensive about their work or, for that matter, to hold inflated views of their performance and capabilities. But more often than not, the boss is also to blame. Let's examine why.

Whenever we face a decision or situation, we frame it, consciously or not. At its simplest, a frame is the decision maker's image of a situation—that is, the way he or she pictures the circumstances and elements surrounding the decision. The frame defines the boundaries and dimensions of the decision or situation—for instance, which issues will be looked at, which components are in and which are out, how various bits of information will be weighed, how the problem might be solved or a successful outcome determined, and so on. Managers tend to frame difficult situations and decisions in a way that is *narrow* (alternatives aren't included or even considered) and *binary* (there are only two possible outcomes—win or lose). Then, during the feedback discussion, their framing remains *frozen*—unchanged, regardless of the direction the conversation takes.

In anticipation of the conversation with Jeremy, for example, Liam framed the problem in his mind as "Jeremy's too controlling." This is a narrow framing because it excludes many alternative explanations—for instance, "Jeremy would really like to hand off some responsibility but doesn't know how and is embarrassed to acknowledge that." Or "Jeremy is actually delegating as much as he can given his subordinates' current skill levels; they are frustrated but really cannot handle more than they do." Or maybe "Jeremy is delegating quite a lot, but Frank and Joan have some other ax to grind." Liam may be making matters worse without realizing it by sending Jeremy mixed signals: "Empower your subordinates, but make no mistakes." We don't know for sure; nor does Liam.

Operating from this narrow view, Liam also approached the discussion with a binary framing that leaves both parties with very little room to maneuver: "Jeremy must learn to delegate or we'll lose Frank and Joan—and meanwhile, he'll burn himself out." Last but not least, Liam's framing remained frozen throughout the exchange despite clear signals that Jeremy was not buying the feedback. At no point was Liam processing, let alone addressing, Jeremy's objections. It's no surprise that the meeting ended badly.

The Dangers of Easing In

After they've had a few bad experiences delivering narrowly framed feedback, managers tend to fall back on the conventional wisdom that it's better to soften bad news with some good.

They try to avoid uncomfortable confrontations by using an indirect approach: They make

up their minds about an issue and then try to help their employees reach the same conclusions by asking a carefully designed set of questions.

At first glance, this type of “easing in” seems more open and fair than the forthright approach that Liam took, since the manager is involving the subordinate in a conversation, however scripted. But like the forthright approach, easing in reflects a narrow and binary framing that typically remains frozen throughout the process. Indeed, there would be no need to ease in if the manager were approaching the conversation with a truly open mind. And easing in carries an additional risk: The employee may not give you the answers you’re looking for.

For example, Alex, an executive at a pharmaceuticals company, had some difficult news to communicate to one of his subordinates, Erin. She was a middle manager at the company and did an excellent job handling her department but was not contributing satisfactorily to a companywide task force chaired by Alex. Erin was remarkably silent during the meetings, which

led Alex to conclude that she was too busy to participate fully and had little to offer the group. Alex’s solution? Take her off the task force so she could focus on her primary responsibilities. But because he suspected Erin would be hurt or insulted if he suggested she step down, Alex hoped to prompt her to resign from the committee by asking her a series of questions that would make her see she was too busy to continue. Let’s look at what happened.

Alex: “Do you sometimes feel as though you’re wasting your time in the task force meetings?”

