Preventing Career Derailment:
Managing Past the Major Stallers and Stoppers
By Carter Cast
Preventing Career Derailment:
Managing Past the Major Stallers and Stoppers

By Carter Cast

Carter Cast’s 30-year business career includes a variety of manager, director and executive roles in Fortune 500 corporations and multi-million dollar startups. Part of the launch team at Walmart.com, Carter later became CEO of the online platform. Now a partner at Pritzker Group Venture Capital, Carter invests in high-tech startups and coaches management teams. An award-winning entrepreneurship and marketing professor at Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management, Carter earned an MBA from the Kellogg School after receiving a BA from Stanford University. Carter has appeared in the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times and on Bloomberg, CNN, CNBC and FOX.
# Table of Contents

1. About the Author ..................................................................................................................................................... 1

2. Executive Summary ................................................................................................................................................1

3. Introduction ..............................................................................................................................................................2
   a. About this Project .........................................................................................................................................2
   b. Career Derailment Defined ........................................................................................................................3
   c. The Study’s Target Market ..........................................................................................................................3
   d. The Importance of Studying Derailment ..............................................................................................3

4. The Five Major Derailers .....................................................................................................................................5
   a. Interpersonal Issues ......................................................................................................................................5
   b. Difficulty Building and Leading Teams .................................................................................................8
   c. Difficulty Adapting to Change ..................................................................................................................9
   d. Narrow Focus: Lack of Strategic Orientation ....................................................................................10
   e. Poor Follow-Through: Not Delivering on Promises ............................................................................12
   f. Differences in Derailment Themes ..........................................................................................................12

5. When Derailment Occurs ...................................................................................................................................14

6. Derailment Remedies ..........................................................................................................................................17
   a. Becoming Aware ...........................................................................................................................................17
   b. Understanding Career Transitions ........................................................................................................20
   c. Improving Learning Agility ......................................................................................................................22
   d. Effective Organizational Development ...............................................................................................23
   e. Taking Charge of One’s Own Career ....................................................................................................25

7. Epilogue: Derailment in Reverse: Cultivating High-Potential Managers ....................................................27

8. Appendix: Exhibits ..............................................................................................................................................36

9. Bibliography ...........................................................................................................................................................39
1. About the Author

Carter Cast is a clinical associate professor at Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management, where he teaches entrepreneurship and marketing courses and is a member of Kellogg’s leadership initiative. He was selected by his students in 2012, 2013, and 2014 to receive Kellogg’s Faculty Impact Award, given annually to professors whom students choose as demonstrating the most dedication to the classroom and the student experience in it. In addition, Cast was named one of five finalists for Kellogg’s 2015 Professor of the Year Award.

Cast is also a venture partner at Pritzker Group Venture Capital, where he invests in early-stage technology companies and provides counsel to the firm’s portfolio-management teams. Prior to his academic and venture capital careers, Cast was the chief executive officer (CEO) at Walmart.com. During his tenure, Walmart.com became the e-commerce company with the third-highest volume, just behind Amazon and eBay. Before his career at Walmart, Cast was part of the launch team for online jeweler Blue Nile, Inc., now a publically traded company. Before that, he was vice president of product marketing for Electronic Arts. Cast began his career at PepsiCo, Inc., where he spent eleven years in successive marketing assignments. Cast holds a master’s degree in management from Kellogg and a bachelor of arts degree in from Stanford University.

2. Executive Summary

What sinks careers? Why do some careers stall and others flourish? This paper not only examines these questions and attempts to answer them; it also provides possible remedies for this little-understood business phenomenon.

The popularity in 2015 of assessment tools designed to measure a person’s talents in dozens of competency areas indicates that both companies and employees are taking a positive approach to on-the-job feedback. Each year from 2001 through 2012, more than half a million people used the Gallup StrengthsFinder® assessment tool. In 2014, the number of users jumped to 1.6 million, according to Gallup representative Leticia McCadden, as quoted in a recent Wall Street Journal article. “Accentuate the positive” has become a new mantra in many workplaces,” writes Wall Street Journal’s Rachel Feintzeig, where “bosses now dole out frequent praise, urge employees to celebrate small victories and focus performance reviews around a particular worker’s strengths—instead of dwelling on why he flubbed a client presentation.” The problem with a too-positive approach is that it can mask a critical skill gap or lead to a personal blind spot that can stop a talented manager’s career in its tracks. Research has shown that negative scores on derailment assessments are more predictive of an impending career problem than low scores on competency tests, which are administered much more often than are derailment assessments.

Leadership research is clear on the traits of managers who derail, those with personal characteristics that very likely might impede their career progress. Irrespective of variables such as gender, ethnicity, and culture, type and size of industry, and even age or seniority level within an organization, people with derailment propensities often suffer from one or more of the following traits or behaviors: 1) interpersonal issues; 2) difficulty building and leading teams; 3) an inability to adapt to changing circumstances and to learn from mistakes; 4) a narrow skill set and a lack of a broad, strategic perspective; and/or 5) poor follow-through on commitments.

This paper examines and discusses these five derailment propensities and their causes and then offers the following potential remedies: 1) becoming more aware of one’s own derailment propensities; 2) understanding new job requirements during times of change and transition; 3) increasing learning agility; 4) understanding how an organization contributes to management derailment—and how it can reduce the likelihood of derailment occurrence; and 5) taking charge of one’s own career development.
It is important to note that the above five career derailers are not of equal weight. Research shows that three of them—interpersonal issues; the inability to adapt and learn from mistakes; and difficulty in building and managing teams—are the most frequently cited as contributing to career derailment. And of those three, suffering from a key interpersonal issue (e.g., being aloof, arrogant or insensitive to others) leads the way in terms of career destruction. As Robert Hogan, Joyce Hogan, and Robert Kaiser, three often-cited derailment researchers, write, “Derailment can almost always be traced to relationship problems.”

Lastly, although my examination of the research pointed to the above derailers as being “the Big Five,” other reasons also cause talented people to derail, both inside and outside the office. A major reason for career derailment occurs outside the context of the job, in the personal realm. This paper will not address career derailment that stems from personal circumstances (e.g., health challenges) or personal priorities (e.g., a reluctance to relocate or work/life balance decisions). Although clearly these are critical aspects of a person’s career equation, in an effort to limit scope, this study focuses on derailment as it occurs within the confines of the office.

3. Introduction

A. ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This report originates in my experiences working with and counseling managers during my twenty-five-year career at PepsiCo, Walmart, and several technology startups, as well as from teaching students as a professor at the Kellogg School of Management. Whether they occur in an organizational or a classroom setting, counseling conversations often gravitate to career management. I have done my best to answer questions regarding topics such as pivotal career decisions (“Do you think I should take the lateral move from marketing into enterprise sales to gain experience?”) or how to best manage one’s career (“Is there a smart path here to the C-Suite?”). While advising those who have asked these questions, I often work in the following message to the conversation: “Although it’s important to understand your strengths, talents, and passions, also be aware of two often-neglected areas of career assessment: 1) digging deep to acknowledge your personal values, motives, and needs so you can make career decisions in the context of your life—and not the other way around; and 2) using that same disciplined and honest self-reflection to understand your personal vulnerabilities and professional gap areas. Interpersonal issues and professional gap areas, if unknown or ignored, can stall a promising career.”

Why do some careers stall and others flourish? Because of the importance of this topic, I decided to conduct research (an analysis of the existing management/leadership derailment literature, as well as discussions with subject-matter experts) to pinpoint the major causes of career derailment. This paper draws from an examination of more than sixty research papers, journal and newspaper articles, and business books, as well as from personal interviews with leadership researchers, executive coaches, executive recruiters, career-placement officers, and senior-level executives.
regardless of seniority level, gender, age, or even culture and geography. I will point out some of the more striking differences I found within these various demographic constituents. I will also look at the role that organizations play in management derailment, as they often are complicit whenever a talented employee derails.

D. THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING DERAILMENT

In conducting the research review, I was surprised to discover that little organizational attention seems placed on the topic of career derailment. According to the research experts and management/executive coaches I interviewed, few companies have a fundamental understanding of the topic; of the underlying reasons why talented employees derail; or of what can be done to prevent this circumstance.

In particular, I found five compelling reasons to examine the topic of derailment:

1. A large number of people derail. According to derailment statistics, somewhere between 30 percent and 67 percent of managers and executives will involuntarily derail at some point in their career. The median derailment rate across multiple studies is 50 percent.

2. Career derailment carries a high organizational cost. The direct and indirect price to companies of managers and executives who derail can be more than 20 times those employees’ salaries. Failure in management, regardless of level, can be so detrimental to the welfare of both a manager and his or her company that organizations and managers need to become aware of the characteristics of derailment on a level equal to their knowledge of the characteristics of success.

3. The marketplace is changing rapidly, increasing the likelihood of derailment. The context within which managers and organizations must perform effectively is shifting dramatically. Factors such as the increased rate of technological change, the dynamics

B. CAREER DERAILMENT DEFINED

Derailment occurs when a manager or an executive previously deemed to have strong potential is fired, demoted, or plateaus below expected levels of performance. The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) has studied derailment extensively. Two of its leadership researchers, Jean Brittain Leslie and Ellen Van Velsor, have written, “Derailment results from a lack of fit between individual values and development, on the one hand, and organizational values and needs, on the other.” It is important to note that prior to failing, in many cases derailed employees were successful and were considered talented up-and-comers. The study of derailment should not assume a lack of managerial talent. Quite the contrary—derailment often afflicts talented managers who are either unaware of a debilitating weakness or interpersonal blind spot or are arrogant enough to believe that doesn’t apply to them. Derailment experts Michael Lombardo and Robert Eichinger have defined it thus: “Derailment is neither topping out nor opting out nor not winning a promotion each time one is available. It is reserved for that group of fast-track managers who want to go on, who are slated to go on, but who are knocked off the track.”

C. THE STUDY’S TARGET MARKET

I examined both managers and C-Suite executives because the most likely reasons for derailment are surprisingly consistent regardless of seniority level, gender, age, or even culture and geography. I will point out some of the more striking differences I found within these various demographic constituents. I will also look at the role that organizations play in management derailment, as they often are complicit whenever a talented employee derails.
of globalization, and the effects of the 2008 economic downturn have forced companies to become leaner, flatter, and more resource constrained, and the business environment in which they operate is faster-paced and more competitive. As a result of these dynamics, managers have taken on more responsibilities with fewer resources to assist them, and they have been rushed into new positions without the requisite training, increasing the likelihood of derailment.15

4. ‘Bright side’ management abounds. As mentioned in the executive summary, focusing on strengths alone can be the tip of a career-sinking iceberg. A manager might find that his or her strong skills are offset by a weakness, often manifested in the form of an interpersonal issue that ends up stalling or stopping a promising career. This often comes in the form of over-developed strengths that lead to corresponding weaknesses. (I will cover this behavioral propensity in the section entitled “When Derailment Occurs.”) In his book The Elephant in the Boardroom, Adrian Furnham notes that very few of the 50,000 books with “leadership” in their title are about leadership derailment or failure.16 When I conducted interviews with three leadership consulting and development firms—the CCL, the Korn Ferry Institute, and the Hay Group—each said its firm’s derailment instruments were not used nearly as often as were its competency assessments. The common sentiment was that organizations prefer to focus on the positive and don’t like to talk about the negatives. In Management Derailment, Hogan, Hogan, and Kaiser said, “Identifying dark side characteristics could help identify derailment potential...The literature shows that failure is often due to having the “wrong stuff” rather than lacking the “right stuff.”17 Derailment research is consistent on this point: a developmental strategy focusing on strengths alone will not lead to the corner office. Sooner or later, unaddressed developmental needs will limit career progression.

