

Executive Derailer: Mistakes That Interfere With Success

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Leadership style, personality traits, and emotional intelligence account for much of an executive's success or lack thereof. But executives can engage in other destructive behaviors that will cause them to compromise or damage their own chances for success too. Although somewhat counterintuitive, I've seen irrefutable evidence that one of the major reasons for executive ruin is the tendency to overuse a strength to the point that it becomes a weakness. To wit: overachievers, at some point can run amok, focusing too intensely on achievement while demolishing trust and morale. Gregarious leaders build enviable relationships but fall short of hitting targets. Brilliant thinkers analyze data adeptly but then fail to find out if anyone else will support their ideas. Here are some more specific examples of how executives can play a role in their own demise:

An Imbalance of Fairness and Firmness

Consider Bill, the CEO and owner of a small consulting firm that sold about \$10 million a year of services. Bill's professional staff of nine included the best and brightest in the field, but he lost about one of these top performers a year, chiefly because none of his direct reports knew which Bill would show up to work: the aggressor or the accommodator. On a given day, Bill would scold a person in front of others, raise his voice, and charge through the office like the proverbial bull in the china shop. On another day, avuncular Bill would engage in solicitous conversation with each member of his team, often distracting them from the task they needed to do, causing them to have stay to late or to take work home.

When you consider that each person who left the company cost more than \$100,000 in turnover expenses, and add the loss of corporate memory and client relationships, conservative estimates put Bill's losses at about a quarter to half a million dollars a year, a considerable chunk of the firm's annual billing. Yet, Bill refuses to change, so he continues to derail both his own success and that of his company. Many things could explain Bill's behavior and failure to advance, but I have always suspected Bill lacked fundamental self-awareness. That, and he never solicited feedback, so he removed any chance of gaining the perspective that would have helped him advance.

Lack of Self-Awareness

When I begin a coaching relationship with clients, my first goal is to build on the self-awareness they possess and to provide new insights. When I give feedback about assessment results or multi-rater feedback, people seldom register dismay. More often they wonder how I could know that much so quickly. As the coaching progresses, I look for the clients' willingness to grow in their understanding of their emotions, strengths, weaknesses, motivations, fears, and values.

Frequently people know certain things about themselves but lack the understanding of how to use the information to change their lives. Self-aware people, however, tend to be more honest with themselves and others, so they start from a position of knowledge. On the other hand, people who lack self-awareness don't know where to start.

Consider my client, Louise, a smart woman who understood neither her strengths nor her limitations. She had the ability to think analytically but lacked empathy. She could solve unfamiliar problems, but since she had such regrettable people skills, she couldn't build cohesion, much less collaboration. She failed to recognize how her feelings affected her, other people, and her job performance.

Once Louise started to concentrate on self-awareness, she was better able to leverage her strengths to mitigate her limitations. She better understood the kinds of situations that caused her frustrations and angst and to develop ways to avoid situations that caused her to perform at less than optimum levels. When people like Louise learn to assess themselves realistically, they avoid the inner turmoil that comes from treading on their values or putting themselves in situations where they can't possibly succeed. Self-awareness means having a deep understanding of one's self, a celebration of talents and an acceptance of limitations. Self-awareness implies a balance of self-perception, not unhealthy self-love.

Narcissism and Ego

Narcissism, which comes from the Greek myth of Narcissus, describes the trait of excessive self-love, based on self-image or ego. In adults, especially successful leaders, a reasonable dose of healthy narcissism allows people to balance their needs in relation to those of others. It spurs them on to greatness because they expect it of themselves. Taken to a pathological extreme, however, it causes people to have a grandiose sense of self-importance, a preoccupation with power, a belief that rules don't apply to them, a need for excessive admiration, a sense of entitlement, and a lack of empathy. Their tendency toward grandiosity and distrust creates their Achilles' heel, and often their demise.

Narcissists thrive in chaos, so they tend to create it. Considering themselves bullet proof, they disregard caution and listen only for information they seek. Sensitive to criticism, narcissist leaders shun emotion and keep others at arm's length. They don't care what others think and won't tolerate dissent.

