Executive EDGE

BREAKING THE FAILURE CYCLE

Managers can, without intending it, set up employees to fail. This syndrome usually begins when, after the worker has committed a minor mistake, the boss's supervision increases in intensity—thereby making the worker more timid and even less effective. Both boss and employee find themselves locked in a downward spiral until, perhaps, the latter either quits or is fired. Meanwhile, the company is the big loser.

There is, fortunately, a five-part intervention that can help free boss and employee from this spiral.

- The boss should schedule a meeting with the worker, preferably on neutral ground (not the manager's office). In arranging the session, the manager should use affirming language and admit that he or she bears some responsibility for the problem they will discuss.
- The manager and the employee should begin the meeting by agreeing on the symptoms of the problem (the worker's inability to make deadlines, for instance). The manager should have evidence supporting complaints; mere "feelings" will not suffice.
- The manager and the employee should arrive at a shared understanding of the factors interfering with the latter's performance. If a factor is the manager's behavior toward the worker, the manager should be prepared to honestly discuss that.
- The manager and the employee should agree on a plan to solve the problem they have identified together. If the plan succeeds, the manager will wind up with a more efficient worker; the worker, requiring less supervision, will gain autonomy.
- The manager and the employee should agree to communicate more honestly in the future. A more open relationship is likely to be more productive as well.

From Jean-François Manzoni and Jean-Louis Barsoux, "The Set-Up-to-Fail Syndrome," Harvard Business Review, *March-April 1998, pp. 101-113.*

WHEN IT TAKES TWO

Job sharing is not a new concept in the workplace—except when it comes to the top job. Accepted business wisdom has always held that two chief executive officers is one too many, and mergers have often foundered on the question of which CEO of the companies involved will head up the new entity.

But in the wake of such megamergers as Citicorp and the Travelers Group—a deal in which the CEOs of both will become co-CEOs of the new Citigroup—conventional wisdom is shifting. With more and more companies combining in several ways, it is obvious that managerial pairs will happen more often, and that ways to make them work must be found.

Ram Charan, writing in *Forbes*, outlines five broad steps to help co-CEOs coexist:

- Agree on a definition of success. Business goals must be clear so both leaders know where the new company is headed.
- Recognize each other's strengths; define roles accordingly. Each executive brings different skills and experience to the mix; these can help establish individual priorities.
- Make communication a top priority. Daily informal talks with each other are essential.
- Build trust. Structure some time specifically to get to know each other.
- Get to know the other CEO's people. The point of a merger is to create a new, unified organization, with everyone on the same team.

The Economist points out that a crucial factor in the success of executive teamwork appears to be the support of the board of directors. Ultimately, the best strategy is a strong board and a dynamic duo who all agree on where the company is headed.

From Ram Charan, "Two on Top," Forbes, *May 25, 1998, pp. 193-196; and "Sharing the Limelight,"* The Economist, *April 18, 1998, p. 59.*

Illustration by Chris McAllister