One of CCL’s senior coaching managers, Candice Frankovelgia, put it to me this way: “Despite brilliant minds, sophisticated strategy and a dedicated workforce, many organizations founder on the shoals of underdeveloped people skills.” She went on, “Referring to these as ‘soft skills’ belies the hard work needed to prepare people for the challenges of today’s business environment. And the ‘hard work’ I’m referring to involves organizations having difficult conversations around derailment propensities.”18

Derailment also cannot be understood simply by focusing on the results from competency assessments. Although these surveys are helpful in understanding why and how people succeed, they don’t provide a complete explanation regarding the types of behaviors that lead to career derailment. Propensities for derailment are not merely low scores on a competency assessment; they are personal weaknesses or blind spots that can override strengths found in such an assessment. For example, Korn Ferry found that more than a quarter of leaders rated by their bosses as having high potential also were at a high risk of career derailment.19

5. Understanding derailment helps companies and individuals to understand how development should take place. Examining the key reasons why talented managers derail helps us understand how and where organizational development is not taking place. As Morgan McCall, a management professor at the University of Southern California’s Marshall School of Business, writes in his book High Flyers, “Managers and executives who later derailed were successful for similar reasons prior to derailing, which seemed to say something about how organizations judge performance... and what is meant by ‘potential.’” McCall goes on to make a compelling case that a significant factor in the derailment of high-performing managers is “organizational complicity,” whereby corporations move talented managers too rapidly through key
assignments (and do not offer lateral moves that will increase exposure and perspective) and forgive those managers’ poor interpersonal behavior if they achieve short-term results. I will explore this dynamic later in the paper, under “Derailment Remedies” in the “Effective Organizational Development” section.

4. The Five Major Derailers

A. INTERPERSONAL ISSUES

As stated in the executive summary, this is the most prevalent and damaging derailer. Derailment researchers agree on this point. “Leadership failure is a behavioral phenomenon,” David Dotlich and Peter Cairo write in *Why CEOs Fail.*22 According to Leslie and Van Velsor, “derailment can almost always be traced back to relationship problems.”23 Hogan, Hogan, and Kaiser state, “When relationships are strong, people will forgive mistakes. But when relationships erode, tolerance disappears and mistakes get managers fired.”24 In *What Got You Here Won’t Get You There,* executive coach Marshall Goldsmith lists 20 flaws that impede a person’s career progress. Every one of them is an interpersonal issue.25 When I interviewed Goldsmith, he said: “The biggest derailer I see is lack of ego management—lack of humility, lack of willingness to shut up and listen and learn.”26 Stuart Kaplan, the former global chief operating officer of Korn Ferry’s leadership and talent consulting practice and currently CEO of Knightsbridge Human Capital, put it this way to me: “As you progress [in your career], your relationship with others is more important than your knowledge of and relationship with data. This need kicks in as you move into middle and upper management. It’s a mindset change.” He went on, “You have to let go of having the answer and embrace the relational world. It becomes less about competencies and more about trust.”27

To examine this broad derailier more closely, I broke it down into two categories: a) relational issues and b) dark-side personality dimensions. Korn Ferry analyzed a tremendous amount of data from its 360-degree feedback instrument (called VOICES®) and found 19 “career stalkers and stoppers”—that is, negative behavioral characteristics that reliably correlate to job performance flame-out.28 Ten of the career stalkers and stoppers are related specifically to relational issues. Of those ten, the five most frequently found are, in order: defensiveness (not being open to criticism; having poor listening skills; rationalizing away failures instead of learning from them); lack of composure (handling stress poorly; acting unpredictably or being emotionally volatile when things don’t go as planned); insensitivity to others’ feelings (lacking empathy and understanding toward others; intimidating others; not caring about the effect one has on others); excess ambition (focusing on self and upward career trajectory at the expense of others; managing up well, but not sideways or down); and arrogance (always needing to be right; being dismissive of others’ input; keeping others at a distance).29

Of the top five relational issues, defensiveness leads the way in terms of career damage because it suppresses a person’s ability to learn and develop. In their book *FYI (For Your Improvement),* derailment experts Lombardo and Eichinger put it this way: “Self-knowledge is a mission-critical key to success and defensiveness takes away that key. People will give you less and less feedback and you’ll rely increasingly on inaccurate self-perception. Your blind spots will multiply and eventually one of them will stall your career.”30 Hay Group, in its work *Potential—For What?*, cites the inability to listen as one of the top individual factors that cause managers to derail. (The other three in their research are: arrogance; being too narrow/technical and not having lateral thinking skills; and a lack of self-control/lack of emotional maturity).31 In 2005, leadership researcher Douglas Ready studied 32 companies around the world and identified seven reasons why leaders fail to lead. One of them was a poor capacity for listening. Ready writes, “A leader who fails to listen may experience isolation, which will eventually lead to derailment.”32
The second derailment category under interpersonal issues is “dark-side personality dimensions,” dysfunctional dispositions that are associated with failure as a manager. Hogan and Hogan conducted extensive research on derailment resulting from personal factors and created an inventory assessment tool managers can take to test for these dark-side personality dimensions.³³ Their Hogan Development Survey instrument features eleven scales, summarized in Table 1, below:²⁴

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dark-Side Personality Dimension</th>
<th>Hogan Theme Description</th>
<th>Coaches’ Comments on Traits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excitable</td>
<td>Moody and hard to please; intense but short-lived enthusiasm for people, projects, and things.</td>
<td>Yells at people when they make mistakes; is easily upset; is self-doubting; is fault-finding; is impatient or irritable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skeptical</td>
<td>Cynical, distrustful, and doubting of others’ true intentions.</td>
<td>Feels mistreated; is easily hurt by criticism; has trouble trusting others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cautious</td>
<td>Reluctant to take risks for fear of being rejected or negatively evaluated.</td>
<td>Is self-doubting and has trouble making decisions; feels inadequate; is uneasy around new people; is easily embarrassed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reserved</td>
<td>Aloof, detached, and uncommunicative; lacks interest in or awareness of the feelings of others.</td>
<td>Is self-centered; is socially inept; is withdrawn and doesn’t socialize well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisurely</td>
<td>Independent; ignores others’ requests and becomes irritated or argumentative if they persist.</td>
<td>Procrastinates; is bold; doesn’t take direction well; is overly confident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bold</td>
<td>Unusually self-confident; has feelings of grandiosity or entitlement; over-evaluates own capabilities.</td>
<td>Is self-promoting; tests the limits; is arrogant; takes advantage of others; expects special consideration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mischievous</td>
<td>Enjoys taking risks and testing the limits; needs excitement; manipulative, deceitful, cunning, and exploitative.</td>
<td>Enjoys being in the fast lane; wants quick results; is charming and fun loving; bends the rules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorful</td>
<td>Expressive, animated, and dramatic; wants to be noticed; needs to be the center of attention.</td>
<td>Craves recognition; is entertaining; tests the limits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imaginative</td>
<td>Acts and thinks in creative and sometimes odd or unusual ways.</td>
<td>Has an unusual appearance; is eccentric; has unusual ideas; engages in horseplay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diligent</td>
<td>Meticulous and precise, with tendencies toward perfectionism; inflexible about rules and procedures; is critical of others’ performance.</td>
<td>Is detail-oriented; is overly conscientious; sets very high standards; is very organized.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutiful</td>
<td>Eager to please and reliant on others for support and guidance; reluctant to take independent action or go against popular opinion.</td>
<td>Is a follower; is forgiving and tolerant.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1:
Dotlich and Cairo put Hogan’s model into practice with their own consultative tool, called the CDR International Derailment Report, which they administered to thousands of managers and executives. In doing so they confirmed the accuracy of the Hogans’ dark-side derailment dimensions. In *Why CEOs Fail*, Dotlich and Cairo write: “Many leaders sabotage themselves, albeit unconsciously ... We’ve found all leaders are vulnerable to eleven derailers—deeply ingrained personality traits that affect their leadership style and actions. The odds are that you possess at least one of these traits.”

According to Dotlich and Cairo, managers have two or three potential derailers. This statistic might seem alarming, but it needn’t be. The unknown enemy is the most fearsome. By understanding our own derailment propensities, we can address them, mitigating their potential for career destruction.

Psychologist Daniel Goleman’s work on emotional intelligence reinforces the importance of understanding and managing one’s derailment tendencies. Goleman lists five components of emotional intelligence at work: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. The first two are critical to avoiding self-destructive tendencies: self-awareness, or having the ability to recognize and understand one’s own moods, emotions, and drives and their effect on others; and self-regulation, or the ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods and to think before acting upon them.

The “disruptive impulses” to which Goleman refers are also “self-defeating behaviors” (SDBs) that can lead to career derailment. According to leadership researchers Williams, Campbell, and McCartney, SDBs are “akin to ‘dark-side’ characteristics described by Hogan, which ‘irritate subordinates, thereby resulting in ineffective leadership and possibly leader derailment.” Some of the key SDBs that Williams et al. mention are: procrastinating, being overly critical, acting suspicious, over-committing, and being defensive. They warn that SDBs often go undetected for periods of time, only to surface under stressful situations. Many derailment researchers note that with increased emotional awareness and extensive training aimed at the dark-side behavioral tendency, the power of SDBs can be mitigated and thus decrease the likelihood of derailment occurring.

In summarizing the findings surrounding this first derailer, interpersonal issues, the importance of self-awareness cannot be stressed enough. In 360-degree assessments, high-potential managers are more critical of their own skills and flaws than are those who rate them. But these high potentials also are in closer agreement with their raters’ assessment than derailment-bound performers are with that of their raters. High potentials have a more accurate understanding of themselves than average or derailed performers, and that self-awareness allows them to focus on their developmental needs and build emotional scaffolding or develop corrective measures around their personal vulnerabilities.

In interview after interview I conducted, virtually every expert, whether a leadership derailment researcher, an executive coach, or an executive recruiter, stressed the critical importance of having the self-awareness and self-knowledge to mitigate the chances of career derailment. Hay Group organizational design and talent management consultant Smruti Rajagopalan told me: “When we’re under stress, we tend to regress to ill-timed or unsuitable behaviors. It’s important to learn how to manage our drives and emotions. The biggest derailers often come from a lack of awareness around the impact of our own behaviors.” Ana Dutra, the former CEO of Korn Ferry’s leadership practice, said: “The lack of self-awareness is by far the biggest derailer in any career stage. You need soul-searching to gain self-awareness. You need to be courageous.” Later in the paper, I will discuss ways to increase self-awareness—tools and specific exercises that can help.
B. DIFFICULTY BUILDING AND LEADING TEAMS

Derailment expert Robert Hogan writes, “Leadership concerns the capacity to build and maintain a high-performing team.” He goes on: “The most common reason for failure will be the inability to build or maintain a team. The inability to build a team will be a function of certain dysfunctional dispositions, interpersonal tendencies that are usually invisible during job interviews … These tendencies usually become apparent when people are under pressure or when they let down their guard.”

