

# Face Your Problem Subordinates Now!

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Ask any manager the question, "Do you have problem subordinates?" and the reply is generally an emphatic "Yes!" or a more cynical "You must be kidding!" If there is one universal truth about managers, it is that all of them have problem subordinates. If there is a second truth, it is that the stories they have to tell about these subordinates often reflect a good deal of disparagement and despair.

Here are a few typical tales of woe:

*"Talking to that man is like talking to a rock! I know he's very bright, some say an electronic genius, [but] he must have been brought up in a test tube. He never smiles and it's impossible to carry on a normal conversation with him. He intimidates the hell out of most people by just staring at them."*

*"This woman is very charming and personable. She seems to have talent and yet more often than not, she disappoints me. I give her a major assignment and she comes up short. Quite often, I end up picking up the pieces. Surprisingly, she always seems to land on her feet — she generally has a plausible excuse for what she's done, or not done. I'm never sure how much I can count on her."*

*"He seems to be unplugged from the socket. I mean, really, he seems to be disconnected from the realities of his job. He tells me things that make no sense whatsoever and I really can't rely on him to complete a job of any importance. If he weren't so close to retirement age I might do something — maybe put a bomb under his chair?" (laughs)*

On first reading, one feels that these subordinates have chronic defects and that their bosses would be much better off just getting rid of them than dealing with them. After all, who would want to put up with any one of them?

But are they really as unsalvageable as they are portrayed? Certainly, in the opinions of their exasperated bosses, they are. One thing is clear, however. Unless and until some corrective action is taken, the prognosis is not encouraging.

How can such individuals thrive in today's corporate world? How can they be tolerated, or even ignored, in light of the potential havoc they can and do wreak on the organization? Perhaps the answer is that they have become so pervasive, they are an accepted fact of life. As one CEO explained, "I just assume there are a certain percentage of subordinates who, regardless of the amount of human relations training we force on them, are difficult to get along with by nature." Or, as another executive mused, "Maybe it is because all of us have been problematic from time to time; therefore, we make allowances. After all, nobody is perfect." Although such arguments have a ring of truth, they tend to mask the real problem. Too many managers are unwilling to confront problem subordinates.

Who is the real victim here? Is it the boss, for having to live with such a difficult subordinate? Or is it the subordinate, who no doubt is doing something that causes problems but who may also suffer from his or her boss's reluctance to confront and try to correct such behavior?

In many cases, problem subordinates are as much a result of mismanagement (or failure to manage) as they are of personal shortcomings. Hence, both parties are victims and both are to blame. The tragedy is that because no action is taken — a strategy the vast majority of the executives I surveyed admitted having followed — matters get worse. Clearly, managers at all levels need to examine their role in creating problem subordinates and determine preventive measures to be taken. Senior managers who are derelict must take the lead.

## Name Calling Is the Easy Part

What was said about the subordinates described above are but a few printable examples of the "rogues' gallery" of problem subordinates uncovered in my research.<sup>1</sup> No attempt was made to cover the entire spectrum of problem subordinates at all levels in the organization; classifying all the possibilities would be a herculean task. The search was limited to those long-term cases that senior executives found exasperating to manage — where tough but seldom-made calls are involved. I omitted cases outside the manager's control, such as alcoholism or drug abuse, where outside help or referral to an employee assistance program is called for, and clear-cut cases of total incompetence or dishonesty, where termination is the only answer.

In gathering the survey data, I asked executives taking part in one of several seminars I conducted to write detailed case histories of problem subordinates who worked for them. During this process, many participants would look up, chuckle to themselves and ask, "You want us to describe only one? I can think of several, and I'm having trouble deciding which one to nominate." Virtually every executive had a story to tell and, in many cases, the story telling seemed to have a cathartic effect.

As these executives soon found out, describing a problem subordinate turned out to be very difficult. Name-calling was the easy part: "He's an SOB," or "She's a game player." Going beyond the superficial and describing how these people actually behaved proved difficult but enlightening. In some cases, the executives were amazed at how little evidence they could muster. In others, the evidence often involved very subtle behavior; some easy to describe, some not. The initial descriptions were usually based on how the problem subordinates made their bosses feel — "She drives me nuts!" — and not in terms of behaviors that caused the feelings. This exercise illustrated that while problem subordinates are discussed and thought about frequently, such musing rarely produces useful information for providing effective feedback. And operating on pejoratives and half-truths only makes matters worse. In many cases, these executives found themselves in a classic perceptual trap. Using limited and selectively perceived information they focused on a single trait, to the exclusion of many positive attributes the problem subordinates might have had.

