LEADERS - FIRST IMPRESSIONS COUNT

Your early days are critical

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Most new leaders don’t realize that their first few days are absolutely crucial for developing relationships with subordinates – and that getting it wrong is not only difficult to reverse but can also trigger vicious performance spirals. Professor Jean-François Manzoni and Research Fellow Jean-Louis Barsoux argue in Chapter 20 of the OWP book 2008, “Riding the Winds of Global Change”, that taking the time to build relationships should be a new leader’s top priority.

**Impressions form quickly**

Our research suggests that bosses seriously underestimate how fast they and subordinates form impressions of one another. Subordinates try to ascertain whether the new boss is approachable, credible, committed and fair and quickly ascribe labels based on the boss’s early utterances and behavior. Similarly, bosses make early calls about whether subordinates are higher and lower performers using their own rules of thumb for what differentiates these, such as displays of intellect, engagement, cooperation, self-confidence or initiative. And for most bosses this process results in an implicit distinction between subordinates they can rely on for help (the “in-group”) and those they would be less likely to turn to (the “out-group”).

According to field studies, this process happens extremely quickly – within a month of starting work together – and it has even been detected as early as the first week.

**Early labels are lasting – and self-fulfilling**

These first impressions are not easily altered – and indeed can produce a vicious spiral that cannot self-correct. This is because once the labeling process is activated, two reinforcing mechanisms kick in that keep the labels in place.

The first mechanism is attribution bias, where initial impressions distort the way people process information, particularly the way they interpret behaviors and outcomes. The result is that people tend to bend evidence to match their expectations – and to keep their labels intact.
Studies show that when in-group subordinates experience a setback, bosses tend to blame it on external factors. But when the same happens to out-group subordinates, bosses tend to attribute it to lack of effort or low ability. Similarly, subordinates whose emerging relationship with the boss is less close tend to take decisions that go against them more personally than those who feel they are part of the emerging in-group.

The second mechanism is expectancy effects, where labels guide the way people behave towards each other – triggering self-fulfilling processes. For example, a boss may closely monitor or make forceful suggestions to a subordinate she/he thinks needs help. But feeling “boxed in”, the subordinate may not be able to shine. In addition, the boss’ controlling approach may hit the subordinate’s motivation and so decrease his or her performance. Similarly, subordinates with a bad first impression of their boss may be wary or defensive in their initial exchanges, making the boss suspicious and inviting close scrutiny.

Labels affect performance

The idea that inaccurate labels could influence performance is not in itself so surprising. What is surprising is how fast this occurs. Research shows that significant differences in subordinate performance show up in as little as one week due to false perceptions of their potential that unwittingly affect boss behavior. In other words, bosses can quickly drive good subordinates to underperform. And in the opposite direction, subordinates can also drive good bosses to behave unreasonably. Whoever triggers the labeling process, chances are it will soon be activated in both directions, producing a vicious spiral that cannot self-correct.

Some of these dynamics remain unsatisfactory, yet bearable – while others may become very painful, very time- and energy-consuming and very debilitating in terms of team spirit.
Avoiding false starts

To avoid negative dynamics, bosses need to devote energy to building relationships early on, while they – and their subordinates – are still impressionable. We are not arguing that every relationship is potentially perfect or that the subordinates in place are necessarily the right ones. However, we believe that making a good first impression is absolutely necessary to maximize the likelihood of productive relationships.

Our recommendations for this are:

1. **Frame the relationship:** Frequent contact with subordinates in the first weeks allows bosses to communicate key priorities and expectations, and be explicit about their own style, their principles, and where they are heading. This clarity goes a long way towards eliminating confusion about what is expected and/or tolerated.

2. **Create an open and supportive climate:** Such contact also helps bosses to develop a personal rapport with their subordinates, which in turn decreases subordinate anxiety and defensiveness. It also reassures subordinates about asking for help because they know that they can still be respected as individuals even if their performance falls short of expectations. Investing time – the new leader’s scarcest resource – in individuals additionally signals a commitment to them and starts to build up a store of goodwill that will help the new leader ride out initial mistakes.

3. **Keep an open mind and beware of labeling:** The urge to label is deep-seated, so it is unrealistic to advise leaders not to do it. Nevertheless, leaders must be conscious of the labeling process. In particular, they must work hard to resist broad, abstract or generic performance labels, such as “stronger” and “weaker” performer, which are simplistic and therefore poor guides for action. New leaders should be especially wary of performance labels handed out by their predecessors and instead keep an open mind about subordinates.

4. **Intervene early:** Perceived problems need to be tackled as they emerge; delayed intervention only raises the threat and embarrassment attached to the issue. An open mind is needed here too. For example, discuss both the data and the interpretation with the person concerned, instead of assuming a poor outcome is due to lack of skill,
judgment or effort. When bosses make the effort to check, they often discover they misread the subordinate’s conduct or motives and overlooked mitigating factors.

Questions to ask

Your first week in your new role just passed. Think about the following questions:

How did you introduce yourself to the team? Did you talk about your work style? Were you transparent? Were you curious? Do they understand your expectations and what you will be judging them on? Were you clear about the two or three critical dimensions on which you expect each of them to excel?

How many of your direct reports have you spoken to face to face? What do you know of their strengths and weaknesses and what makes them tick? A good question to ask is: “What do you hope for from me?” It also paves the way for you to be explicit about: “And now let me tell you what I hope for from you…”

Are some labels starting to appear in your mind? How will you make sure they don’t become self-fulfilling? Can you talk to people who have a different view of the individual to see what you may be missing?

If someone has done something that concerns or irritates you, have you spoken to them about it yet?

When giving feedback, did you start by asking, rather than telling? Did you first check that what you thought you saw or heard indeed happened and, if so, why it happened – before issuing warnings?

Have you expressly invited your direct reports to help build the working relationship and let you know when your actions are not helpful for them?

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