These five derailers are not discrete; components of particular derailers tend to interact with or show up within other derailers. That’s certainly the case between “interpersonal issues” and the second derailer, “difficulty building and leading team.” If a person suffers from, say, arrogance or defensiveness, those traits are very likely to affect his or her ability to lead a team. Executive coach Marshall Goldsmith told me: “The second derailer, after poor ego management, is lack of team orientation. Many of these talented managers are used to going it alone and don’t know how to bring a team along with them.”

“The second derailer, after poor ego management, is lack of team orientation. Many of these talented managers are used to going it alone and don’t know how to bring a team along with them.”

In an interview with me, CCL senior coaching manager Candice Frankovelgia said, “In building and leading teams, the problem we run into is these fabulous performers who get a team and still behave like all the ideas have to come from them. This creates bottlenecks and dampens innovation.”

Former CCL leadership researchers Morgan McCall and Michael Lombardo point out traits, such as assertiveness and initiative, that help put managers on the fast track early in their careers but that can become detrimental when the managers transition from being individual contributors to being part of the team required to operate at a higher level in an organization. Barbara Kovach’s work on derailment emphasizes the shifts in expectation that come from moving up the organizational ladder, first from a task to a functional orientation and then later to a corporate or strategic orientation. Early in their careers, managers are rewarded for independence and decisiveness within a narrowly defined context of influence (their project, team, or department). Later, managers are expected to work effectively within a much broader context: the total organization and all its internal and external constituents. I will discuss this topic more fully in “Understanding Career Transitions,” under the “Derailment Remedies” section of the paper.

People who suffer from this derailer tend to do at least one—and sometimes all—of the following three things:

- **They over-manage.** a) Those who over-manage don’t empower their team members and are over-controlling and meddling. As a result, other team members find their efforts thwarted and can lose their sense of autonomy and their desire to take the initiative. b) Those who over-manage are poor delegators. Because they were often effective individual contributors, they tend to revert to that behavior and try to do the work themselves.

- **They fail to build and lead their team.** a) Those who fail to build a team hire
poorly, often assembling a team in their own image (instead of building a diverse team whose members have complementary skills) or failing to use rigorous criteria when hiring. Consequently, they end up with a team that doesn’t have the skills required to be effective. b) Those who fail to lead their team don’t communicate business priorities or provide the necessary strategic context for assignments, so their team members fail to understand how their work fits within the overall strategy of the team, the department, or the organization. c) Those who fail to build and lead a team also find it difficult to resolve interpersonal, resource-allocation, or work-flow/processes-related problems within the team in a timely manner, reducing its effectiveness. d) They do a poor job of developing the functional and managerial skills of their direct reports.

• **They don’t manage the team’s context.**

  This issue is a bit more nuanced than the previous ones. In her book *Becoming a Manager*, Harvard Business School professor Linda Hill writes that managing team members one-on-one isn’t the same as managing the team: “[New managers] conceive of their people-management role as building the most effective relationships they can with each individual subordinate and erroneously equate managing the team with managing the individuals.”50 Managing the team means managing the team’s context, which is particularly important in four areas: a) scanning the competitive environment and making adjustments to business strategy based on an ongoing competitive and marketplace assessment; b) lobbying for and securing resources for the team; c) ensuring strategic and project alignment with other internal functions; d) ensuring that team objectives, goals, and key performance indicators (KPIs) are clear and are followed. Poor team leaders often struggle with managing their team’s context, especially, in my own experience, with securing internal resources and ensuring cross-functional alignment for key initiatives.

Of the above derailment components constituting difficulty building and managing teams, the most prevalent, based on my research analysis, is over-managing. Ruth Malloy, the global managing director of leadership and talent at the Hay Group, told me: “If you’re a high achiever, you get promoted and tend to still want to do your previous job. The problem is, as you ascend, your role broadens. You can’t be good at everything. You need to rely on others.”51 For many talented managers skilled in and rewarded for “doing,” the shift to manager is a hard one.

Leadership researchers Erik de Haan and Anthony Kasozi offer a heuristic, a litmus test of sorts to see whether a person is under a good leader. If you’re in a meeting or giving a presentation and your boss suddenly walks into the room, how do you feel? If you feel strengthened, emboldened, or appreciated, you are experiencing good leadership. If you feel inhibited, uneasy, or exposed, you are experiencing questionable leadership.52

C. DIFFICULTY ADAPTING TO CHANGE

This is a very common and damaging derailer. Almost two-thirds of managers who derailed were described as being unable to change or adapt.53 As managers rise through organizations, adaptability becomes increasingly important, as business situations become more complex and answers less clear. With additional responsibility more constituencies and political nuances must be managed. As my colleague, the Kellogg professor and executive coach Kevin Murnane, puts it, “As you progress, you need to move from the technical to the interpersonal and from certainty to ambiguity.”54

When I interviewed Tina James, the senior vice president of human resources at H.E. Butt Grocery Company (H.E.B.), she said: “Adaptability, or lack thereof, is one of the most important derailers we talk about at H.E.B. We look for people who are committed to personal growth and are coachable.”55

This derailer can be triggered because of either of the following two areas:
• **Changing circumstances.** a) Probably the most common reason for derailment under this heading is that a person either gets promoted into a new position and doesn’t have the requisite skills to do the new job or hasn’t taken the time to understand the new job requirements (and continues to act and behave in the same manner as before being promoted). A common issue after promotion is the difficulty for some people of making the mental transition from being a technical manager to a general manager and moving from “me” to “we.” b) A second very common reason for derailment within this topic is overdependence on a boss or advocate. People frequently struggle when they lose their old boss and gain a new one who has a different agenda and a more participative management style. c) Some people have great difficulty understanding and accepting fundamental shifts in the macro environment and, subsequently, making necessary adjustments. Business strategies change because of competitive marketplace shifts and technological disruptions, and new skills or behaviors are required for continued success. (Here are two examples, where I recently saw this in action: 1) After a company adopts a much more aggressive direct-to-customer Internet strategy in a previously high-touch direct selling business model, an enterprise sales person needs to learn new technology skills. 2) With the rapid consumer adoption of smart phones, a retailer merchandising vice president had to re-think her approach to item-level stock-keeping-unit management and pricing strategy, given consumers’ real-time, in-store price and inventory checking.

• **Personality traits.** People who are poor listeners are especially vulnerable to derailment. This includes being closed to learning new personal, interpersonal, managerial, and leadership skills; not seeking input or being able to take direction from others; being fearful of change (especially of appearing inept); having narrow interests; lacking curiosity; and preferring the status quo, even when faced with new challenges that necessitate a change in approach and the development of new skills. In the “Derailment Remedies” section of the paper, I will discuss the importance of developing “learning agility.”

In *The Leadership Machine*, Lombardo and Eichinger mined a large database of 360-degree surveys and found that superior performers (the top 15 percent at their companies) excel at only a few skills, but one of those is something virtually all of them are good at: “personal learning,” which the authors define as “the subtle skill of picking up on cues and changing one’s behavior quickly.”

**D. NARROW FOCUS: LACK OF STRATEGIC ORIENTATION**

Here are two cautionary statistics for ascendant managers: 1) 71 percent of high performers are not high potentials; 2) More than 75 percent of managers are not competent to carry out the new roles to which they are assigned.

High-performing managers who have limited success at the next level suffer either because of shortcomings in their abilities or long-held interpersonal issues that become more damaging at higher levels in an organization. In either case, it is not just the individual who is at fault; organizations are complicit, as well. Lombardo and Eichinger write:

> From an organizational standpoint, derailment of previously well-thought-of people is the result of narrowness of development. There is too much emphasis on straight-up promotion and an absence of developmental strategies. We have obvious untested areas—challenges we’ve never faced and haven’t been prepared for. Even if we’ve been promoted, our experience is silo-based—we’ve done the same thing over and over.

According to a 2013 Korn Ferry analysis, two of the three most pervasive career stallers or stoppers in the workplace are overdependence on a single skill and a lack of strategic thinking (the other is defensiveness, which I examined in the first derailer, interpersonal issues). Korn Ferry research shows that successful
The trait of being too narrow and lacking a strategic context for the business appears to be growing more prevalent in managers.

leaders have had experiences more diverse than those of derailed leaders, expanding their domain knowledge and applying competencies to new situations.63

The trait of being too narrow and lacking a strategic context for the business appears to be growing more prevalent in managers. When I asked Korn Ferry’s senior director of research, Guangrong Dai, if his research had shown any emerging derailers, he said that in this age of globalization and rapid technological change, he was seeing an increase in the number of managers and executives who lacked “an integrated global perspective on their business.”64

This derailer can be broken down into three components:

• **An overdependence on a skill.** This is reliance on the same skill or small set of skills to get any job done and not recognizing the importance of a broadened skill set. It often comes with a bias for one’s functional area of expertise. (The old adage “If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail” comes to mind—for example, a chief financial officer trying to pin a return on investment to all projects, even those that are exploratory or conceptual; or an enterprise sales manager saying, “Selling is selling; I don’t need to understand how our new client software portal works.”) In the book Potential—For What? Hay Group lists narrowness as a critical derailer: “A narrow and short-sighted emphasis on immediate results and/or technical expertise—this is the opposite of lateral thinking and taking a broader view.”65 Lombardo and Eichinger put it this way in FYI: For Your Improvement:

> Many of us take the safe career track, we think, of learning one thing and doing that well. In our early careers, that gets us good pay and promotions up the career ladder. We pass up people who are not as deeply skilled as we. We play that one skill or one talent all the way. Trouble is, it doesn’t go all the way. All things change. One of the requirements for higher-level management and career fulfillment is breadth and diversity ... A single skill is never enough.66

• **Non-strategic.** This often takes three forms: a) being a whirlwind of execution and not pulling back to examine and understand the strategic context surrounding the work. (At Walmart.com, I frequently urged my team to remember to “zoom in, pull back.”); b) being too technically oriented, overly concerned with project details, getting mired in the tactics of the business and losing touch with its overarching objective; c) lacking a holistic understanding of how the pieces of the business fit together—not grasping the company’s value chain, the process or activities by which a company adds consumer/customer value.

• **Having a key skill deficiency.** This issue concerns not having a key skill necessary to be successful in a position. According to Lombardo and Eichinger, some of the causal factors are: counting backwards to retirement and not taking on new challenges or learning new skills; younger managers suffering from general inexperience; lacking technical or functional skills; being new to the job or function and also not being interested in self-development.68 I have found this issue of having a key skill deficiency to be particularly damaging when managers lack
a fundamental understanding of their company’s key “critical path” activities or functions. In this context, the critical path consists of the most important activities in a firm’s value chain, which, when executed well, result in delighted customers and a thriving business. For example, at Walmart, key critical path activities include sourcing and buying products (with a great price-to-value ratio); supply-chain logistics (getting products into consumers’ hands at the lowest possible cost); and store operations (clean, well-lit stores with easy-to-find products and the ability to check out quickly). Ascendant managers at Walmart generally find that the lack of a fundamental understanding of these three areas (merchandising, distribution/logistics, or store operations) eventually impedes their career progress at the company. (It’s no surprise that the past three CEO’s at Walmart came from out of the logistics or merchandising functions.)

E. POOR FOLLOW-THROUGH: NOT DELIVERING ON PROMISES

This last derailer is an insidious one; when managers cannot be counted on to deliver on commitments, they lose their personal credibility and co-workers slowly but surely back away and avoid working with them.