Not too surprisingly, when the executives attempted to reconcile their stories with what they reported at performance appraisal time, the gap was significant. One executive said:

*"We keep two sets of books. One is the public record, which is generally circumspect and vague, and the other [is] the private record, which contains how we really feel. And it is the latter one which we rarely share, except with confidantes, but which influences our thinking when we make decisions that affect the individual's career."*

### Why Are Problem Subordinates Avoided?

Most executives readily admitted that the problem subordinates they described were not as problematic or ineffective as their expletive-laced portraits had suggested. However, when the emotions generated by these individuals were tapped, it was very easy to overreact. At times, problem subordinates took on an almost surreal existence to their frustrated bosses. During a spare moment, freed of the daily stresses — perhaps during the evening commute or just before going to sleep — reflecting on the problem subordinate often produced a kind of autistic hostility, an emotion not entirely grounded in reality, but still painfully real. As one manager explained:

*"On the drive home, he would be on my mind . . . I would get so damned mad at him and myself for not saying anything that I would work myself into a rage. Sometimes it would take me over an hour to calm down. And then I'd come back to the all-too-familiar dilemma: Do I take some action or do I try to put it out of my mind for now?"*

For these distraught bosses, their anger was, in effect, feeding upon itself — the subordinates need not have done anything at all. The angrier these bosses became about their own inability to confront the problem, the more they blamed their subordinates for "making" them feel that way.<sup>2</sup>

Although such feelings are common, they are often exaggerated by the intense anxiety a manager experiences when thinking about confronting a problem subordinate. Ideally, such feelings need to be transformed into constructive action. Unfortunately, however, they often are rationalized away, further exacerbating an already difficult situation. Thus, while anger often plays an integral role, such self-inflicted misery begs the question: Why do managers from the executive ranks down to first-line supervisors avoid confronting the source of their pain? Could it be that managers, especially top executives, just do not have the guts to talk to their people face to face?<sup>3</sup> Perhaps. However, upon closer examination, I found a variety of reasons for avoidance.

First of all, it is too simplistic to attribute "being chicken" as the primary reason for such avoidance behavior. Certainly, some bosses avoid confrontation because they are afraid that they will jeopardize a long-term friendship — the most common reason given — or they are afraid they might create an even worse relationship: "She's so defensive that if I confront her, she could just get worse or even turn on me." Others experience guilt:

*"Just after Jim's wife died we decided not to promote him as planned. I felt he needed some space to get his life in order. As I look back on it now, it was shortly after these events that Jim's attitude turned sour and I never — well, I never knew how to approach him after he blamed me . . . I know I should have, but I hoped that time would straighten him out."*

In almost all cases, bosses feel frustrated — "I have tried repeatedly to point out to her that she has to be more sensitive to other managers' feelings, but after a few weeks, she's right back into bulldozing everyone. . . . I don't see how I can change her personality" — or hopeless — "If you want legal backing, the person has to be more than a pain-in-the-neck to get fired in my shop, so what's the point of trying?" Sometimes bosses are insecure: "She knows more about running this place than I do!" — or are reluctant to "play God" — "I don't want to be the one to push him over the edge. This wouldn't be the first time someone has considered suicide or gone on a rampage after a poor performance review."<sup>4</sup>

Avoidance also results from a tendency on the part of managers to want overwhelming proof before taking action against a problem employee — a tendency often reinforced by personnel policies designed to avoid litigation and thus severely restrict managerial response. One manager from a major U.S. corporation confided in me the major reason he had not confronted a problem subordinate

*“If I screw up in following to the letter corporate procedure, it’s my butt on the line. Personnel expects me to maintain detailed contemporaneous notes on all discussions I have with the employee and a carefully documented history of any infractions. What I want to know is how the hell are you supposed to do that with a subordinate whose primary fault is being arrogant and insensitive?”*

Thus, gathering detailed evidence is often perceived as so onerous that it rarely is done. In the absence of convincing evidence, and the desire to avoid a libelous confrontation, managers feel their hands are tied and therefore continue to give conflicting signals to problem subordinates. Quite often the feedback is inconsistent with how managers feel — sometimes it is a complete fabrication — but it is justified as reasonable given the lack of hard evidence. Having thus

committed to a course of faulty and erroneous feedback, managers often believe there is no turning back and, in an effort to reduce their feelings of dissonance, they begin to justify a continued strategy of avoidance, thereby becoming trapped in a self-reinforcing pattern of behavior.

