

Personality and Leadership Derailment

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Leadership derailment has been a much discussed issue in recent years, particularly given its negative role in limiting the extent to which individuals may make the most of their talents in leadership roles.

Recent events within the context of the economic downturn have revealed numerous examples of this. For instance, overly confident leaders in the banking and automotive industries, who were reported to have dismissed dissenting voices and ignored risk, may have done well in the good times but fell hard and fast when the economy began to nosedive.

Many of the problems these organisations are now facing can in part be traced back to poor decision-making by their leadership teams, characterised by a culture of risk-taking and an emphasis on short-term gains.

Derailment tends to occur when leaders progress 'up the ladder' capitalising on their key strengths, but fail to develop more widely, ultimately being unable to deliver when confronted by circumstances that require a broader range of capabilities confront them.

Three common routes through which leaders often progress but ultimately derail are outlined below:

Growth focus

Here, leaders may thrive on risk and be very decisive, succeeding in sales-led environments where the wider market is expanding by taking opportunities quickly. However, they may pay inadequate attention to risk, thus failing to plan for contingencies and creating significant risk of their confidence exceeding their ability to deliver.

Operational focus

In this instance, leaders may thrive on working within a structured, operational environment, working within tight timelines and succeeded using these skills. On progressing, they may not develop strong strategy development capabilities and may struggle to succeed without a fixed paradigm or way of doing things.

Professional focus

These leaders may have progressed on the basis of their professional or technical specialism without having developed broader leadership and management skills. In a more senior role, they may find themselves unready to deliver the non-specialist aspects, leading to derailment.

Derailment characteristics are exhibited when an individual is put under considerable pressure, for instance when they are failing to deliver because they are promoted into a role for which they are not ready or have the requisite breadth of capabilities. When under pressure, what may normally be sources of strength can become exaggerated as people 'revert to type', relying on their preferred ways of doing things rather than stepping outside their existing comfort zones.

For these reasons, understanding the root causes of derailment and helping leaders avoid them is a key element of realising potential from the talent in any organisation. As the recent economic crisis has shown in a number of organisations, failing to do so can have disastrous consequences when the personalities of individual leaders override business strategy.

Personality and derailment

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The personality of an individual plays a key role in this process from a psychological perspective, with increased risk of 'extreme behaviours' occurring when under acute or continued pressure.

Much of the early research in this area relates to the clinical understanding of personality disorders, such as 'antisocial personality' within which individuals may show scant regard for the feelings of others, or 'narcissistic personality' whereby an individual's self-belief and self-esteem reaches a dangerous point where their appraisal of situations becomes highly unrealistic and negatively impacts others around them.

Whilst these extremes are relatively uncommon in the workplace, behaviours of a similar but often less exaggerated nature are in fact more frequent amongst individuals who are under significant pressure and finding it difficult to cope or perform in a work context. This forms the basis of the Talent Q model linking personality to derailment, developed through extensive literature research, data collection and statistical analyses.

The Talent Q model defines eight personality characteristics which could lead to derailment.

The eight key leadership derailment factors

Factor	Scale description
Hyper-sensitivity	These individuals may have shrewd judgement and subtle perceptions but this comes with a risk of emotional fragility and anxiety and a tendency to regard others as hostile to them.
Isolation	Such leaders can cope and make decisions on their own; but may be less comfortable in team situations, where they appear to be poor communicators, with a tendency to isolate themselves.
Eccentricity	These leaders are viewed as unconventional and able to come up with novel ideas; but these may be unworkable and they may be poor listeners and unreliable in their judgement.
Iconoclasm	These individuals are probably tough-minded and able to break with conventionality; but they may be insensitive to others, even anti-social and unethical in their behaviour.
Exhibitionism	These are likely to be positive, charismatic and socially confident leaders but this may come with attention seeking behaviour, where they are prone to exaggeration and less capable in unfavourable conditions.
Over-confidence	These individuals are typically self-confident and see themselves as leaders but they often fail to listen or understand their own limitations, eventually becoming despotic.
Over-dependence	People usually view these individuals as agreeable and easy to work with, as good followers; but they may also be risk-adverse, lacking in influence and weak when faced with high demands.
Micro-management	These leaders tend to be good administrators, methodical and attentive to detail; but they may be inflexible and rule-following and tend to try to manage others too closely.

It is important to remember that these characteristics are only likely to occur when the individual in question is experiencing considerable stress, and may be an extension of what may otherwise have been the source of their success to date.

Indeed, not having a small amount of each tendency can potentially act as a 'career limiter'. For example, someone who is lacking in confidence is likely to be restricted in their potential to progress. A healthy balance between the two extremes is most desirable.

Talent Q research in this area draws on assessment data from over 14,000 individuals and shows that derailment factors tend to vary across business functions in fairly predictable ways. For instance, people working in sales tend to show higher risk of derailment due to 'Exhibitionism' and 'Over-confidence' compared to other functions, whilst for managers in finance roles, derailment through micro-management represents the greatest risk.

In a sense, this is unsurprising as, to be considered effective; role-holders in these functions are required to exhibit an element of these derailing behaviours (i.e. confidence in salespeople, attention to detail in finance professionals).

How to address the risk of derailment

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So what can be done to address derailment factors and manage the risks for individuals and organisations?

Self-awareness

Put simply, forewarned is forearmed. For the individual, self-awareness is key. For people in leadership roles, helping them develop an understanding of aspects of their personality which could lead to derailment and then proactively managing these is an important part of ensuring stable high performance and career progression.