When talking about leadership at a conference in 2015, Jamie Dimon, chief executive officer and chairman of the board at JPMorgan Chase put it this way, “I do think there are some principles to get right—openness, facts, details, and not too much ‘strategy.’ But the tone gets set because you walk the walk and you do what you say you’re going to do.”

The following five reasons for potential derailment extend from poor follow-through and from not delivering on promises:

- **Poor planning and organizational skills.** People suffering from this derailer are often disorganized and are not detail oriented, which can lead to unmet commitments.

- **Trouble prioritizing work.** Effective managers are able to differentiate high-impact work from busy work and prioritize their time accordingly. They use various heuristics to prioritize, plan, and execute their work. An affliction from which ineffective managers suffer is what I call “working in response mode,” wherein they allow interruption after interruption to impede their progress on important projects by responding, like Pavlov’s dogs, every time a text or email message comes in over the transom.

- **Being a pleaser.** People who have trouble delivering on promises are often pleasers who don’t say “no” to requests for fear of disappointing their boss or co-workers. As a result, they over-commit and under-deliver.

- **Not understanding due process.** In my experience, managers who execute poorly often lack an understanding of the due process required inside their business unit or company. They tend to have a naïve or inadequate understanding of the action steps, the work flow, the functional and cross-functional dependencies, and the necessary stakeholder approvals required to complete an initiative inside their company. They assume they can accomplish activities or projects in an unrealistic time frame.

- **Suffering from grandiosity.** People who suffer from grandiosity often are creative, curious, highly conceptual people who are spirited and full of big ideas. When this trait goes into overdrive, however, their strengths can become weaknesses. They become enamored with their game-changing, high-concept ideas and are distracted from following through on the mundane tasks or projects for which they are accountable. (I will discuss in the next section how strengths in overdrive become derailleurs.)

F. DIFFERENCES IN DERAILMENT THEMES

Leadership experts Feruzan Williams, Constance Campbell, William McCartney, and
Carl Gooding have summarized the research on derailment thus: “Generally, the [derailment] themes have had empirical support, with the first theme of problems with interpersonal relationships consistently heading the list of reasons for leader derailment.”

Before I move on to discuss situations in which derailment occurs and the remedial actions a person—or a company—can take, I should stress that I was surprised to find across my research such a high degree of consistency:

1) In various studies over two decades (1983–2013), these five derailers frequently were found to be the most prominent; 2) four of the five major derailers were shared by men and a women alike; 3) Neither age, generation, geography, nor culture seemed to make a difference in derailment themes across various levels of management.

Differences or variations in my research findings on derailment themes can be summarized as follows:

• **Level of seniority in an organization:**
  a) Whereas poor managerial skills, or over-managing, definitely is an issue for lower-level managers and C-Suite executives, it is the number-one derailment theme for mid-level managers; b) The failure to build a high-performance team becomes an increasingly prominent derailler as people move from mid-management level to the C-Suite; c) Not being a strategic thinker is a big derailment issue for lower-level managers but appears to be somewhat less of an issue for those at the C-Suite level (who usually achieve that level at least in part because of strategic thinking). In a 2005 study, leadership researchers McCartney and Campbell found that over-managing and poor prioritization and follow through were the big derailers for managers and were less of a problem for senior leaders in an organization, whereas poor interpersonal skills, the inability to adapt to changing circumstances and/or to build a team became increasingly prominent derailers at the upper levels.

• **Men vs. women:** Four of the five major derailers are shared by men and women. The biggest differences, according to Korn Ferry’s 360-degree research is that: a) for women, lack of composure is the fourth most prevalent derailler, but for men it is the ninth; b) men suffer more from an overdependence on a single skill; it was ranked the most pervasive derailler for men but was ranked fifth for women; and c) men have more of a problem with poor administration skills; it constituted the eighth-most pervasive derailler for men but the fifteenth for women. When I interviewed executive coach Candice Frankovelgia, she said: “Women leaders frequently under-predict how their boss will rate them. They think their boss, whether male or female, thinks less of them than they actually do. We coach plenty of women around clarifying their perceptions of how others see them. As a result, the women leaders gain confidence and assert more agency in their leadership behavior.”

• **Generational differences:** There was little variation in derailment themes across generations, although researchers Gentry and Martin noted that managers of the Baby Boom era (born circa 1946–64) were more likely than Gen Xers (born circa 1965–80) or Millennial managers (born circa 1981–2000) to demonstrate the derailment behaviors of having a too-narrow functional orientation and difficulty changing and adapting. That information is not surprising, given the rapid rate of change in technology, the short lifecycles of products, and the fast-moving global marketplace.

• **Geographic differences:** Perhaps surprisingly, research seemed to vary little from country to country. In a study comparing executives in North America to those in Europe, executives in both regions suffered from the same top three derailers: poor working relations; the inability to develop or adapt; and/or to build and lead a team. The biggest difference in the research was that more executives in Europe seemed to suffer from poor working relations (64
percent of derailment cases, compared with 50 percent in North America) and that more North American executives seemed to suffer more from the inability to build and lead a team than European executives (40 percent of derailment cases, compared with 24 percent in Europe). According to Korn Ferry, managers in Asia rated themselves as having higher mean scores of derailment overall than those in other countries (they self-identified more career stallers or stoppers than did managers in North America, Europe, Asia, South America, Africa, Australia, and New Zealand)—indicating that either the potential for career derailment is higher in Asia or perhaps that managers there just are harder graders. (Asian managers rated themselves tougher on nearly every single derailment factor, so caution should to be used when interpreting this data.)

Exhibit 1 in the Appendix, provides a summary of the five major derailers. Exhibits 2 and 3 summarize the most significant derailers by seniority level and gender.

5. When Derailment Occurs

I found five fundamental reasons why, or conditions under which, derailment occurs.

**Reason 1: Deficiencies eventually matter.** As people continue to progress in their career, problems become more complex, and interpersonal dynamics become more nuanced. More challenging assignments mean that eventually, deficiencies will matter—whether they are interpersonal (e.g., arrogance or defensiveness) or indicative of skill gaps (e.g., in a core area of the company’s value proposition, such as gameplay/user experience and software application development at Electronic Arts). Leadership researchers McCall and Lombardo put it this way: “If talented enough, a person can get by with insensitivity at lower levels, but not at higher ones, where subordinates and peers are powerful and probably brilliant also.”

**Reason 2: Circumstances change.** It may occur something like this: You are a high-performing enterprise sales person with a great network and refined selling skills. You’re rolling along and hitting your numbers, closing deals, and surpassing your sales quotas. All is good. Until something changes. Maybe the product you understand and sell so well is sold off, and you now are tasked with selling a different, more technical product. Or perhaps an executive-level decision was made, resulting in 40 percent of your accounts moving straight to a new self-service Internet portal for direct product procurement. Or maybe your boss gets promoted and the new head of sales has a much more participative style. In any event, circumstances change and you find yourself in foreign territory, finding you need to adapt. The two most common reasons for derailment pertaining to changing circumstances are losing a boss or mentor and making a job change (usually by getting transferred or promoted). In *FYI: For Your Improvement*, the boss/mentor derailment dynamic is referred to as “overdependence on an advocate.” The problem, according to authors Lombardo and Eichinger, is that the person “has been with the same boss, champion, mentor, advocate too long. (He/She) isn’t seen as independent. Others question if he/she could stand up to a tough assignment or situation without help.” According to the challenges pertaining to changing jobs or being promoted, Hay Group writes, in *Potential—For What?*: “It is important to recognize that “being a star performer” is not an enduring trait of a person. It does not necessarily carry over from one situation to the next. Great performance is a state, the condition of enjoying a good match between a person's capabilities and the requirements of the job—and it lasts as long as that match stays in balance.” I will explore this topic more fully in the “Derailment Remedies section, under “Understanding Career Transitions.”

**Reason 3: Success goes to their heads.** This is a common reason for derailment—Icarus flying too close to the sun. Success begets success, and somewhere along the way, a talented manager thinks he or she has all the answers
and stops listening. McCall and Lombardo put it this way: “After being told how good they are for so long, some executives simply lose their humility and become cold and arrogant. Once this happens, their information sources begin to dry up, and people no longer wish to work with them.”

McCall makes a compelling case for this derailment dynamic in his book *High Flyers* citing example after example of high flying executives who flamed out due to arrogance. When I met with John Ryan, the CEO of the CCL and a retired U.S. Navy vice admiral, he called “lack of humility” the number-one derailer for C-Suite executives.

**Reason 4: Events conspire.** Sometimes managers do little or nothing wrong to merit their derailment. Perhaps they’re just unlucky and find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time, such as having a job managing a chain of mid-ticket restaurants in 2008 when the public cut back on discretionary spending, or working in financial services or in real estate construction at the time of that economic downturn. Or perhaps a manager takes a very challenging turn-around assignment and finds that the parent company doesn’t have the patience to weather the financial storm or investment spend to turn around the business unit. When I interviewed Doug Kush, a partner at executive recruiting firm Egon Zehnder, he said, “Sometimes we see people derail for no reason other than bad luck. They just find themselves at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

**Reason 5: Strengths become weaknesses.** This is a significant causal variable in derailment and is well validated through research. Researchers Bob Kaplan and Rob Kaiser discuss it throughout their book *Fear Your Strengths*, as does Kaplan in a book he edited called *The Perils of Accentuating the Positive*. In *Fear Your Strengths*, Kaplan and Kaiser found that “leaders are five times more likely to overdo strength than their other attributes. Whatever they were best at, they got carried away with. Likewise, they tended to neglect the opposing and complementary behaviors.”

Kaplan and Kaiser cite an example from Gallup’s *StrengthsFinder* instrument. Managers who were categorized as “Achiever,” “Activator,” and “Command” according to Gallup’s self-administered instrument tended to be rated by their co-workers as too forceful and not empowering or participative enough. The two researchers created an instrument that measures people’s approach to leadership: Is it balanced or is it lopsided? The tool weighs a variety of behaviors pertaining to two core dualities that confront all managers and leaders: a) the need to be forceful but also enabling; and b) the need to have a focus that is both strategic and operational. Forceful leadership means taking charge, whereas enabling leadership means making it possible for others to take charge. The dynamic tension between the two determines how people work together. Strategic leadership means positioning a business for the future, whereas operational leadership means short-term efficiency and effectiveness within that business. When testing managers through their survey tool, Kaplan and Kaiser found “lopsided leadership” over and over again, especially in the area of “forceful” vs. “enabling” leadership. They write, “We found that when managers were rated as doing ‘too much’ of either forceful or enabling behavior, there was a 90 percent chance that they were also rated as doing ‘too little’ of the other behavior.”

(See Exhibit 4, in the Appendix, for a framework on the balancing act of leadership, drawing from Kaplan and Kaiser.)

Leadership researcher McCall put it this way:

"As situations change, the development of new strengths (and often the letting go of old ones) may be required. People are inclined to stick with their strengths (and the more successful they are, the more likely people are to stay with doing what they know), and organizations, rational as they are, like to keep people doing what they are good at. Unfortunately, development requires doing things people don’t yet know how to do, so playing people to their strengths only looks like an effective strategy until the situation changes and the old strengths no longer serve."
In _The Leadership Machine_, Lombardo and Eichinger identify eight early strengths that often are responsible for a manager’s success but that later can become weaknesses. They are outlined in Table 2, above:

A recent meta-analysis showed that in a sample of more than 7,000 managers at all levels, 98 percent had at least one “overdrive” risk factor. In other words, virtually every manager was at some risk of derailment.