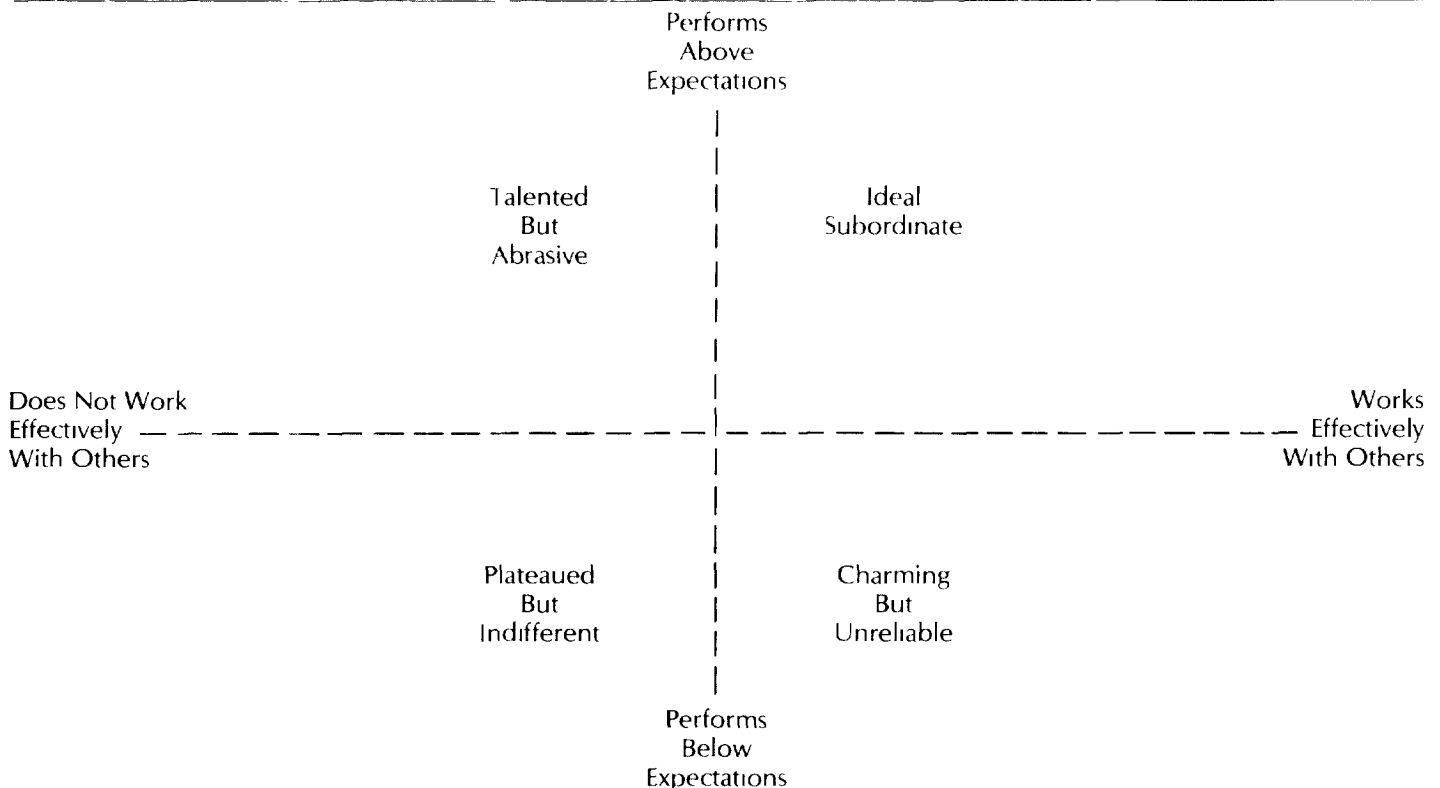
### Types of Problem Subordinates

In my examination of the case histories of problem subordinates, two recurring themes emerged. The first theme related to job performance; that is, whether or not the individual performed above or below the boss’s expectation. The second related to interpersonal skills; that is, whether or not the individual worked effectively with others.<sup>3</sup> Combining these two themes resulted in the grid shown in Exhibit 1.

