



# Stanford eCorner

## The Toxic Tandem

Bob Sutton, *Stanford University*

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Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/2566/The-Toxic-Tandem>

Stanford Professor Bob Sutton discusses the "toxic tandem," which he defines as when bosses do not pay attention to their employees, while still being closely watched by those same employees. This asymmetry of attention can be devastating, and in this clip, Sutton shares an anecdote of one company team who anticipated layoffs just by reading their boss' unconscious behavior.



### Transcript

One of the problems, though, and one of the reasons this is hard to do is because of something that I call the 'toxic tandem'. So what the toxic tandem means is that when people are in positions of authority--remember, people are looking at them and watching their every move, but there's something about being in a position of authority that when you're the boss, people tend to not pay much attention to their underlings. They call it an 'asymmetry of attention effect' in the literature sometimes. And to give you an example of this, in early 2009... Everybody here remembers early 2009, right? That wasn't long ago. It was right after the giant meltdown and it just kind of sucked everywhere. Everybody I knew, well, except for John Lilly of Mozilla--he's now a venture capitalist--everybody I knew was doing layoffs. Every executive, every manager, they're all doing layoffs, they were getting laid off. And so I wrote an article for the Harvard Business Review called "How to be a Good Boss in a Bad Economy". I gave some talk.

That's what happens when you're a management professor. You sort of capitalize on other people's woes, I suppose. So as I was giving this talk, and I gave a talk on the article, but the most striking thing about it--this was a talk at an executive program right over here. It was on Project Management. And afterwards, one of the project managers started talking to me about an incident that occurred in his office. And the incident was as follows: one of the secretaries walked up to an executive vice-president and said, "When are the layoffs coming?" and this guy was shocked because, number one, the layoffs were planned, and number two, it was a very well-kept secret. But the reason they figured it out--they see if the guy is looking at his shoes--was because the EVP was having what they called in the office an interesting 'shoes day', which meant that there was something bad happening and he could not stand to look people in the eyes, and because there was financial trouble, they inferred it. And he did not know that he had this kind of leakage or 'tell', like they say in poker. And so if you look at it, if you go back to this toxic tandem or asymmetry of attention effect, they all knew he had it. He had no idea he suffered from this or enjoyed it.