

When leaders derail



We are all human and we all make mistakes. We have our bad days and we may lose our tempers or withdraw from others. In other words – all of us derail. Similar to trains derailing from their tracks. It is the extent to which we derail that can be a concern. And it is the next step in the process (following a derailment) that I want to discuss. Because, as humans, we are also able to apologise; be open to receive feedback and ultimately change our behaviour.

Why is this important? I believe this is important to both the organisation as well as the leader:

- It is important for the **organisation** because, as pointed out by Adrian Furnham in “The elephant in the boardroom” (2010), organisations and even countries have been destroyed by derailed leaders. Organisations typically do not budget for lost intellectual and social capital, or for the serious consequences of experiences by the subordinates of ineffective managers or leaders. **A derailed manager does not necessarily imply a major corporate failure. Such managers can cause different types of damage to organisations, including both direct and indirect costs. They cause significant stress for their subordinates and are known to be insensitive and abrasive towards their staff, leading to the loss of valuable team members.** In exceptional circumstances, the organisation may be dealing with a psychopath. Some of the characteristics of psychopaths described in “*Snakes in suits: When psychopaths go to work*” by Paul Babiak and Robert D. Hare (2006) are: influencing skills, charisma and strategic thinking. Babiak and Hare reported that psychopaths are attracted to leadership positions and the influence and power these bring. Their courage, high energy and risk-taking attitudes may also be mistaken for positive management skills during interviews, but they hide a dark side often including poor communication skills, lack of a conscience and poor people management skills. During the research for my 2016 thesis on the assessment of leadership derailer risks, I found that tools such as 360-degree feedback should be used by leaders to recognise that certain strengths or behaviours could translate into derailleurs when they are under pressure. This enhances self-awareness for the leaders and can be turned into techniques for self-regulation by these leaders through coaching, etc. The organisation wants leaders and managers who are focussed on their goals as well as engaging with their teams, but derailed leaders are not experienced as “engaging”.
- It is important for the **leader** because great leaders want to develop and just BE BETTER. **Leaders know that they need to surround themselves with good smart people.** You cannot do that if you continue to push them away. Derailed leaders often lack self-awareness, in that

they perceive themselves more positively than other people perceive them. This leads to destructive behaviours, because these leaders are not aware of their weaknesses. This is another benefit of a well-administered 360-degree feedback with enough participants to make it anonymous. The anonymity encourages subordinates to provide some honest and constructive upward feedback. In their book *"The Leadership Killer"* by Bill Treasurer and John R. Havlik (2018) they state that with leadership comes power. With power comes the risk of arrogance or exaggerated pride or self-confidence and this can be a leader's most destructive enemy. As I mentioned at the start of this article: We are all human and we all make mistakes. In fact, we are encouraged to make mistakes and "experiment" in order to be innovative and value-adding. As long as we can recognise the difference between good and bad and choose good over bad. **Worthy leaders will also make mistakes but will ultimately serve their organisations and their teams. They are aware of the consequences of their behaviours.**

What to do?

A responsible leader schedules some time to reflect following a derailment. You recognise that you've derailed because you don't feel great about your day or a specific interaction or outcome. Sometimes you receive feedback that leaves you feeling uncomfortable or even shocked, because you had no idea your behaviour was perceived in such a manner. The difficulty is that the same behaviour that may be encouraged by some as positive leadership skills (e.g. confidence) may be perceived as negative elsewhere (e.g. seen as "bragging" by peers) and the behaviour may also be unintentional. My best advice is to:

- reflect on the alternatives, i.e. how could you have handled it differently
- ask the opinion of someone you trust
- start documenting exactly what happened (all the details including who was involved, what was the topic, where or when the interaction took place e.g. were you very tired after working towards a deadline, etc.) and keep track of any derailments or feedback you receive about possible derailments to see if you notice any patterns such as the same person being involved who pushes your buttons or a certain project that frustrates you.

When effective leaders derail...they use it as a learning opportunity to enhance their emotional intelligence and handle the situation better the next time!