In an interview with me, Korn Ferry’s Guangrong Dai said: “Some personality traits will benefit people early in their career [but] hurt them later: ambition, independence, assertiveness. Managers must become aware of how their strengths can hurt them by overusing them.”

If I were asked by an MBA student or a business manager to pinpoint the most likely scenario describing when derailment might occur, I would respond that one of the dormant derailment traits eventually will be activated by changing circumstances—a job promotion or a new boss—and those liabilities, previously outweighed by other strengths, will move to the forefront and take their toll.

This discussion of individuals’ strengths and weaknesses brings to mind a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson: “A man must thank his defects and stand in some terror of his talents. A transcendent talent draws so largely on his forces as to lame him; a defect pays him revenues on the other side.”

### Table 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early Strength</th>
<th>Associated Early Problems</th>
<th>Potential Future Trouble Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bright and driven</td>
<td>Overly ambitious, abrasive, bruising to others</td>
<td>Arrogant, insensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent, self-directed</td>
<td>Doesn’t develop direct reports, poor delegator</td>
<td>Can’t build a team, hasn’t developed a strong network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyal team player</td>
<td>Doesn’t challenge others, hires in own image</td>
<td>Can’t make the tough call, can’t build a team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results-oriented, controlling</td>
<td>Gets irritated when things don’t go as planned, tactical</td>
<td>Over-manages, poor adaptability, lacks composure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personable, relies on relationships to get things done</td>
<td>Problems with rigorous analysis, over-reliance on a single skill, non-strategic</td>
<td>Non-strategic, lacks learning agility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative and highly conceptual</td>
<td>Lacks attention to detail, disorganized</td>
<td>Lacks follow-through, betrays trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has single notable strength</td>
<td>Over-reliance on a boss/mentor, “has a hammer, so everything looks like a nail”</td>
<td>Narrow—key skill deficiency, over-dependence on an advocate, poor adaptability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contentious, takes strong stands and is often right</td>
<td>Poor selling skills, lacks tact</td>
<td>Poor adaptability, insensitive to others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. Derailment Remedies

In this section, as I discuss derailment remedies, I will offer more of my own perspective on the topic, bringing into account my own managerial experiences.

A. BECOMING AWARE

Calling this the number-one remedy (stemming from its derailor counterpart, interpersonal issues) is understating the matter significantly. It is the most important remedy because addressing it means addressing essentially every other derailment propensity. All positive change—whether becoming a better team leader, or learning to be more adaptable, or thinking less narrowly/more strategically, or improving follow-through skills—starts with self-awareness. This trait is mission critical.

A lack of self-awareness is the single best indicator of a manager or executive’s impending derailment. Data from Korn Ferry’s research indicates that individuals who have an inflated sense of their skill level and underestimate their interpersonal issues (as demonstrated by their self-evaluation scores as compared to those given them by their peers, subordinates, and bosses) are more than six times likelier to derail than those with accurate self-awareness. Of all the data and research I gathered for this report, that statistic struck me the most.

I believe virtually every manager or executive could benefit from gaining a richer understanding of his or her own strengths, weaknesses, and skill gaps. For those who suffer from a more notable lack of self-awareness, I would recommend seven possible remedies:

• **Seek 360-degree feedback from co-workers.** A handful of organizations do a fine job of administering, interpreting, and coaching managers and executives through this type of multi-source (360 degree) assessment. I urge everyone, regardless of level, to go through this assessment process.

• **Gain a deeper understanding of specific values and needs.** If a person’s behavior is not consistent with his or her core values and needs, an integrity gap exists that can cause internal friction and eventually can lead to erratic or inappropriate behavior. When I refer to values in this context, I mean the behaviors and activities to which we are naturally drawn—our fundamental judgment about what is important to us. When we are engaged in activities that we appreciate, we feel more like ourselves—well connected to others and excited by and deeply engaged in those activities.

For those who struggle in or find themselves disengaged from their jobs, it might be wise to spend the time to become clearer on personal needs and values. To what extent is your job fulfilling some or many of your personal needs? Is your job well aligned with the values you hold dear? Here are four tools/programs that may be helpful: 1) Needless Program to pinpoint your most important personal needs; 2) Tru Values Program to discern your core values and put you on the path to honoring them; 3) the Enneagram Personality Test, which is a method for self-understanding and self-development; (Note: while it has been criticized as being subject to interpretation, making it difficult to test or validate scientifically, I found the Enneagram to be very helpful to better understand my own motivations.) 4) Korn Ferry offers four dimensions of leadership as a way to try to prevent derailment. They are: a) Competencies, stallers, and stoppers: Watch for low scores on competencies and high scores on stallers and stoppers and a mismatch between an employee’s self-assessment and the evaluation of that person by others; b) Personality traits: Look for negative traits, such as micromanagement or pessimism, which often inhibit individuals from seeking out new experiences; c)
Experiences: Note whether managers and leaders have a narrow set of experiences or a broad, diverse set, allowing them to gain a more holistic understanding of the company and the marketplace context; d) Drivers: Probe whether managers’ and leaders’ values, career goals, and motivations match the demands of their particular jobs and the overall organizational culture of their companies.104

- **Gain a deeper understanding of your blind spots and self-defeating behaviors.** Although none of us likes the prospects of hearing about, examining, and addressing our areas of personal vulnerability, there’s no better way to improve our performance. The Hogan Personality Inventory and the Hogan Development Survey offer a rich set of tools to understand bright-side and dark-side personality traits. (As part of my research for this paper, I recently took the Hogan assessments and found that I had a tendency toward being “Mischievous.” At this point in my career, this information didn’t surprise me, but it would have been very useful to know when I was in my early thirties, trying to navigate through the organizational labyrinths and political nuances at PepsiCo.)

- **Gain a deeper understanding of your “strengths in overdrive.”** Do you know the circumstances in which you overuse your strengths? Do you know where your balance lies in the push and pull between being “forceful vs. enabling” and “strategic vs. operational?” Kaplan and Kaiser’s Leadership Versatility Index® is a survey tool you might want to take to see if and where your leadership approach lacks balance.105 Another tool useful in understanding your strengths in overdrive comes from executive consultant Daniel Ofman. It is the Core Quadrant Analysis.106 This is a free, simple, self-administered model that looks like this:

```
Core Strength          Pitfall (overdrive)
                     
                     Challenge
                     
                     Allergy
```
Using this framework, first identify several core strengths or competencies you bring to your job. Let’s say one is “determination.” You are known as a person who works hard and doesn’t stop until the job has been successfully completed. Think of what happens when that strength goes into overdrive, when you offer too much of it. Perhaps your “determination” turns into “pushiness.” Then think about the challenge behavior—the balancing behavior you’re leaving out. So with “pushiness” you might be missing “patience” or “deliberation.” The fourth step is to inquire into the challenge behavior and see if you might have an unrealized allergic reaction to it. When you see the quality of “patience” or “deliberation” in others, does it bother you in any way? Do you have a bias against people who demonstrate great patience and are deliberate? Perhaps you tend to associate these traits with being “lazy” or “slow-moving.” So, the purpose of this simple, powerful exercise is to examine the flip side of your strengths, and by doing so, you can identify allergic reactions, uncovering behavioral areas that may be holding you back.

**Maintain your equanimity and observe others’ reaction to you.** In the context of this paper, equanimity is a great word: maintaining a calm self-possession regardless of circumstances. Self-defeating behaviors are most likely to pop out in charged situations. To counter that, I personally have found it very useful to find ways to reinforce my equanimity. Two of my favorite mantras, which I say to myself in stressful or charged situations, are: 1) “Be the participant—and the observer” and 2) “Look at my thoughts, not from my thoughts.” Along this line of thinking, I recently ran across an interesting word: proprioception. Literally, it means an awareness of the position of one’s own body. Figuratively, it can beg an examination of some worthwhile questions, such as: “Am I self-aware right now? Am I well-oriented to the situational context in which I find myself? Am I in touch with what I’m projecting to others?” I have found it useful to try to detach from what I’m saying and doing and to observe how others are reacting to me. Are they smiling and nodding? Are they leaning forward, a look of concentration on their face? Or is their body language closed, leaning back, arms crossed? Are they staring into my eyes or are they focused on some point on my forehead, eyes glazed over?

**Seek coaching and counsel, especially during times of transition.** When I interviewed Smruti Rajagopalan, an organizational design and talent management consultant at Hay Group, she stressed the importance of self-awareness and self-management during times of change. She said, behavior is a function of a person in a situation, and capability blind spots often act as derailers, because they cause individuals to misjudge situations and their approach to emerging challenges. This is particularly true during times of change, a new job or assignment; a new boss; a wildcard thrown into the mix can heighten derailment risks. During times of change, do not try to go it alone. Seek counsel from a mentor, your current or former boss, from peers or people who have made similar transitions. Do you have a full understanding of the new job—its goals, objectives, and success metrics? Do you understand the skills and competencies required to execute the position successfully? When I found myself in a new assignment, I learned to ask my boss up front what success looked like. I would say, “What will I have done in six months and in eighteen months to make you say ‘Carter nailed that assignment?’” (For more on this topic, see the next section, “Understanding Career Transitions.”)

**Be empathetic and compassionate—and stay humble.** One of the best ways to avoid derailment is to be “other oriented” by practicing empathy and compassion. When you find yourself in a charged situation with a peer, think, “Why might this person be resisting my proposal?” “What are this person’s objectives, and how might I help him or her achieve them while still adhering
to my own goals?" And above all, practice humility. Staying humble is important because the leading cause of interpersonal issues is likely arrogance. Leadership expert McCall puts it thus: "The dynamics underlying the derailment of talent suggest starting with a different set of assumptions: every strength can be a weakness; blind spots matter eventually; success after success can lead to arrogance."108 In The Leadership Shadow De Haan and Kosoji write, "Learning to lead requires humility in the true and original sense of the word, which is being lowly and grounded, including being in touch with what the base of your organization thinks and open to your own experiences of incompetence and over-competence."109 When Good to Great author Jim Collins writes about great—"level five"—leadership, he stresses humility, which is not to be interpreted as self-abasement or even as a lack of self-confidence but as modesty and resoluteness. He says level-five leaders have "a compelling modesty coupled with an unwavering resolve."110

B. UNDERSTANDING CAREER TRANSITIONS

One of the key derailment themes is difficulty adapting to change. This derailier often is activated by a shift in circumstances. Perhaps the most common of these is a job change, whether that means a rotation, a new assignment, or a promotion.

As I mentioned earlier in this paper, researchers from the Hay Group write that "great performance is a state, the condition of enjoying a good match between a person’s capabilities and the requirements of the job—and it lasts as long as that match stays in balance."111 I have taken informal polls of hundreds of people during alumni reunion presentations and executive education courses at the Kellogg School of Management. My question: "How many of you, when promoted or moved into a new assignment, were deliberate about understanding the skill requirements and the success factors of your new job?" I would estimate that at least two-thirds of the audience members at each gathering did not raise their hands. I have to admit that I didn’t, either. When, as a product marketer, I moved from managing a brand to managing a category of brands, I did not take the time to understand the skills and behaviors I needed to learn to be successful in my new position. And as a result, in 1996 I got off to a slow start, and my performance suffered. Luckily, I had a good boss at the time; he helped me understand that as a category, or portfolio, manager, I needed to focus much more on cross-functional alignment and garnering resources for my team than on driving toward project and task completion, which I previously had done effectively as a brand manager.