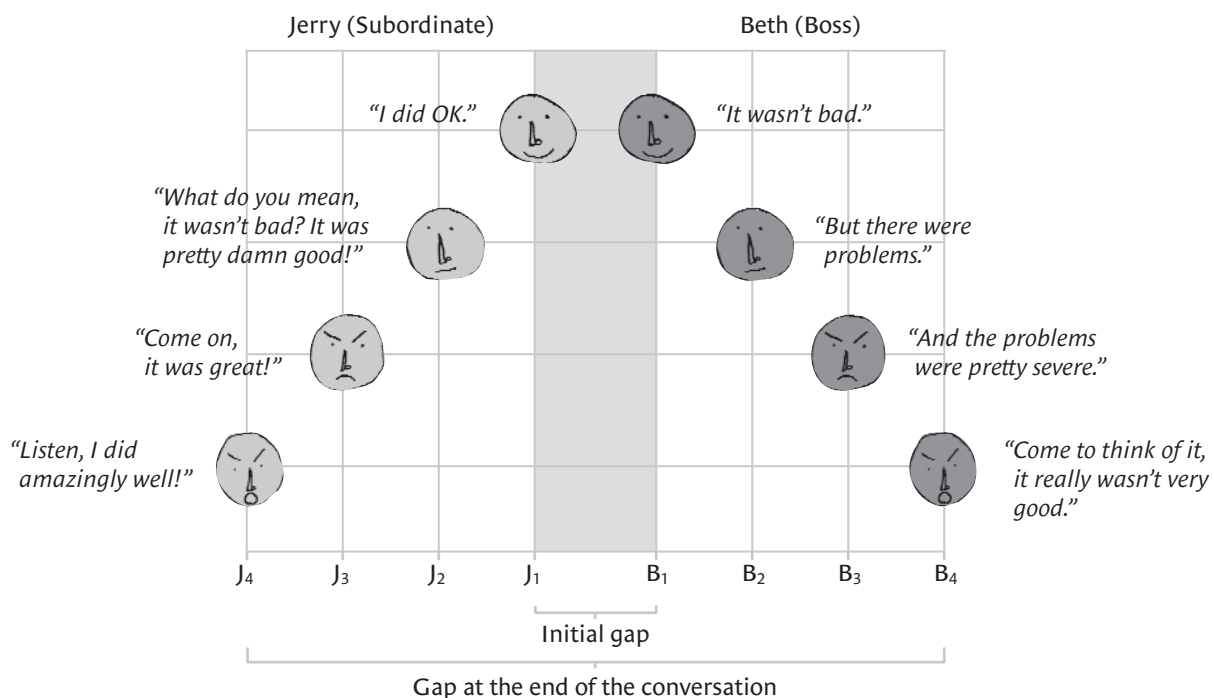
Erin: “No, I learn a lot from the meetings—and from watching the way you run them.”

Alex: “But do you find that your mind is on your daily job when you’re at committee meetings?”

Erin: “Not really. I hope I haven’t given you the impression that I’m not fully committed. I think this is important work, and I’m excited to be a part of it, and I think I have some good ideas to offer.”

Scripted Escalation

Take a look at how quickly a minor point of difference during a feedback discussion can turn into a major disagreement. Jerry starts the conversation by noting that he’d done a good job on his project. Beth, his boss, is not in violent disagreement with his assessment and acknowledges that “it wasn’t bad.” Jerry could reaffirm his opening bid but instead tries to pull Beth’s view closer to his own by overstating his initial point. Beth disagrees with Jerry’s inflated statement, and instead of reiterating her first comment, she yields to the temptation to pull Jerry closer to her point of view. Both present stronger and stronger positions, trying to convince the other, and a minor difference quickly becomes a major point of contention.



Making Feedback More Acceptable

Research shows that people tend to be more willing to accept feedback when they have the feeling that:

- The person offering the feedback is reliable and has good intentions toward them.
- The feedback development process is fair—that is, the person giving the feedback collects all relevant information; allows the subordinate to clarify and explain matters; considers the subordinate’s opinions; and applies consistent standards when delivering criticism.
- The feedback communication process is fair—that is, the person offering the feedback pays careful attention to the subordinate’s ideas; shows respect for the subordinate; and supports the subordinate despite their disagreements.

This short list makes clear the negative impact of approaching a feedback discussion with restrictive framing: Narrow framing tells the employee that the feedback wasn’t developed fairly. And a boss constrained by a binary and frozen frame comes across as biased, closed minded, and unsupportive—ensuring that the subordinate will feel as though the feedback hasn’t been communicated fairly.

Alex: “What if you could participate more informally? You could take yourself off the team as a permanent member, but you could continue to receive the agenda and minutes and contribute when your particular area of expertise is required.”

Erin: “It sounds like you want me off the committee. Why? I don’t think the committee work has undermined my commitment to my real work. I’m making my numbers. Plus, it’s a learning opportunity.”

Alex: “No, no, I just want to make sure it’s something you really want to do.”

Erin: “It is.”

As you can see, Erin didn’t play along. Alex was not ready for a confrontation, so he folded—and lost. He didn’t get Erin off the committee, nor did he communicate his view that her committee work was subpar, so he has no way to help her improve her performance. What’s more, he introduced a source of stress into their relationship: Erin is likely to have been unsettled by the interaction, as Alex implied some level of dissatisfaction with her performance without telling her what it is.

As in our previous example, Alex’s framing of the issue was narrow: “Erin doesn’t talk at the meetings, probably because she’s overloaded, so the committee is a waste of her time.” His framing was also binary; the interaction could be a

success only if Erin agreed to get off the committee without losing her motivation for her regular work. And this framing remained frozen because Alex was concentrating on asking the “right” questions and couldn’t process anything but the “right” answers.