I also attempted to classify the hundreds of reported cases in the hope of identifying some common ground. Therefore, the most pervasive problem subordinates were classified into three types: the talented but abrasive (cited by 40% of the executives), the charming but unreliable (cited by 33%), and the plateaued but indifferent (cited by 20%). The fourth type on the grid, the ideal subordinate, represents the talent mix that managers desire — one who performs up to expectation and works effectively with others.

Exhibit 1

### How Managers Classify Subordinates



Talented but abrasive subordinates were generally described as very bright and gifted performers who were insensitive to others and lacked interpersonal skills. Most were perceived as “superstars” or “comers,” and yet because they played solely to their strengths and were either unaware of or ignored their weaknesses, they were eventually labeled everything from “arrogant know-it-alls” and “pushy, unfeeling SOB’s” to “smart asses.” In some instances their behavior was excused: “She is always willing to take more responsibility” or justified: “We needed some asses kicked, and he was the man for the job.” Some of them were similar to what Harry Levinson labeled the “abrasive personality,”<sup>6</sup> although the term “personality” often connotes to the layperson a permanent and therefore unalterable condition, which in these cases was often not so. Because abrasive subordinates were usually quite good at their jobs, they tended to become impatient with anyone who could not keep up. In some cases, this impatience showed itself in both verbal and non-verbal behaviors such as the caustic remark or the silent stare. These individuals were also perceived as having a talent for making politically insensitive remarks, which was often further exacerbated by their general unwillingness to concern themselves with issues of political sensitivity. Paradoxically, by trying to avoid encounters or tune out abrasive individuals, bosses and co-workers often unwittingly reinforced such unwanted behavior.

Charming but unreliable subordinates were in many ways the exact opposites of the abrasive individuals. The former were perceived as interpersonally skillful — what one executive called “personality plus” — but their job performance was problematic. Although they were not incompetent, they seemed to have a penchant for not delivering what they promised. Generally, they got the job done, but often it was because others, including their bosses, picked up the pieces or because they were able to talk their way out of doing all that was asked of them. Their bosses often marvelled at their uncanny ability to survive (“He always comes out smelling like a rose” or “She always lands on her feet”). Unfortunately, because the real deficit went unaddressed, their major strength eventually became a liability (“He’s nothing but a game player”; “She’s a real smoothie — all style and no substance”).

Plateaued but indifferent subordinates did not merely combine the flaws of the other two problem types.<sup>7</sup> At some point in their pasts, many of these individuals would have been classified as either talented but abrasive or charming but unreliable — a time when they should have been dealt with. They were typically viewed as interpersonally ineffective because others refused to take them seriously. Traits that at one time would have produced pejoratives were now seen as harmless, e.g., “Her bark is worse than her bite.” And while their performance was below expectations, it wasn’t because they made promises they couldn’t keep; rather, they were perceived as preretirement-aged plodders who either hadn’t kept up, or couldn’t be counted on because they were past their prime. Because of this “deadwood” status, then, they were generally given unimportant, make-work assignments or expected to do the bare minimum

Their indifference was as much the result of how they were treated as it was a chosen state of mind. Although their co-workers accepted that these individuals were just biding their time until retirement, they were far less forgiving when asked to carry part of what should have been the indifferent subordinate’s work load — much to the boss’s chagrin.

### *What’s a Boss to Do?*

In my consultations with hundreds of managers over the last 10 years, no easy answers have emerged. No one can guide you with complete confidence. One thing is clear, however: There are many alternatives a manager can exercise besides getting rid of a problem subordinate or just doing nothing. Just because certain individuals are talented does not mean you must tolerate abrasiveness or treat such individuals as special; neither is there any reason to avoid straight talk with the unreliable performer, plausible excuses or not.

While the executives I surveyed spoke of many different company-sponsored programs to assist managers in dealing with problem subordinates, they all agreed that ultimate responsibility for initiating action lies squarely on the boss’s shoulders. Following are some maxims for dealing with problem subordinates, offered by these executives, which all managers must heed.