Job requirements shift significantly in the following key management transitions.112 Think about these shifts, determine those particularly relevant to your next job, and take the time to map out your game plan to ensure you understand the new job’s requirements. In the words of author and executive coach Marshall Goldsmith: "What got you here won’t get you there." (For further information on this topic, see Exhibit 5, in the Appendix.)

• From managing self to managing others.
  a) Making the shift from being a ‘doer’ to managing through others is an enormous transition—one that is not always easy. When we’re good at something, we like to keep doing it. We see the tangible progress and receive the rewards, so we’re naturally reluctant to change our approach. But we can’t do it all ourselves—we aren’t scalable and we don’t have all the answers—so we need to make the mindset shift mentioned above. b) Planning the work. In this management transition, we move from planning our work to planning and assigning the work of others. We’re gatekeepers and allocators of team resources. c) Building the team. We need to determine our strategic initiatives and then match those business priorities to the resources we have, filling
in key gap areas. A big derailer comes into play here: hiring poorly, which often comes by hiring people who have skills and/or temperaments similar to our own, instead of those who balance us out to meet the diverse needs of our business. d) Coaching and motivating the team. It’s not enough to assign tasks; we need to develop a team and motivate its members. One of the best ways to motivate others is by acknowledging their good work and letting them know how it fits into the company’s overall strategy. And wherever possible, show the direct positive effects of their work on the customer experience. This transition is probably the hardest one. In her book *Becoming a Manager*, Linda Hill discusses the importance of the mindset shift that occurs in this transition from being a specialist to an orchestrator and a network builder. She writes that this shift literally involves a transformation of identity; to be successful, managers must learn their job requirements, and, perhaps most important, they must cultivate self-reflection in order to learn how to motivate others.13

- From managing others to managing functions. This passage is tougher than it seems. a) Communication. At the level of manager, we must learn to communicate effectively at least two levels down into our organizations. What are the team priorities, and how do they fit into the context of the company’s business strategy? (Many managers don’t do a satisfactory job of communicating to their direct reports the situational context surrounding the work—e.g., the competitive environment, the company’s contingent priorities.) What are the adjacent resources required to accomplish the work? What specifically needs to be accomplished and what does success look like? (We should set SMART goals—that is, those that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound.) b) Listen well. At this point, we will be managing areas outside of our expertise, so we need to be good listeners, asking the right questions and showing humility. (Managers aren’t expected to have all the answers!) c) Garnering resources. We’re now firmly in the “competing for resources” realm. We need to be able to work well across the entire organization and collect the resources necessary for our team by demonstrating how our work benefits each

A large part of our success will be contingent on our selling skills and establishing good interpersonal relations with others outside our own work group.

- From managing functions to managing businesses. Many find this to be a rewarding passage. We have more autonomy to make decisions and we can clearly link our efforts to marketplace results. a) Business integration. We’re in charge of integrating the activities of various
business functions in order to deliver on overall business strategies. Can we literally make the product—and at the right unit cost? Can we distribute it efficiently? Do we have an effective go-to-market strategy that will result in customer adoption? b) Managing under conditions of uncertainty. At this point in our career, we are no longer experts; we are generalists managing people with specific skills. We need to hire well and listen carefully to what people below us, who know more about the particulars of the business than we do, have to say. And we must learn to become comfortable navigating unknown waters. No longer individual contributors working against specific deliverables, we are now pursuing broad, longer-range objectives, often without a clear-cut path to the goal. We must get comfortable being uncomfortable; we realize that actually we control much less than we thought we did. c) Having a now and later focus. We must learn to execute on the present while planning for the future. We must deliver on the here-and-now initiatives to hit our quarterly numbers while developing plans and directing resources to ensure that future performance is strong.

• From managing businesses to enterprises.
  With this passage, we are very focused on inspiring others and modeling values.
  a) Creating a vision. We need to engage others in creating and then communicating a compelling long-term vision. At its very best, a vision taps into and draws upon a dormant collective aspiration. b) Prioritizing the work. All great leaders have the ability to determine strategy direction, deciding what needs to get done amid a sea of competing priorities. (The definition of strategy offered by Harvard Business School professor Michael Porter comes to mind: “The essence of strategy is choosing what not to do.”) We need to identify the right hill to take and to make sure that goals and objectives line up with owners and KPIs. In other words, leaders help drive results. c) Managing constituents. We need to spend time with external constituents, from buyers and suppliers to financial analysts to members of the media. Company presidents and CEOs lament fairly often that they feel distanced from their company’s product and/or service and that their time is no longer their own. It’s a never-ending challenge to manage key constituents while staying plugged into the core operational aspects of the business. d) Building the team. Of course, a good leader spends much time building and then developing a championship team, from mentoring high-potential managers to recruiting new talent into the company to going on the road and selling the company vision to others.

C. IMPROVING LEARNING AGILITY

Historian Barbara Tuckman writes: “Learning from experience is a faculty almost never practiced. ‘Wood-headedness’ is assessing a situation in terms of preconceived fixed notions while ignoring or rejecting any contrary signs. It is acting according to wish while not allowing oneself to be deflected by the facts.” Benjamin Franklin said it more plainly: “Experience is the best teacher, but a fool will learn from no other.” Learning agility is the willingness and ability to learn from experience and to apply those lessons to performing well in new and challenging situations. Researchers Robert Kaiser and Steven Craig looked at more than two thousand managers across all organizational levels to determine whether behaviors associated with effectiveness differed by level. The only factor associated with each managerial level at a statistically significant level was what the researchers call “learning orientation,” a combination of learning ability and adaptability. Those who succeeded were quick to absorb information and aggressively sought out knowledge, but they were also flexible enough to accommodate challenges to their knowledge base.

What traits do learning-agile people have? Research indicates five that are particularly significant:
• **They are self-aware.** At this point, it sounds familiar: Being effective on the job starts with self-awareness. People with strong learning agility are open-minded and know their true strengths and weaknesses. They use self-awareness to set personal development goals in order to improve.

• **They have a learning orientation.** Learning-agile people see life and work as a series of ongoing learning experiences. They seek out these experiences for purposes of personal growth and development. A common trait of learning-agile people is their ability to accept responsibility for their own personal and professional development. They seek to experiment and to test their limits and view feedback as a way to improve. They are good at minimizing the defenses that inhibit learning—such as fear of disapproval, of being seen as weak, and of being dependent, among others. 

• **They are proactive regarding problems.** Learning-agile people like to engage in problem-solving, are action-oriented, and take initiative to accomplish their learning goals. They are not prone to procrastination when encountering a challenge.

• **They are reflective.** People with learning agility examine their assumptions and methods and are critical of their own problem-solving techniques. They attempt to understand unexpected results—why events occurred as they did and what they can learn from those outcomes. They have the ability to examine problems in unusual ways, processing information by integrating patterns, seeing contextual relationships, connecting seemingly unrelated elements. Often called associational thinking, this ability is a key trait of innovative thinkers.

• **They are open-minded.** Learning-agile people are interested in hearing new ideas and in discovering new perspectives. They are good listeners, are empathetic and sensitive to cultural differences, and are willing to adjust their behavior in response to their environment. They stay flexible and don’t become locked into their positions.

When I interviewed executive recruiter Doug Kush, a partner at executive search firm Egon Zehnder, he stressed the importance of learning agility when his firm recruits talent: “We’ve found there are key traits in high-potential people. We look for people who are curious about themselves and the world. These people seek many inputs, and by doing this, they help limit the risk of derailment.”

Korn Ferry research indicates that learning agility is the primary predictor of success in leadership roles. A Korn Ferry ten-year study of managers, published in 2011, found that the higher an individual’s learning agility (which was determined by taking an assessment), the more promotions he or she received. Also, the CCL conducts webinars to improve learning agility.

---

**D. EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

PepsiCo, Inc., is known as a company with a very good human resources department and a strong management-development focus. During the 11 years I worked there (from 1986 to 1997), I found these traits to be true. Nonetheless, even at PepsiCo, I observed many cases of “shooting-star syndrome.” I saw very talented young managers come charging through the ranks, moving quickly up the ladder to the level of vice president or even senior vice president, only to flame out as a
result of either hubris or the lack of experience to tackle broad, difficult, and nuanced assignments. The opposite example is a former boss of mine at Frito Lay, Inc. (a division of PepsiCo). He moved up the ladder steadily at the company, taking different developmental assignments along the way to broaden his scope. Although he was a talented marketer, my former boss realized the importance of the sales function in a company that had a large sales force and a direct-store-distribution model, so he accepted a lateral move into a sales management role for several years. Meanwhile, some of his peers remained in marketing management and climbed the ranks more quickly than he did. But it didn't take long before my former boss was sought after for general management roles because of his breadth and depth of knowledge. This former boss, Brock Leach, went on to become the CEO of Frito Lay North America.

In *Preventing Derailment*, Michael Lombardo and Rober Eichinger write about the "organizational face of derailment," saying that organizations play a critical role in manager derailment. They call derailment an "organizational failure." Morgan McCall writes extensively about the role the organization plays in managerial derailment and lays out the ways in which organizations are complicit when a manager derails. Table 3, below, gives a brief summary.

A common mistake companies make, in an effort either to fill open positions or to challenge (or placate) talented managers lobbying for a promotion, is to move people into roles for which they are not yet ready. McCall writes that in an effort to fill the widening talent gap, companies “accelerate the development of talent by moving people more quickly through key assignments and reduce the variety of different assignments to which they are exposed.”

In a *Harvard Business Review* article entitled “The Young and the Clueless,” Kerry Bunker, Kathy Kram, and Sharon Ting write: “Putting these unseasoned managers into positions of authority too quickly robs them of the opportunity to develop the emotional competencies that come with time and experience—competencies like the ability to negotiate with peers, regulate their emotions in times of crisis, or win support for change.”

So what can an organization do to reduce the propensity for talented managers to derail? In *High Flyers*, McCall writes that most organizations choose their employees, then stand back and adopt a “wait and see” attitude regarding their potential success or failure. The problem is, many strong performers end up derailing (and the corporation loses a good resource) because the managers weren’t helped along the way. The right stuff is not simply a catalog of natural gifts. It is the result of talent honed by experience over a long period of time. McCall makes the case for moving from “survival of the fittest” to “development of the fittest.”

Table 3:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational Complicity</th>
<th>Derailing Flaw</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moves talented employees rapidly through the organization and</td>
<td>These employees can’t adapt when new skills are required; they lack a network of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>within narrow channels</td>
<td>key relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focuses on immediate objectives</td>
<td>These employees aren’t developing a long-term strategic perspective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgives flaws if results are produced</td>
<td>These employees aren’t forced to address personal weaknesses; they aren’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>developing the necessary team skills.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
McCall provides “a prescriptive model for developing executive talent.” Table 4, above, shows a summary of some of his key points.27

McCall also offers a host of developmental experiences that can aid professional development. They include topics such as building something from scratch; fixing or stabilizing a floundering operation/business; leading a difficult task-force project; moving from a staff to a line job or vice versa; and shadowing a role model.28

In an ongoing survey given to managers and executives in a series of professional development workshops, McCall asked, “Why haven’t you changed something you believe you should have?” A surprising number of responses referred to a lack of organizational support; a sampling of answers contained comments such as: “I’m rewarded for staying the same”; “The benefit is unclear”; “I have no support”; “People won’t allow for the change”; and “I’m afraid to make a mistake.” Organizations need to create an environment conducive to professional learning and development. McCall offers three suggestions: 1) improve the nature of the feedback people receive so they can see why and where they need to change; 2) provide both resources and incentives for change and 3) support the change effort on an ongoing basis.29 (See Exhibit 6, in the Appendix, for more information.)

