



Esther Cameron

Growing leadership maturity

Going off the rails

If you're serious about being able to make a positive difference as an organisational leader, and you're keen to take responsibility for your own behaviour, then you need to know what your de-railers are. What's worrying is that in my experience most leaders are blissfully unaware of these sometimes subtle triggers.

What is a de-railer? It's a term first coined 10 years ago and expanded upon and brought to life by Bob and Joyce Hogan of Hogan Assessment Systems. It is a way of behaving that leaders have a tendency to fall into when things start to feel a little sticky or out of control.

It's a counter-productive behaviour, or set of behaviours, that is easy for a leader to 'pull out of the hat', and tends to feel preferable to the pain of staying with the difficult feelings that are actually arising. Some say a de-railer is an over-used strength, but in my view that's probably being a bit too charitable. I am aware that I get some sort of contorted pleasure from using my de-railer, which makes up for any sense of incompetence. Maybe that's true for you too.

Why and when do leaders de-rail?

The attraction for the leader is that the de-railer behaviour acts as a temporary anaesthetic or diversion from the real problems that need addressing, but they may not be fully aware of this. Scarily, because the ego is usually in control here, they will often claim afterwards that they were doing the right thing, and may even go so far as to try and justify the behaviour e.g. 'Other people have just got to learn to toughen up...' or 'I was busy with other more important things' or 'I didn't mean that seriously...'.

When the organizational or business environment is reasonably stable and the leader isn't under too much pressure, his or her de-railers tend to remain relatively hidden, and are therefore not too problematic. However, if there's considerable urgency regarding performance improvement, and a high degree of structural, process or culture change underway, this is when senior leaders are most likely to come unstuck. It's at this point that they can slip into preferred, 'broken' behaviours, rather than staying



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with apparent difficulties in a calm, grounded manner.

There's also a risk that leaders tip into the very same unproductive behaviours when they get bored, or start to feel invincible or self-satisfied, and there are countless well-publicized examples of this to draw on from recent years in the UK, mainland Europe and the US.

Seven Common Leadership De-railers

So here's our list of the seven most common leadership de-railers, gathered from recent experience. It's likely that as a leader you are vulnerable to at least two or three of these, if not more.

Derailer #1: Changeable

Behaviour: Being moody, bullying people to get what you want, demonstrating thin resolve

Example: The CEO of an international bank is in a good mood and supportive one day, but tears people off a strip and threatens to sack them the next over apparently small issues

Effects: A reduction in 'safety' for key staff leading to cover-ups, poor decision-making and increased wariness/tension in the team.

Derailer #2: Argumentative

Behaviour: Wanting to fight and win, being over-confident in one's own abilities, blaming others for own mistakes

Example: The Director of IT for a Retail company refuses to admit that he's made a mistake about the purchase of a particular piece of kit, and openly blames the resulting problems on his subordinates

Effects: Disrespect for the leader's authority, feelings of being unsupported leading to disempowered staff



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and reluctance to take responsibility.

Derailer #3: Charming

Behaviour: Entertaining and witty, seeming untroubled, lacking gravitas and follow-through

Example: The CEO of a County Council makes light of his opinions about a government initiative and his own plans to resign, and shares these in an 'amusing' way at a high profile event

Effects: Unsettling for staff – people lose focus and wait for clarity, reduction in peoples' sense of 'containment' and trust, followers settle for the leader's likeability instead of his/her grounded authority and lose their own sense of purpose.

Derailer #4: Fearful

Behaviour: Suspending clarity, mistrusting others' motives, being suspicious of critical feedback

Example: The Operations Director of an Engineering Services company is facing significant business challenges in a matrix environment and is unwilling to sit down with stakeholders to clarify his priorities, specify service levels and agreeing things in writing.

Effects: Frustration regarding delivery and performance management, lack of efficiency in interactions, diffuse focus and ineffectual initiatives.

Derailer #5: Withdrawn

Behaviour: Not showing any emotion, not responding to requests or offers, not caring about others' needs

Example: The Head of Sales in a Manufacturing Company retreats to his office and closes the door when



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serious problems with the supply chain are causing havoc

Effects: Causes frustration and delays, erodes the fabric of relationships and can lead to helplessness and victim attitudes in staff.

Derailer #6: Conformist

Behaviour: Always needing a second opinion, preferring to follow others, difficulty making decisions

Example: Director of Marketing for an FMCG company waits for the CEO to clarify his preferences before taking any decisions, and avoids openly disagreeing with anything the CEO says

Effects: The leader is ridiculed/not taken seriously and the kudos of his function is weakened, political stances begin to be triggered in others in response so teamwork is threatened and people are distracted from the true purpose of the work in hand.

Derailer #7: Perfectionist

Behaviour: Obsessing about small details, only seeing what's wrong, having difficulty delegating

Example: Director of HR in a Government Agency spends time perfecting slidepacks and marking/correcting the work of others when there's a need to clarify strategic priorities and support responsibility-taking

Effects: A sense of overall mission gets lost, team members don't grow their capacity to take responsibility, key issues are not spotted and aired in stead becoming buried in a sea of corrections.

How de-railers go unnoticed

In my experience, leaders don't find out what their most problematic de-railers are until they either



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undertake an in-depth questionnaire such as the [Hogan Leadership Assessments](#) and/or work with an experienced coach. The other possibility is that they happen to receive a particularly acute piece of feedback from someone they respect – or someone with no obvious agenda – that illustrates how they are repeatedly sabotaging their own stated intent.

Some leaders manage to get away without ever attending to these types of problems despite repeated warning signs, seeing them as part of their ‘fixed’ personality. They seem successful at one level, yet carry on destroying value as they go, often by damaging relationships and trust. Conversely, others can find themselves going seriously off the rails and having to find their way back, which can be very painful for everyone concerned.

Organisations, often over-reliant on 360 degree feedback, are generally not kitted up to track down these subtle but important de-railers. They tend not to provide support for their talented leaders to manage this until it’s too late and the trail of difficulty is already rather long. In the worst cases, the story is familiar: A once high potential leader appears to plateau, gets mixed reviews, is unsettled at home, gets posted to an unpopular position in an unappealing geography, then mysteriously leaves the company....

What to do about de-railers

So what can you do about your own leadership de-railers? Of course you’re completely free to ignore them, as many people do. But once you start to become aware of them in others, you’ll eventually start to see your own, and it’s likely you have at least one or two! These are behaviours you learned as a child that were quite successful then, so treat them gently as you prepare to wave good-bye to them, as they have probably served you well.

1. Use the list above as a starting point
2. When you spot your own de-railer in action, explore how it manifests, preferably with a coach or trusted colleague
3. Quantify the risk of exhibiting this behaviour – to you, to the business. If it feels worth changing, then



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experiment!

4. Keep a diary of when the behaviour gets triggered, and what exactly happens
5. Understand why this happens and be compassionate with yourself about why you avoid the alternatives
6. Work with a coach or trusted colleague to recognize the triggers 'in the moment' and help create a different set of responses in you
7. Practice and reflect
8. Ask for feedback from your stakeholders 3-4 months later to gauge shifts – but trust your own sense of this even if others haven't yet noticed (their perceptions of you tend to move slowly)

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