Meanwhile, Erin may actually benefit from being on the committee, even if she doesn’t say much. She learns a lot, and it gives her visibility. And if she can find a way to contribute more, the committee may well benefit from her membership. But by framing the issue the way he did, Alex excluded other possible solutions, any of which may have been more productive for all concerned: Maybe Erin would talk more in the meetings if Alex probed the reasons for her silence and helped her find a way to contribute what may be very valuable insights. And if overwork is indeed an issue, perhaps there are duties Erin might give up to gain more time and energy.

Easing in is a gamble. You might get lucky, but you have only half the cards. The subordinate may not give you the answers you’re looking for, as we saw with Erin, either because she genuinely doesn’t agree or because she sees that the game is rigged and refuses to play along. Or the subordinate may decide to stop resisting and pretend to go along but still fail to believe the feedback. And there’s another risk, regardless of how the conversation ends: The employee may forever lose confidence in his or her boss. Erin may always wonder what Alex has up his sleeve, having caught him being disingenuous once.

Indeed, that’s what happened to Mark, a marketing director at a large consulting firm. His boss, Rene, had called him into a meeting to discuss his role, and Mark left the meeting having relinquished control of his pet project, developing and implementing the company’s first advertising campaign. Rene had asked him a series of seemingly innocuous questions, such as “Do you find endless meetings with different agencies to be a waste of your time?” and “Do you feel like your time would be better spent developing new communications materials?” Mark eventually accepted what was clearly the “right” conclusion from his boss’s perspective—to surrender the project—even though he wanted to continue. Worse, he didn’t know why Rene wanted him off the project, so as a learning opportunity, it was wasted. His relationship with his boss is now tainted; Mark can no longer take Rene’s comments at face value.

Why Is It So Hard?

It's very clear from a distance what went wrong for Liam and Alex. Most managers today are well trained and well meaning; why can't they see what they're doing wrong? The tendency to frame threatening situations in narrow terms can be traced to the combination of several phenomena.

First, research shows that when analyzing others' behavior, most people tend to overestimate the effect of a person's stable characteristics—the individual's disposition and capabilities—and underestimate the impact of the specific conditions under which that person is operating. So, for instance, a manager will attribute a subordinate's performance problems to his or her disposition rather than to circumstances in the workplace, leading to a rather simplistic interpretation. This phenomenon is known as the *fundamental attribution error*.

Second, people are more prone to committing the fundamental attribution error when they operate under demanding conditions. We can better distinguish the impact of situational forces when we have time and energy to spare than when we face multiple demands on our attention. Unfortunately, managers tend to be busy. Facing huge workloads and tight deadlines, they have limited time and attention to engage in exhaustive analyses of all the potential causes of the situations they observe or of the many possible solutions to a given problem. So they settle on the first acceptable explanation. "Jeremy's too controlling" explained all the symptoms, so Liam did not go further.

Research can also give us some insight into why bosses tend to frame things in a binary way. In particular, Harvard Business School professor Chris Argyris's work over nearly five decades has established that under stressful circumstances, people behave in predictable ways. They design their behaviors, often unconsciously, to gain control of a situation and to win—which means, unfortunately, that the other side usually has to lose. That's binary framing.

And why is it so hard for bosses to revise their restrictive framing midstream? For several powerful reasons. First, bosses don't set out to frame situations in restrictive ways; they do so unconsciously, most of the time, and it's hard to question a constraint that we don't know we're imposing on ourselves. Second, humans tend to assume that other reasonable people will see the situation as they see it. That's called the *false consensus effect*. Our framing of an issue

represents our view of reality, the facts as we see them. We are reasonable and competent people; why would others see the situation differently?

Bosses can get past these hurdles by recognizing them and becoming more conscious and careful when framing decisions. But then they have to beat another cause of frozen framing: a busy processor. For instance, Liam becomes increasingly stressed as Jeremy continues to push back against his version of the facts, and both devote so much energy to trying to control their growing irritation that they have few resources left to listen, process, and respond constructively.

Reframing Feedback

Let's be clear: I'm not suggesting that bosses systematically misdiagnose the causes of their subordinates' performance problems. Liam's and Alex's early diagnoses may well have been right. And even if their feedback discussions had been more productive, their subordinates may not have been able to sufficiently improve their performances to meet their bosses' expectations. But Jeremy and Erin will almost certainly fail to improve if they don't understand and accept the feedback. Restrictive framing not only makes feedback conversations more stressful than they need to be, it also increases the likelihood that subordinates won't believe what their bosses say. Indeed, subordinates are more likely to accept and act on their bosses' feedback if they feel it is developed and communicated fairly. (See the sidebar "Making Feedback More Acceptable.")

So, for instance, imagine how differently Liam and Jeremy's conversation might have gone had the manager framed his concerns more broadly: "I've heard complaints that Jeremy isn't delegating—and some of his employees are feeling sufficiently frustrated that I'm afraid we'll start losing them. I'd like to find out if Jeremy knows about the complaints and get his take on the situation."