History provides numerous examples of social, and political leaders who created their own downfall because they allowed ego or a sense of importance to cloud their judgment. Clinton's lies under oath, Nixon's Watergate cover-up, and Kennedy's infamous Bay of Pigs invasion showcase how a leader, sometimes one who has otherwise led impressively, can create his own permanent or temporary collapse. More recent examples of narcissists fashioning their own ruin grace the pages of *The Wall Street Journal* nearly every day. The permanent or temporary nature of the downfall often has to do with whether a person can learn from mistakes. For example, unlike many others who continued on the path of narcissism, after the Bay of Pigs invasion, President

Kennedy admitted his mistakes, accepted full responsibility, and altered the course of history in his stellar leadership during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Recklessness

Recklessness, and the headstrong desire for self-fulfillment it brings, have caused many leaders to strike a Faustian bargain with the devil that led them in a diabolical direction. Recklessness, an identifiable behavior among narcissists, explains how and why leaders can fall prey to stunningly poor lapses in judgment. It has contributed to the ruin of religious leaders such as Jimmy Baker and Jerry Falwell, and corporate titans like WorldCom's Bernard Ebbers and Enron's Kenneth Lay. Like Icarus, who disregarded his father's advice and soared too high and too close to the sun, these once admired leaders became reckless and fell. But how do you attempt to soar above competitors without melting the wax on your wings? Smart risk takers define the playing field for everyone else by taking calculated risks and anticipating the future, not by idiocy and folly.

Lack of Empathy

Another hallmark of narcissism, a lack of empathy, explains further reasons executives fall and fail. Almost all narcissists lack empathy, and by definition, all sociopaths and psychopaths do, but not all those who are un-empathic are narcissists or mentally ill. Some lack insight. Others just don't care.

Empathy builds on self-awareness because the more people are open to their own emotions, the more adept they will be at reading those of others. However, when people are confused about their own feelings, they are absolutely bewildered by those of others. During interactions, they lose the nuances of conversation—the notes and chords that weave through the exchange communicate far more than the actual words themselves.

All empathy is not created equal, however. In my work with executives, I have found they often display one or both of two kinds of empathy. The first kind is what I call “no dog in the fight empathy,” which occurs when a person has no vested interest in the outcome. This sort of empathy requires no true understanding or compassion. It allows people to excel at expressing the appropriate reaction to someone's bad news, dutifully show up at funerals, send flowers to congratulate, and generally display social astuteness to match the occasion. Almost everyone has some degree of this kind of empathy. People who only possess this kind of empathy don't lack sensitivity in all circumstances, just ones that involve someone contradicting them.

The second kind of empathy causes people to identify closely with others and their problems. People who exhibit this kind of empathy are truly concerned about others, value close emotional ties, celebrate others' triumphs, and feel upset by their misfortunes, even when feeling these reactions is not convenient. From a business standpoint, people who demonstrate this kind of empathy tend to be able to put themselves in another's shoes, even during conflict, and to imagine what another person might feel or fear in any interaction.

Lack of empathy, probably the most rampant of the derailers, manifests itself in a variety of destructive ways. Often it shows up as a complete inability to listen to, much less consider, an alternative point of view. At other times, those who have difficulty feeling or displaying empathy appear emotionally aloof. They do not allow feelings to intrude on their decision making and prefer impersonal to close relationships. Generally unresponsive to those around them, they display little compassion for other people's problems, especially if the problems create a threat to work accomplishment or some other stake the leader has in the ground. Executives who cannot or will not express empathy regularly put their relationships at risk, causing those around them to question whether they want to stay. The remedy, listening, is easy and painless, however, not widespread among those who suffer from an empathy affliction.

Failure to Listen

Active listening provides the surest and more effective antidote for lack of empathy. If you truly listen to another—not just stay quiet while he or she speaks—but truly listen for both facts and feelings, you will have taken a giant step for mankind. When I conduct multi-rater feedback interviews, the number one weakness direct reports identify in their leaders is a failure to listen. Direct reports tell me their leaders usually display some sort of telling behavior that indicates the end of the conversation, or at least a reduction in empathy.

For instance, the boss will start looking at papers on the desk, glance over at the computer, interrupt, or produce audible interrupters like the hurried “uh huh,” all sure-fire signals that the boss is too busy or simply doesn't care. The importance of listening will be a recurring theme throughout this book, but I'd like to address it here as a derailer.

Successful leaders take the time to understand the issues, their people, and the underlying emotions. They invest the time to probe for understanding and then patiently work through solutions that help both the quality of the decision and the development of the direct report. Executives who are too busy to do either often find themselves acting as talent repellents instead of talent magnets.