Later in my own career, when I was a general manager counseling bright, assertive young managers impatient to grasp the brass ring, I often reinforced two messages: 1) “It’s not a foot race. Your career is long. No one—you included—will remember if you reached vice president by age 35 or age 39. So take the time to get good at something; that’s your bargaining chip, your career leverage. And take the lateral move if it’s in a critical path area that’s important to understand.” 2) “Remember, you’ll go as far as your blind spots allow. Do all you can to increase your self-awareness, to reduce the career-limiting effects of blind spots.”

### E. TAKING CHARGE OF YOUR OWN CAREER

Research indicates that most managers and organizations handle management and leadership development very poorly. For example, of the sixty-seven competencies measured by the Lominger® assessment, “developing others” is the managerial skill rated dead last by test-takers. Commenting on this statistic, Lominger® founders Lombardo and Eichinger write: “No wonder the leadership shelves aren’t stocked with a lot of skilled

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Table 4:</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topic</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Business Strategy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experience</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Talent</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanisms for Movement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Catalysts for Change</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
people. Most organizations haven’t learned how to run the development store yet.”

Because of this reality, the most important remedy, besides being self-aware, is to have a do-it-yourself attitude. Each manager is the only one truly interested in and accountable for his or her own development. If, in your career, you find one boss who truly cares and your development, one who takes the time to work with you on creating and executing a tailored development plan, you are a lucky employee; most bosses are too worried about their own job performance to take the time to worry about yours!

Based on my experience and research, I developed the following “take charge” checklist with eight do-it-yourself action steps:

• **Work with your manager to develop your goals and objectives and your performance-evaluation criteria.** If he or she is not doing this as part of the job of manager, write it up yourself and then seek managerial input. You can’t do your job well if the destination is unclear.

• **Solicit feedback, both formal and informal.** The best performers are always trying to improve—to learn and adjust. Get into the habit of asking for feedback from your boss, your peers, and your subordinates immediately after you present or complete a project or activity. If your company doesn’t have a formal 360-degree feedback process, do your own informal 360, asking the people you work with what you do well, where you could improve, and what you could do better to support them.

• **Create your own personal report card.** In many of my past jobs, I created a one-page punch list of the key skills required to do the job well, an assessment of my own competency level in that area, and then a summary of the things I can do to improve in that area.

• **Seek a mentor and also create a personal board of directors.** The mentor/mentee relationship can be tricky; it works better when it happens naturally than if you formally ask someone to mentor you. I have found it’s best to find someone you admire, someone who seems to share your values and has experience in an area important to your career. Ask him or her to grab lunch. If it goes well, he or she likely will say, “We should do this again sometime.” Then follow up a few weeks later and begin to establish a rhythm with this person. It’s also a good idea to identify a group of four or five wise people who care about you and can serve as an informal personal board of directors. These people can provide you with feedback in areas such as career management and work/life balance.

• **Create a knowledge/learning circle.** I did this in 1999, in the formative years of the Internet, when I was part of the start-up team at Blue Nile, Inc. (We sold $6,000 diamonds to men seeking to become engaged.) At the time, e-commerce was still in its early years, so I thought it would be a good idea to create a circle of peers (e-commerce marketing VPs in non-competitive business categories) to share ideas, perspectives, and lessons learned. During monthly conference calls, we discussed topics such as what advertising, design, and web agencies we were using and how our marketing programs were performing. And perhaps most important, we laughed a lot and shared our job fears and anxieties with one another. That was priceless—not feeling alone amid the hurricane of a fast-moving, venture capital–backed startup.

• **Codify your learning.** When I was a marketing manager, I created a journal, dubbed “These Things I Know to be True,” that contained two things: 1) a list of the key marketing skills I thought a well-rounded marketer should have; 2) a summary of my own knowledge in each of those areas. Every time I learned something new, I would jot it down in the journal. Over the years, I have referred time and again to that little guidebook. This is a great way to learn, synthesize, and reinforce what I know. In fact, I found this to be such an important activity that I still keep a journal, my “notes to myself.”

• **Sign up for projects that increase your C-Suite visibility.** Research has shown that interacting with senior executives puts them at ease, makes them more comfortable with you, and can lessen your chance of derailment. So find opportunities (e.g., projects and task forces) that allow you to get to know the C-Suite better. After a particularly close call with derailment (due to interpersonal issues with a boss), I volunteered to run MBA recruiting for the Frito Lay marketing department. This
extra-curricular assignment put me in contact with the CEO and a host of C-Suite executives, and I am fairly certain it helped to change their perception of me for the better.

• Choose an area of increasing importance to your company (and of interest to you) and go deep with it. Do this to become a person sought after for your specific knowledge of that subject. It might be in an area where a market disruption is occurring, such as SoMoLo (social/mobile/local), or digital interactive health care, or sustainable energy sources, or the Internet of things. Conduct a literature review, do your own research, attend conferences, blog about it, or read—or write—a white paper about it. As Harry Kraemer, my colleague and the former CEO of Baxter, Inc., put it to me: “Are you watching the movie, or are you in the movie?”

7. Epilogue: Derailment in Reverse: Cultivating High-Potential Managers

I have written quite a bit about what causes people to derail. Flipping the subject and looking at its positive aspects: 1) Can research point us to particular managerial and leadership competencies that strong performers have in common? 2) Do talented people—i.e., those who have great senior management and leadership potential—share specific traits or behaviors?

When hiring and evaluating people, companies often have a list of competencies they seek; this list can be a combination of practices (what people need to get the job done, such as setting vision and direction) and attributes (knowledge, skills, and capabilities people bring to the job that enables them to be effective, such as strategic thinking). Attributes are the raw material of performance, whereas practices are what people do with the attributes they possess. For example, it’s difficult to make tough decisions (a practice) without having a high degree of self-confidence (an attribute). Having an attribute doesn’t necessarily guarantee that the required behavior (practice) follows, but it does increase the likelihood.132

A research firm supported by the Corporate Leadership Council attempted to identify the most common elements among various companies’ leadership competency models by examining sixty-two different models. It came up with nine meta-competencies, which represent a combination of different attributes and practices; see Table 5, below, for the list133:

If these are the most prevalent competencies, I wondered whether available research might

Table 5:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IQ: mental horsepower</td>
<td>Tell: set direction, hold others accountable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EQ: emotional intelligence</td>
<td>Sell: use influencing skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know: business and technical acumen</td>
<td>Initiate: make things happen, be decisive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grow: inquisitiveness, curiosity</td>
<td>Relate: build strong relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ego: self-confidence, honesty, strong ethics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
indicate which of them might be viewed as the most important by management teams? Leadership researchers William Gentry and Taylor Sparks examined nearly 10,000 managers across 40 countries to determine just that. The researchers found that resourcefulness, change management, and building and mending relationships were the most highly valued among managers internationally and cultural values did not seem to influence this endorsement. Following is a description of each competency:

- **Resourcefulness:** The manager uses resources efficiently and adapts them as needed to meet the ever-changing challenges his or her organization faces.

- **Change management:** Change is constant and is accompanied by a host of complex challenges. The manager has the ability to chart a new course, to create new systems and approaches, and to mobilize others to move toward mutually beneficial goals.

- **Building and mending relationships.** The manager demonstrates concern for the relationships with his or her direct reports, as well as with internal and external business partners. The manager is able to build and maintain a strong network of interpersonal relationships.

Of the nine above meta-competencies, the three key competencies listed above seem to point to the importance of being able to “initiate” and “relate.” Further research confirms the criticality of the “relate” competency—of building and maintaining strong relationships. A study by Seth Berr and Janine Waclawski shows “the singular importance of the social-emotional and relationship component involved in management effectiveness, particularly at the senior level. It is apparent that building and maintaining relationships is a primary function and important skill set for individuals at higher levels.”

Turning to the second question from above, I next wanted to discover whether talented people—i.e., those who have great senior management and leadership potential—do indeed share specific traits or behaviors?

Here’s a little formula for gauging high-potential managers and other business leaders that I borrowed from Hay Group and modified. It is as follows:

**Functional Job Skills + Industry Knowledge x Growth Factors/Derailers =**

This equation can be broken down in the following way:

- **Functional Job Skills:** The price of entry to the leadership circle is a strong set of skills in your chosen specialty area, whether that is finance, operations, human resources, product supply, marketing, sales, customer service, technology development, or merchandising. I have described it like this to young managers: “A company hires you because it believes you can come in with your jingling belt of tools, assess the situation, take out the right instrument, and fix the problem.” Over the years, as a boss and a counselor, I often have had a talented manager come into my office and ask for a promotion without having developed the requisite functional skill set. In such circumstances, although it’s not easy to hear, my message has been this: “Please be patient and concentrate on building your functional skill set; barring a derailing blind spot, promotions follow competency.”

- **Industry knowledge:** It’s critically important to have a strong skill set, but that is not the only success factor. Strong performers also develop a nose for their industry. They are curious and externally focused, so they grow to understand the marketplace dynamics, knowing the key suppliers, buyers and sellers, as well as the competitive set. They develop a strong industry network, which makes them efficient and effective. And over time, they develop a sixth sense for their industry; in challenging situations, they draw from their own past experiences, interpreting results and applying pattern recognition to determine how best to proceed, based on their intuitive knowledge of what previously has worked— and what hasn’t.
• **Growth factors:** These act as a multiplier to the first part of the equation, catapulting talented managers forward in their careers. Managers who have growth factors are seen as coachable, understanding, and adept at applying new skills to new and challenging situations. Research from the Hay Group found four key growth factors of high-potential people; research from Egon Zehnder found five indicators of potential; and research from Korn Ferry found seven similar traits.\(^{137}\) As they overlap quite a bit, following is a synthesis. High potential people:

» **Think beyond the boundaries.** High-potential managers have strong raw computing power (IQ), plus the ability to think broadly, making useful and unexpected connections between their areas and others more peripherally related. These insightful managers are also astute at trend spotting and are able to make sense of a sea of data or other information and translate it into business opportunities.

» **Have a learning disposition.** High-potential managers have a bias for learning. They are curious and seek out new knowledge and experiences. They want to learn from others. They seek candid feedback and listen well; they have a high ratio of questions asked to statements made.

» **Are empathetic, with a strong social understanding.** They have a genuine desire to understand not just someone else’s specific argument but also its subtext—the reason for the other’s perspective. These managers seek to understand others holistically—their background, needs, and aspirations. Armed with this orientation, they have a flexible leadership style, using different approaches depending on the needs of the situation.\(^{138}\) And they have a knack for using both emotion and logic to connect with people and communicate persuasively.

» **Maintain emotional balance.** High-potential managers are emotionally resilient. They respond well when things don’t go as planned. They lead with a cool head under stressful circumstances. They bounce back from failure, seeing it as a learning experience, not a personal indictment. And critically, their high self-awareness allows them to be cognizant of, and manage around, their own derailment propensities.