This frame isn't narrow. Liam hasn't reached a conclusion about why Jeremy doesn't delegate or whether, indeed, Jeremy is refusing to delegate at all. Nor is the frame binary. Liam hasn't fixed on a win-or-lose outcome. And because Liam hasn't entered the conversation with a preconceived outcome in mind, he has nothing on which to freeze. Now, Liam can open the conversation in a much more open way. He might say, for instance, "Jeremy, I don't know if you're aware of this—or if it's true or not—but I've heard

that Frank and Joan are anxious to take on a bit more responsibility. What do you think?” This can lead to a discussion of Frank’s and Joan’s capabilities, as well as Jeremy’s own role and aspirations, without locking Jeremy and Liam into a test of wills.

As for Alex, instead of approaching the meeting with the goal of getting Erin off the committee with minimal damage, he could have framed the interaction more broadly: “I have a great subordinate who doesn’t say much on the committee. Let’s sit down and talk about her work, the committee, her career plans, and how committee membership fits in with those plans.” Because this framing doesn’t fix on a win-or-lose outcome, Alex would have felt less need to control the discussion and hence less compelled to ease in.

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While most managers can easily see what they’re doing wrong when shown how they’ve developed and presented their feedback, restrictive framing remains a surprisingly persistent problem, even for seasoned managers who excel at other aspects of leadership. But giving feedback doesn’t have to be stressful for you, demoralizing for your employees, or damaging to your professional relationships.

Offering more effective critiques requires that you learn to recognize the biases that color the development of feedback. It requires that you take the time to consider alternative explanations for behaviors you’ve witnessed rather than leaping to hasty conclusions that only serve to paint you and your subordinates into a corner. And it requires that you take into account the circumstances an employee is working under rather than attributing weak performance to the person’s disposition.

In short, it requires a broad and flexible approach, one that will convince your employees that the process is fair and that you’re ready for an honest conversation.

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Further Reading

ARTICLES

[The Set-Up-to-Fail Syndrome](#)

by Jean-François Manzoni
and Jean-Louis Barsoux
Harvard Business Review
March–April 1998
Product no. 861X

This article demonstrates the power of a manager’s framing to generate poor employee performance. In the **set-up-to-fail syndrome**, you begin questioning an employee’s performance based on one slip-up (a missed deadline, a lost client). You start micromanaging him. He begins doubting *himself*—and stops giving his best. You decide your suspicions were well-founded, and tighten the screws further. The more you “help,” the worse your employee’s performance becomes.

This destructive cycle doesn’t have to happen. The authors explain how to prevent the syndrome and reverse it if it erupts.

[Taking the Stress Out of Stressful Conversations](#)

by Holly Weeks
Harvard Business Review
July 2001
Product no. 9403

Weeks provides additional strategies for more effectively delivering critical feedback. During the session, use one or a combination of three gambits. For example, “**honor thy partner**” by acknowledging your part in the problem. You’ll help the employee hear your difficult message, without provoking him. Also “**disarm thy partner**” by granting the employee his perceptions. You’ll transform confrontation into agreement, without resorting to appeasement. Finally, “**fight tactics, not people**” by naming any defensive or aggressive behavior in the employee. You address the behavior while maintaining respect for the employee.

[The Power of Talk: Who Gets Heard and Why](#)

by Deborah Tannen
Harvard Business Review
September–October 1995
Product no. 9977

Tannen agrees that our assumptions powerfully shape how we converse with others—and what responses we get. She describes **eight styles of talking** that can emerge from various assumptions, and notes the unintended consequences of each.

For example, when delivering critical feedback, managers who assume that buffering criticism saves face for recipients often mention problem behavior only *after* citing an employee’s strengths. Result? Some employees conclude the problem areas aren’t important.

By becoming aware of your own and others’ assumptions and approaching feedback sessions flexibly, you increase your chances of communicating your message clearly—and ensuring that it’s heard accurately.

BOOK

[The Set-Up-to-Fail Syndrome: How Good Managers Cause Great People to Fail](#)

by Jean-François Manzoni
and Jean-Louis Barsoux
Harvard Business School Press, 2002
Product no. 9490

Based on ten years of study of boss-subordinate relationships, this book explains how a manager’s assumptions about an employee can not only decrease individuals’ productivity, but also derail careers, dampen morale, and hamper overall organizational results.

The set-up-to-fail syndrome is not confined to relationships featuring the proverbial “boss from hell.” Even respected leaders—whether CEOs, teachers, or coaches—can get caught in it if they micromanage perceived weaker performers in ways that stifle self-confidence and drive.