Assess for derailment factors

When it comes to assessment for senior roles and identifying individuals with high potential, there is a strong rationale for including personality assessment as a way of identifying aspects of their personality, which under certain conditions may derail them.

Focus on reducing business risk

From an organisational perspective, ensuring that potential derailment factors are a key aspect of leadership development is likely to have clear benefits in terms of managing and reducing risk to the business. This can help avoid the situations outlined earlier, where clear strengths were acknowledged at the expense of any behavioural areas for concern.

Coaching and development

In a developmental context, addressing potential derailment factors is not simply a case of sending someone on a training course to learn some useful skills (although this has its place). Rather, considerable personal development and experiential learning is likely to be required for someone to learn to accept, better understand and finally manage their derailment factors. With this in mind, coaching leaders to tackle their derailment factors is likely to result in improvements over a period of time.

In response to the organisational risk posed by derailment, Talent Q has developed a new report from the Dimensions personality questionnaire. The Derailment Report provides powerful insight into an individual's personality and how this may, under certain conditions lead to derailment. It can be used within selection and assessment contexts as well as for individual development and coaching.

The report can support a risk management strategy for senior appointments, in that it highlights strengths but acknowledges areas for development – enabling a structured development strategy is put in place before derailing behaviour may begin to manifest itself.

As Talent Q's research has demonstrated a relationship between functional roles and derailment risks, this information can be used by organisations to actively seek out such behaviour in a targeted way and implement tailored development programmes.

Pen pictures of derailment in action

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So what does derailment look like? The following ‘pen pictures’ of leaders with strong derailing personality characteristics may be familiar to you – though they are not intended to represent any particular individuals, you may recognise past or present colleagues in these descriptions.

The Hyper-sensitive leader

“Hyper-sensitive” people feel things very intensely, noticing things that others may miss or gloss over.

They are capable of sensing fear and danger, and they are aware of other people’s criticisms of them. They avoid superficiality, and can be quite shrewd in their judgements about other people. The “Hyper-sensitive” are often prepared to take the blame when things go wrong, and they take adequate time before jumping onto a new fashion or adapting to a new challenge. They may be at their best in politically-charged situations which require a lot of subtle perception.

Overly hyper-sensitive individuals may exhibit emotional fragility, even a tendency to feel victimised or persecuted. Individuals like this are easily frustrated and irritated and lack the resilience to cope with difficult problems.

They are inclined to view others’ intentions as hostile and to misinterpret innocent remarks. They question the loyalty of others, and may be preoccupied with hidden agendas and politics. They are typically anxious, fearful and over-sensitive to criticism. In a crisis, they may fail to respond appropriately.

The Over-confident leader

Over-confident leaders have all the benefits from being self-confident.

There is no doubt that success depends to some extent on self-belief, intellectually, socially and emotionally. However, the danger is that they will genuinely believe that they are good at solving problems, able to deal with complexity and create broad, innovative visions – and this is regardless of their real level of ability

They will see themselves as leaders, influencers and good negotiators. They will have a high degree of drive, competitiveness and ethics. These people possess many of the key competencies required of a manager at any level and in any function.

Self-confidence is obviously a strength, but arrogance or over-confidence is a clear weakness. The typically “Over-confident” person lacks a sense of their own limitations, and they can easily over-reach themselves. In believing so strongly in their own powers of intellect they may fail to listen to others, and may develop grandiose and unworkable visions, which do not adequately deal with the underlying complexity of the problems involved.

By needing to be the leaders in any situation, they may develop despotic tendencies and make many enemies. And their need to win and eclipse others will sometimes catch up with them. Their belief in their own ethical code may also become an illusion, if it does not get them the success they crave. “Over-confidence” can in the end have disastrous consequences: “pride goes before a fall”, and history confirms this for us time and time again.

The Micro-managing leader

“Micro-managers” are highly methodical and structured operators, who pay a lot of attention to detail.

They plan every aspect of their lives, both in the short and the long term; and never trust spontaneity or leave things to “sort themselves out”. “Micro-managers” always prepare themselves thoroughly and pay full attention to statistical and technical data. They are very conscientious, and persist with all tasks until they are fully completed. They tend to be excellent administrators and bureaucrats.

However, someone who overly micro-manages may rely too heavily on structure, rules and detail. They may be inflexible and have difficulty in adapting their behaviour to new circumstances and challenges. Their emphasis on method and rule-following may limit their competence in dealing with unstructured situations, or decisions for which inadequate data is available. Their main problem is likely to be that many other people do not thrive on being “micro-managed”. As one progresses to higher levels of management, the style of being a “Micro-manager” tends to become less successful.

Conclusion

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Derailment represents a significant development challenge for individuals as well as being a key concern for organisations wishing to manage the risk of leadership failure. Assessment of personality traits can highlight derailment factors and potential career limitation.

This information can be used when selecting new leaders to mitigate against the derailment potential associated with their personality. It can be used as part of a structured development programme for managers whose profiles exhibit the potential for derailment.

In this regard, putting in place the necessary assessment and developmental support is critical to ensure leaders are aware of their own potential risks and are able to grow with the challenges they face and manage these.

A sample Derailment Report is available by emailing Talent Q at info@talentq.co.uk



Talent Q provides innovative online psychometric assessments, training and assessment consulting, addressing talent management challenges throughout the employee lifecycle.