#### *Confrontation Must Be Direct*

Contrary to the usual prescriptions for helping a person with a problem, most of the executives queried believed that candor promotes credibility and that problematic individuals cannot be handled with kid gloves or in a detached, counseling-like way. This is no time to offer a “positive sandwich” — praise followed by criticism, followed by praise again — because most subordinates are smart enough to perceive its contents as “baloney.” The goal is to clarify the unwanted behaviors and the consequences. From the start, be prepared to take a tough stand; take the risk of owning up to your position first, then be prepared to be receptive.<sup>8</sup> Blaming and fault finding will not work. Both parties must accept the fact that each is responsible at some level for allowing the situation to continue. Remember that you are dealing with individuals who probably know they disappoint you. Thus, your attempt to unravel this illusion about their performance calls for straight talk. Clear-cut expectations must be established, make clear what is wrong and what you expect to see changed. Offering psychological safety and support to encourage a small but new step is essential. Help these individuals face the central question: Why do they behave as they do? Are they unsure of themselves? Are they having trouble managing their time or establishing priorities? Are there legitimate, personal reasons or priorities that have caused them to behave as they do? Or are they having trouble admitting that they are not well suited to their jobs? As the following two cases illustrate, a big first step is starting with some honest dialogue

**The Talented but Abrasive Engineer.** “Jack was a very bright industrial engineer, he had a master’s degree in engineering and had been promoted to senior engineer at the age of 25. The problem was that every time he worked on a project with manufacturing personnel, he caused trouble. He ‘knew’ more than the foremen he worked with and let them know it in many ways. Since his ideas were too good to waste, I had to run interference for him. I would present Jack’s ideas to the foremen, drop a lot of his statistical analysis, and generally win their acceptance. Even though I valued Jack’s contributions, I seemed to be running interference more frequently. When I called Jack in for his annual performance review, I decided it was time to confront him. At first he told me it wasn’t his fault that there were so many ‘stupid people’ in manufacturing. I told him that’s why we hire ‘smart’ engineers to help those less fortunate. I also told him his ideas were no better than his ability to implement them, that was what he was paid for, and I would no longer smooth the way. Jack wanted to focus on what was wrong with the manufacturing personnel, but I reminded him that if I could get his ideas accepted it must have something to do with how he presented his ideas. He reluctantly agreed to meet the next day with me and one of the foremen he had trouble with to explore his problem. In that meeting, he found out that his attempts to impress the foreman with his statistical prowess were seen as an attempt to put the foreman down. The foreman told Jack, ‘I don’t need to take crap from a smart-mouthed college graduate. I know my job and I do it well. When you accept that fact, you might be able to see that I have just as much to contribute as you do. Sure, I don’t understand the numbers, but I do know my people and how things work, and you don’t.’

“When the meeting was over, Jack was angry. He didn’t say anything but it was clear that he felt ganged up on. I thought I might lose him until about two weeks after the meeting when he asked to see me. When we met, he asked my advice on how he could present a new cost-cutting idea to the plant manager. While he never talked about the earlier meeting, it was clear that he had heard the message. As it turned out, this was one of several meetings he and I would have.”

**The Charming but Unreliable Plant Manager.** “Tom is the manager of one of our five assembly plants and reports to me. He’s been in the job for five years. I had managed the plant before him and supported his promotion. He had always struck me as a personable guy and I liked him. He was honest and loyal. After one year, Tom’s plant became the poorest performer in my division. When I ran this plant it had regularly been number one or two out of the five.

“When I noticed this slippage in productivity, I began to question Tom. In the beginning he made promises to turn things around. He told me how some things he was working on showed real promise. He sold me. I believed. During this same time, he had also made a lot of friends in the company. Everyone liked him, everyone talked to him. He knew more about what was going on in the company than I did. But his promises never materialized. He was getting on my nerves. There were times when I would see him going to lunch with corporate staff people and I’d think, ‘Why the hell isn’t he back in his plant fixing things instead of spending his time B-S-ing with staff people?’ On more than one occasion, my wife listened to my tale. But invariably I did nothing. Because we were good friends, some of the other plant managers believed I was protecting an old buddy.