» **Have a diverse set of experiences.** In new situations, high-potential managers draw from their diverse set of experiences (e.g., taking lateral moves into sales or marketing; running task forces or extra-curricular projects; accepting overseas assignments, running manufacturing or distribution facilities) to recognize and extract underlying principles by which to manage. High-potential managers develop frameworks, mental models, rubrics, and rules-of-thumb to help guide them through uncertain waters. Behaviors that may appear instinctual are in many cases the result of lessons learned.

» **Are ambitious and determined.** More than money or status, high-potential managers cite the nature of the work as what drives them—their ability to contribute and make a tangible difference. Their intrinsic motivation for what they do gives them the wherewithal to fight for difficult goals and persevere through adversity.

• **Derailers.** In summary, derailers act as a massive detractor, interfering with growth and degrading inherent potential. I have emphasized the importance of self-examination to gain self-awareness of one’s derailment propensities. I have stressed that everyone has derailment propensities. To understand them is to manage past them. By identifying and addressing derailment propensities, managers can accelerate—not derail—their careers.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Guangrong Dai et al., *Detecting Derailers* (Minneapolis, MN: Korn Ferry Institute, 2014), 3.


7 A recommended process to gain a deeper understanding of one’s needs and values comes from Coach U, Inc. It’s called *NeedLess Program* and can be self-led. (www.coachu.com.2005).


9 Jean Brittain Leslie and Ellen Van Velsor, *A Look at Derailment Today*, 1, 34.


18 Candice Frankovelgia, CCL senior coaching manager, in an interview with the author, March 2015.

19 Dai et al., *Detecting Derailers*, 1.


21 Ibid., 52-58.


27 Stuart Kaplan, CEO of Knightsbridge Human Capital, in an interview with the author, September 2014.

28 For more on this instrument, see Korn Ferry VOICES® Feedback Report. VOICES® is a Web-enabled 360º feedback system that provides access to the Leadership Architect® Library of 67 Competencies, 19 Career Stallers and Stoppers, 26 Clusters and 8 Factors, 7 Global Focus Areas, 10 Universal Performance Dimensions, and 365 Behavioral Aspects.


31 Signe Spencer and Chris Watkin, “Potential—For What?,” Hay Group, 11.


33 See the Hogan Development Survey (HDS) for more information. HDS has eleven scales, or “dark side” personality dimensions, that measures how people behave when they are under stress. www.hoganassessments.com.


35 Dotlich and Cairo, *Why CEOs Fail*, xx.

36 Ibid., xix

37 Ibid., xxiv.


40 Ibid., 93.


42 Smruti Rajagopalan, consultant for the Hay Group, in an interview with the author, January 2015.

43 Ana Dutra, former chief executive officer, leadership and talent consulting, Korn Ferry, in an interview with the author, August, 2014.

44 Dotlich and Cairo, *Why CEOs Fail*, xv.


46 Candice Frankovelgia, in an interview with the author, March 2015.


49 Adapted from Lombardo and Eichinger, *FYI*, 5th ed. 471-476.


51 Ruth Malloy, the global managing director of leadership and talent at the Hay Group, in an interview with the author, March 2015.


54 Kevin Murnane, Kellogg professor and executive coach, in an interview with the author, April 2015.

55 Tina James, senior vice president of human resources at H.E.B., in an interview with the author, April 2015.


Dai, Guangrong et al., *Detecting Derailers*, 5.

Guangrong Dai, senior director of research at Korn Ferry, in an interview with the author, January 2015.

Spencer and Watkin, “Potential—For What?,” Hay Group, 11.


Ibid., 493.

Ibid., 489.


Jamie Dimon at the JPMorgan and Chase Founders Forum, May 27, 2015.


An example of a popular heuristic is the time management matrix that Stephen Covey popularized in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* and *First Things First*.

As an aside, being someone who suffers from this, I found Robert Ury’s *The Power of Positive No* to be a useful guide.


Williams, Campbell, and McCartney, *Leader Derailment*, 85.


Candice Frankovelgia, in an interview with the author, March 2015.


Spencer and Watkin, “Potential—For What?, Hay Group, 5.”


John Ryan, Center for Creative Leadership CEO, in a discussion with the author, May 2015.


Ibid., 20.


Guangrong Dai, in an interview with the author, January 2015.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Fate,” *The Conduct of Life* (1860).

Several effective tools include: CCL Benchmarks®, Korn Ferry’s VOICES® and The Hay Group’s Emotional and Social Competency Inventory.
I read *The Wisdom of the Enneagram* by Riso and Hudson and found it to be an excellent companion to the test. I would recommend taking the test under the guidance of a certified Enneagram coach as well. See www.theenneagraminbusiness.com and www.enneagraminstitute.com/ for more information.

Dai et al., *Detecting Derailers*, 7.

For more information on this instrument visit, www.versatileleader.com/vl/tool.


Smruti Rajagopalan, in an interview with the author, January 2015.

Morgan McCall, *High Flyers*, 35.


Spencer and Watkin, “Potential—For What?, Hay Group. 5.


Hill, “Becoming a Manager,” x-xi.


For more information on associational thinking and innovation I recommend *The Innovator’s DNA*. Jeff Dyer, Hal Gergersen, and Clayton M. Christensen build on the idea of disruptive innovation to explain how and why people like Steve Jobs and Jeff Bezos are so successful.

Doug Kush, in an interview with the author, May 2015

De Meuse, *What’s Smarter than IQ?*, 1-2; and Kenneth De Meuse et al., *Using Learning Agility to Identify High Potentials Around the World* (Minneapolis, MN: Korn Ferry Institute, 2008), 3-5.

For more information, see www.ccl.org/Leadership/community/fivewebinar.aspx.


Ibid., 54-55.


McCall, *High Flyers*, 17.

Ibid., 194.

Ibid., 68.

Ibid., 166.


Ibid., 10–11.


I made some changes to the equation that came from the Hay Group in “Potential—for What?,” which I cited earlier in this paper.


For more on this, see Daniel Goleman’s *Leadership that Gets Results* in *Harvard Business Review*. 
EXHIBIT 1: SUMMARY OF THE 5 MAJOR DERAILERS

Interpersonal Issues/Poor Working Relations:
Includes: defensive — isn’t open to criticism, doesn’t accept responsibility for problems and has poor listening skills; insensitive to others’ feelings; lacks composure — has poor stress management skills (including outbursts, over-reactions); arrogant — dismissive of others’ input, always needs to be right; excessive ambition — focuses on self and career at the expense of others; abrasive and sometimes even abusive — people avoid or don’t want to work with this person; lacks self-awareness — suffers from blind spots and self-defeating behaviors.

Difficulty Building and Leading Teams:
Includes: over-manages/micro-manages — doesn’t delegate or empower, over-controlling and meddling; fails to build a good team — hire poorly, often assembling team in own image; poor communicator — doesn’t provide strategic context or explain business priorities; doesn’t resolve conflicts — interpersonal and resource-related; doesn’t motivate and develop subordinates — resulting in low team morale & high turnover; doesn’t manage the team’s context — garnering resources, driving cross-functional alignment, etc.

Difficulty Adapting to Change:
Includes: difficulty adapting to changing circumstances — an organizational change, a new boss, a new assignment or a promotion (such as moving from individual contributor to manager, from “me” to “we”); over-dependent on a boss or advocate; resistant to change — lacks curiosity, fearful of change; doesn’t learn from mistakes and doesn’t seek input or take the advice of others.

Narrow Focus: Lack of Strategic Orientation:
Includes: overdependence on a narrow skill, often resulting in overusing it and not developing other skills; non-strategic — a whirlwind of execution, overly detail-oriented and unable to prioritize, misses the big picture, overwhelmed by business complexity; has skill deficiency in a key area of the business.

Poor Follow Through/Not Delivering on Promises:
Includes: poor planning, organizational and task management skills; trouble prioritizing work; trouble saying “no” to requests (a pleaser); doesn’t understand due process — under-estimates time/effort to complete projects.
EXHIBIT 2: MAJOR DERAILERS BY SENIORITY LEVEL

Derailment Ranking (1 = most prevalent)

- Narrow skill set
- Defensive
- Over-manages
- Failure to staff well
- Non-strategic

Korn-Ferry VOICES survey, 2010-2013

EXHIBIT 3: MAJOR DERAILERS BY GENDER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Career Staller/ Stopper</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overdependence on a single skill</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defensiveness</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-strategic</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over-manages</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key skill deficiency</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure to staff effectively</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure to build a team</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor administrator</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacks composure</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Korn-Ferry VOICES survey, 2010-2013
EXHIBIT 4: THE BALANCING ACT OF LEADERSHIP

- Asserting positional power
- Creating conditions for others’ contributions
- Positioning the organization for the future
- Focusing the organization on short term results

EXHIBIT 5: UNDERSTANDING JOB TRANSITIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Managing Self to Others</th>
<th>Managing Others to Functions</th>
<th>Managing Functions to Businesses</th>
<th>From Businesses to Enterprises</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thru Others</td>
<td>Strategic</td>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>Inspire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shift from do</td>
<td>Communicate</td>
<td>Alignment</td>
<td>Vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan work</td>
<td>Resourcing</td>
<td>Non-expert!</td>
<td>Prioritize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach others</td>
<td>Broad strategy</td>
<td>Future/Present</td>
<td>Constituents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Kaplan and Kaiser, Fear Your Strengths; Personality, Leader Behavior and Overdoing It, Kaiser and Hogan.

Adapted from The Leadership Pipeline. Charan, Drotter & Noel.
**EXHIBIT 6: CATALYSTS TO HELP PEOPLE CHANGE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Improve feedback &amp; information</th>
<th>Provide specific and timely feedback</th>
<th>Provide performance criteria (goals &amp; objectives, KPIs, etc.)</th>
<th>Provide development direction</th>
<th>Be clear and candid (don’t waffle/dance)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide incentives &amp; resources</td>
<td>Involve the manager in setting goals</td>
<td>Promote managers who model desired behavior.</td>
<td>Ensure reward systems reinforce dev’p goals</td>
<td>Provide access to role models and coaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support change</td>
<td>Provide emotional support and listen</td>
<td>Carve out the time for development &amp; training</td>
<td>Encourage learning experiences (new projects, rotations, etc.)</td>
<td>Create a cultural environment where change and risk-taking is encouraged</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Morgan McCall’s High Flyers

**EXHIBIT 7: MANAGER TAKE CHARGE CHECKLIST**

- ✔ Work with boss to ensure clear goals & objectives
- ✔ Solicit regular feedback (conduct informal 360s)
- ✔ Create personal report card & check-in monthly
- ✔ Find mentors; also create a personal advisory board
- ✔ Start a learning / knowledge circle in key areas
- ✔ Codify your learning: ‘These Things I Know to be True’
- ✔ Sign up for projects that increase your c-suite visibility
- ✔ Pick an area of increasing importance & go deep
9. Bibliography

- De Meuse, Kenneth. *What’s Smarter than IQ?* Minneapolis, MN: Korn Ferry Institute, 2011.


• Sevy, Bruce, Vicki Swisher, and J. Evelyn Orr. Seven Signposts Pointing to High-Potential Leaders. Minneapolis, MN: Korn Ferry Institute, 2013.