Failure to Hire the Best and Brightest:

Failure to hire top talent so will contribute to your personal failure and that of your organization. A Players want to play on a team with other A Players. They will tolerate a B Player but won't suffer a C player too long or too much, and they will often leave if you force a D Player into the mix.

Often, however, decision makers fear a stronger player coming in usurping their position. They want to guard the sovereignty of their role and not give those above them

reason to question who should be in charge. Then too, companies often don't want to pay the premium of hiring the best and brightest.

Derailed executives often have a knack for not selecting and attracting talented individuals. They fail to establish their organizations as a place where people can maximize their skills and abilities with minimal bureaucratic interference. That's one explanation for the failure. Another is they forget they must commit to the continuous and constant task of selecting, molding, and grooming of top talent. It costs money; it takes time; and it takes courage. But failure to do so dooms your company to mediocrity.

For example, while working with a COO, Jane, I commented that the turnover at their company was unusually high and their staff strangely under-compensated. In spite of the enormous sums the company paid each year in turnover costs and temporary agency charges, Jane refused to authorize raises, commenting that "we pay the average." I pointed out that they had hired me to make sure they don't hire average people, and the turnover costs in one year would more than fund the raises to attract and keep A Players. Jane doomed herself and her company to run of the mill results because of an unwillingness to pay top talent its worth. Whether fear of competition, refusal to pay a competitive salary, or just plain inability to recognize talent explains your situation, if you don't attract and keep the best and brightest in your industry, your competitors will.

Failure to be the Best and Brightest

When coaching executives, I frequently encounter a widespread and nefarious trend—they have begun the process of stagnation. School is behind them; they have met the continuing education requirements; or they think they are simply too busy to spend time on learning. People who spent thousands of dollars a year pursuing a degree to get them where they are hesitate to spend hundreds a year on continued development.

Some industries change more quickly than others, but no matter the nature of your work, you need to be learning about it, leadership, the world, and people. Formal training and classes often help, but so does reading. Protecting time each day for learning and steadfastly pushing yourself to improve are the first steps. They will help you in your own advancement, but they will also make you a better judge of the talent you encounter. Continuous learning should be a priority for you and those you lead because, in general, it will equip you to set better priorities.

Not Setting Priorities

Peter Drucker once said, "There is surely nothing quite so useless as doing with great efficiency what should not be done at all," which highlights the confusion between effectiveness and efficiency—between doing the right things and doing things right.⁵ In Chapter Four I will more directly address the necessity of prioritizing goals to support the strategy, but a failure to set priorities defines a more basic derailer.

Productive managers realize they can't do it all. We are each limited by the hours in the day, our energy level, budgets, and the support we receive—just to name a few. Prioritizing, the sense of what's mission-critical and what's nice to do, therefore, separates those who rise to the top and those who fall. Several reasons explain an otherwise effective leader's inability to prioritize: a belief that everything's equally important, an addition to activity, poor time management, or an unwillingness to set boundaries. Without clear priorities leaders tend to create activity traps for their direct reports. In these cases, everyone works long hours trying to make virtually everything perfect, but nothing of importance actually gets done—largely because everyone is too worn out from addressing inconsequential activities to work on the important ones. Even though a commitment to excellence distinguishes the average executive from the successful one, an inability to make distinctions among tasks and a predisposition to perfectionism create the slippery slope for a leader's derailment.

Perfectionism

Perfectionism, an overuse of detail orientation to the point that it causes analysis paralysis, contributes mightily to failure. Successful executives have a keen eye for the critical details but don't usually concern themselves with the unimportant ones. They zero in on what needs to be done and demand accuracy and precision on those things that truly matter but don't squander their time and that of others on the inconsequential.

Few things in life need to be perfect—brain surgery and taxes being the exceptions. Yet, many focused and determined people mistakenly believe the adage, "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing well." Most things don't need to be done well; some things just need to be done. When you're 80% ready, move. The time you will spend gathering the data for the other 20% accuracy may be the critical time it took your competitor to launch the new product, initiative, or service. Think of perfectionism and recklessness on a continuum, neither extreme offering the best course of action. Neither folly nor precision defines great business decisions; bold innovation does.

Conclusion

Even though their personalities and management styles may differ, executives who make it to the top and stay there, share some common traits: they have a sense of proportion in their leadership styles and lives; they possess a high degree of self-awareness and self-regulation; and they maintain a long-term focus. They are willing to delay reward for the bigger payoff.