“Initially, when my boss would question Tom’s performance I would make excuses for him. Soon it became clear that my ability to manage Tom was being called into question. I began to cut his annual salary increments. He said he understood but still nothing. Finally, about a year ago I decided I had to take some action. I knew that if I got angry with him that that would do no good. . . but I felt the need to lay all my cards on the table. I can’t tell how many dress rehearsals I went through in my mind. But when the time came I was surprisingly calm. I talked and he listened. I told him how I had grappled with the problem and had tried to avoid it; how I felt he and I had to begin addressing what was happening. You know what? He agreed. He told me how lousy he felt that he was unable to get his plant moving. How he hated to come to plant manager meetings, especially when performance issues were talked about. How he had begun to seriously doubt his career choice. We met again and talked some more. At that time I asked him to develop a plan that would improve his performance over the next two years. We agreed that this would be a good way to test his potential as a plant manager and a way to provide the evidence as to whether he should continue on his present career track or look for a reassignment more suited to his ability. One year has gone by since the plan was developed. So far the results are not too encouraging. I have serious doubts that he will improve. But two things are different now. First, we are talking openly about what’s happening and secondly, I am convinced that he will be much more receptive to a job change. In the meantime, my boss is very pleased with my approach to managing Tom.”

Unfortunately, attempts such as these are rare. Instead, managers often bungle the job by exerting subtle pressure on the subordinate to leave rather than directly confronting him or her. In many cases, the subtle pressure — such as irrelevant or undesirable assignments or excluding the subordinate from management seminars and retreats — eventually are escalated to the not so subtle — such as holding back on salary increases or other tangible perks. Unfortunately, these kinds of pressures drive a wedge between boss and subordinate. On the surface, relations between the two appear cordial, polite, even friendly, but beneath the surface, both are getting further mired in the deception. Clearly, action must be taken to break this self-reinforcing pattern of behavior. As we saw in the above cases, both parties benefited from confronting the situation, even if the final resolution was uncertain.



#### *Frozen Evaluations Can Get in the Way*

All too often, ability and potential become inextricably tied to past performance. This is especially true when subordinates do not live up to their bosses' expectations. As one executive observed: "In organizations we label people. . . . It's a gradual, insidious kind of process . . . but, over time, labels stick and become well known, unspoken fact." Such labeling gradually reduces the confidence a boss will show in a subordinate and eventually may threaten the subordinate's self-worth. Once this happens, both the charming but unreliable performers and the talented but abrasive individuals are likely to start making extra efforts to prove their value by engaging in activities that place greater emphasis on their strengths — in most cases, whatever they do well they will try to do more of. In turn, the boss will assign them less important projects or compensate by monitoring their work more frequently. As one engineering manager told me:

*"When I took over the engineering department, there was one engineer who spent several hours a week running a sports pool all over the plant. Everyone liked this guy. He had helped the department many times by greasing the skids with other units. Anytime a 'sell job' was needed, we used him. Unfortunately, I had to check his work all the time. Eventually, I had to put him on unimportant projects to avoid serious mistakes and save my time."*

Labeling subordinates based solely on past performance rests on the faulty assumption that people are unable to change over time. Who is to say that the engineer described above would not make an excellent customer service representative or a liaison with purchasing? Moreover, such unchanged or "frozen evaluations" are unfair and in many cases are merely excuses for the boss to do nothing.<sup>9</sup> Once previously held views are put aside, the potential for new insights can be enormous. As one boss explained.

*"I used to tune this woman out because she grated on me. The more I tuned out, the more she would push her point. Finally, one day I started to listen. As painful as it was, I kept telling myself, 'This woman is bright, just try to see her point of view.' Eventually, I got past my negative reaction and she started to behave less abrasively. What I need to do now is to help her to see how her desire to be heard and have her ideas appreciated is causing her to be too pushy and triggering many of the problems she has with others."*

#### *Early Warning Signals Are Easily Missed or Ignored*

Many problem subordinates start out with great promise. Some are so likeable that in early career their shortcomings are easily overlooked. "She's so pleasant to work with I'm sure it's only a matter of time before she comes up to speed." Others are so talented that a few eccentricities are hardly noticed: "He's just a little strong willed." Thus, the insidious thing about looking for warning signs is that they are easily missed or ignored. All too often, bright and/or charming young subordinates seem to be given a special dispensation by their seniors. Indeed, many of the problem subordinates described in the survey were not perceived as problematic until after they turned 40 and took on a major management responsibility. As one CEO from an electronics firm observed: "What passes for hard-driving, mover-and-shaker behavior at age 30 is quite often perceived as arrogance and insensitivity at 45." And yet, the prognosis is likely to be more promising in early career when the individual is the most malleable and the damage minimal. This is the time when they are most easily turned around or redirected.

Accept the fact that it is going to be difficult to challenge youthful brashness because such attempts can backfire. If your efforts become too threatening, you could be faced with a hostile and uncooperative subordinate. You might also find yourself trying to convince him or her to stay or, worse, you could stand accused of causing the problem. Don't wait for all the evidence to accumulate before you start a dialogue. When in doubt, trust your instincts. Most managers have good instincts but often fail to follow them. Early coaching can make a difference; waiting until the warning signs can no longer be ignored is a mistake.

### *There is No Excuse for Continued Neglect*

Shelving an individual in midcareer because of shortcomings that should have been dealt with years before is inexcusable, but continuing to write him or her off as “deadwood” is also wrong. In many of these cases, an attitude of “why bother” prevails, leaving both boss and subordinate feeling helpless, believing the situation is outside their control and seeing little hope of escape. Given the long history of neglect from which such cases have evolved, both parties are right; little can be done to change what has already happened, and little can be done at this stage in the individual’s career to offer major redirection. But does that mean that these individuals deserve continued neglect? Hardly.

Often the plateaued but indifferent subordinate has potential and talent, your job is to identify it. Just as you would be unwilling to drive an automobile running on fewer than all its cylinders, you should also be unwilling to allow any human resource to be underutilized. In the beginning, these indifferent individuals must be involved in mainstream activity, no matter how trivial their part. At a minimum, they should be expected to carry their fair share of the workload. Find out what interests them and encourage them to follow through. Not all your people have to do the same thing. Try to juggle the workload to match individual interests and talents. (These subordinates may be ideal candidates for retraining or job rotation.) As the following case illustrates, sometimes a small effort, even in late career, can make a difference:

*“I manage a group of designers. Many of them love creating new ideas but lack the patience for the detail work after the initial design is accepted. One of my designers, an older woman named Mary, hadn’t been assigned any major projects for several years. Mary was considered good in her day but she had not kept pace with the times. Other designers refused to work with her because she was considered a ‘nit-picker’ and that disturbed their creative flow. As a consequence, I had to assign her to minor projects.*

*“One day a couple of my best designers approached me with a complaint. They felt it was unfair that they had to do projects that Mary should be doing. They were especially unhappy about doing the additional burdensome detail work. . . . That meeting gave me an idea. I decided to experiment by assigning Mary to do the follow-up detail work on accepted designs. This would free up the other designers to do what they loved to do best. It turned out to be a perfect marriage after some encouraging and nudging on my part. Mary’s attention to detail resulted in her finding minor flaws in the accepted designs and saved us production glitches. The other designers began to respect her ‘eye for detail’ and seek her advice during the preliminary stages of design. This gave Mary a greater sense of ownership in the project.”*

To be sure, there are also a number of plateaued but indifferent workers who, for whatever reasons — cynicism, despair, or apathy — are less willing to respond to such change attempts. Before you throw in the towel, however, recognize that helplessness conditioned by years of neglect requires a patient response on your part; don’t give up too easily.<sup>10</sup> As one executive summed up, “There are no easy answers when you deal with human beings. . . . If there were, we wouldn’t need managers.”

### *Own Up to the Part You’ve Played*

Regardless of the type of problem subordinate you face, the place to start is with yourself. How big a part have you played in creating the problem or allowing it to continue? When is the last time you paid attention to a problem subordinate or took the time to find out how he or she feels about the job? In all likelihood, it has been a long time. Sadly, such attempts are frequently affected by a simplistic cost/benefit decision; Managers will invest energy in a subordinate when the payoff is substantial, but are unwilling to do so when it is not. However, writing off another human being as a bad investment is not only a dereliction of a manager’s responsibility to develop human resources — it is dehumanizing as well. Although you cannot undo past practices or necessarily fix what is broken, there are many instances where effective interventions have made a difference.

You can also begin by recognizing that the metaphors used to describe problem subordinates often create more hostility and frustration in you than is warranted, and that such metaphors, whether derogatory or despairing, tend to guide and shape how you respond. Recognize, too, that such actions detract from your primary mission of developing productive human beings.

When Don Quixote thrust his lance at “monsters” created out of windmills, it was funny; when managers allow themselves to be hassled by “monstrous” kinds of behavior, some real and some imagined, it is not. Perhaps it is time to recast these metaphors to produce more positive images: A subordinate with a problem, rather than a problem subordinate, could become a potential challenge and not a threat, a mismatch and not a misfit. And perhaps it is time to stop passing the buck, arguing that “It’s not my fault, I inherited him (or her).” Managers don’t “inherit” people, but they do inherit responsibility for their performance and development, a rule to which most managers subscribe but for which few are willing to foot the bill.

## Postscript

Bear in mind that no one expects you to be a miracle worker. There are no quick fixes or guarantees. One week of training is not the answer, nor is a simple heart-to-heart talk. You must accept the fact that this will be a long haul. Establishing a pattern of coaching and feedback, perhaps supplemented with training, takes time. In some situations, the behavior patterns are well entrenched, if not permanent. In these cases, it may be nearly impossible to promote change or it may take some major crisis to break the pattern. As one CEO explained: "The threat of a takeover made us all pull together. . . survival was at stake. Each of us learned a valuable lesson in humility and teamwork." Some changes take time to be implemented; others will never occur. Sometimes you may be too big a part of the problem and might have to change as well; other times, the only answer is reassignment or termination.

In the final analysis, managerial vitality depends on the ability to see something new in the old and the familiar. Therefore, all managers must be willing to take another hard look at problem subordinates and themselves and be prepared to face both. Unless and until managers accept this charge, they will continue to be victimized and continue to be blameworthy. ■

## Endnotes

1 The findings presented here are based on a formal survey of 150 executives from over 100 firms, who attended one of several Executive Development programs in which I was a faculty member, and on informal surveys of over 2,000 managers who have attended my "Working with Problem Subordinates" seminars over the past 10 years. These individuals were kind enough to share their frustrations and remedies with me. In addition, I did extensive in-depth, follow-up interviews with 15 executives. The participants in the formal survey averaged 49 years of age and held positions from vice-president to CEO (86% were males, 14% females). The typical problem manager averaged 44 years of age, 64% were male, 36% were female. Both sexes were equally scathed by their bosses, except in the choice of adjectives used. Thus, gender per se played no unique role in the name calling.

2 The paradoxical behavior involved in autistic hostility is further explained in T. M. Newcomb's "Autistic Hostility and Social Reality," *Human Relations*, 1947, 1, 69-86.

3 This case was made the strongest in Walter Kiechel III's "No Words From On High," *Fortune*, January 6, 1986, 125-126.

4 The front-page story of the *New York Times* on August 21, 1986, "Oklahoma Letter Carrier Kills 14 and Then Himself," is a chilling reminder to all managers as to what could happen when poor performance is confronted. However, it should be noted that according to the newspaper account, this was a rare case involving an employee with a history of instability and a management that allegedly had engaged in verbal abuse of employees and other forms of harassment.

5 These themes are similar to the "technical" and "human skills" discussed in Robert L. Katz's "Skills of an Effective Administrator," *Harvard Business Review*, September-October 1974, 90-102.

6 Harry Levinson, "The Abrasive Personality," *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 1978, 86-94.

7 There is a growing body of research on the nature of the plateaued performer. See especially Thomas P. Ference, James A. F. Stoner, and E. Kirby Warren's "Managing the Career Plateau," *Academy of Management Review*, 1977, 2(4), 602-612, and John F. Veiga's "Plateaued Versus Nonplateaued Managers: Career Patterns, Attitudes, and Path Potential," *Academy of Management Journal*, 1981, 24(3), 566-578.

8 For the manager interested in more information on how to coach managers effectively, see Ferdinand F. Fournies' *Coaching for Improved Work Performance*, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, Inc., 1978; Michael Beer's "Performance Appraisal," in Jay W. Lorsch (Ed.) *Handbook of Organizational Behavior*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1987; and Charles D. Orth, Harry E. Wilkinson, and Robert C. Benfari's "The Manager's Role as Coach and Mentor," *Organizational Dynamics*, Spring 1987, 66-74.

9 For more information on avoiding "frozen evaluations," see Chapter 13 of William V. Haney's *Communication and Interpersonal Relations: Text and Cases*, 5th Edition, Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1986, pp. 408-432.

10 The consequences of failure to give individuals effective career feedback are clearly highlighted in John F. Veiga's "Do Managers on the Move Get Anywhere?" *Harvard Business Review*, March-April 1981, 20-38, and Jay W. Lorsch and Haruo Takagi's "Keeping Managers Off the Shelf," *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 1986, 60-65.

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