

# Throwing the Right Switches

## How to Keep Your Executive Career on Track

Craig Chappelow and Jean Brittain Leslie

**E**ven the shiniest, highest-performing locomotives can run off the rails if the right measures aren't taken to prevent it. The same is true of executives. High-level managers with impressive track records, who are seen by themselves and others in their organizations as being on their way to the top, may have no concerns about their careers derailing. That type of complacency, however, can set them up for a wreck.

Many high-performing executives have one or more blind spots that they ignore as long as they continue to meet their business goals. Others rely heavily on a specific strength, then find themselves lacking the necessary skills when their work environment changes. These factors and others can play a role in derailing the careers of once promising managers.

Since 1983, the Center for Creative Leadership has studied the career derailments of male and female executives in North America and Europe. By comparing successful executives with those who derail, CCL has identified specific characteristics that lead to success and other characteristics that force formerly successful careers off track. Executives who are aware of these characteristics and who combine that awareness with an honest self-assessment of their leadership behavior can do a lot to keep their careers headed in the right direction.

This article examines two of the factors that are key to determining whether executives will successfully further their careers or derail—the ability to establish strong interpersonal relationships and the ability to adapt and develop during periods of change. Other factors may be involved, but these two are among the most critical. In addition to looking at how deficiencies in these characteristics can cause executives to derail, we will look at related strategies that successful executives use to realize their full potential and stay on track.

### What Is Derailment?

It's important to first understand what we mean by derailment and success. CCL's research has defined successful executives as those who have reached at least the general manager level and who, in the eyes of senior executives in the organization, remain likely candidates for promotion. Derailed executives are

those who, after reaching the general manager level, are fired, demoted, or held on a career plateau. Right up to the point of derailment, the superiors of the derailed executives saw them as having high potential for advancement, impressive track records, and solidly established leadership positions. (For the purposes of this study, executives who have simply advanced as far as the company hierarchy allows or who voluntarily decide to stay at a particular level are not considered derailed.)

### Interpersonal Skills

The ability to work well with others is a key factor for long-term career success. This characteristic clearly separates executives who succeed from those who derail. Executives who are perceived as adept at building and managing effective interpersonal relationships are described by their bosses, peers, and direct reports as:

- Good listeners.
- Available to others.
- Collaborative.
- Sharing responsibility.
- Nonauthoritarian.
- Teamwork oriented.
- Supportive of others' ideas.
- Honest.
- Trustworthy.
- Straightforward.
- Ethical.

Consider the following story about an executive who took part in CCL's research. He displayed a strong sense of connection with the people in his department and was seen as adept at building strong relationships:

*A woman in the office had recently become engaged, and the department had taken up a collection to purchase a wedding gift for her. The executive suggested giving her an engraved cake knife. He had received one on his wedding day, and on every "cake occasion" he and his wife use the knife. It always reminds him of his wedding*

*day and how much he loved his wife on that day and continues to love her to this day. The woman who was engaged was very touched by this sense of emotion and openness, and the gift took on a meaning for her beyond just something to cut a cake with. She felt more loyal to the executive as a result.*

The most common reason for career derailment is an inability to relate to people in meaningful ways. Executives who are unable to establish strong interpersonal relationships are described by their bosses, peers, and direct reports as:

- Insensitive.
- Competitive with others.
- Self-isolating.
- Dictatorial.
- Overly critical.
- Overdemanding.
- Easily angered.
- Arrogant.
- Emotionally explosive.
- Manipulative.
- Aloof.

Many managers are hired originally for their contributions as individuals, and at first their value to the organization is measured in terms of bottom-line results. As they move up in the organization, however, they find themselves judged not only on results but also on how well they manage relationships with people inside the organization and outside the organization, such as customers. If they grow resentful because they feel that fostering relationships was not part of the original bargain, they will resist developing the skills needed to establish strong interpersonal relationships.

Let's look at the case of an executive who ignored the importance of interpersonal relationships and suffered the consequences:

*A company lacked strategic direction. The CEO set up a five-day meeting to explore strategic alternatives. All the key senior officers participated, and everyone worked hard for five days. After the meeting, however, nothing more on the matter was heard from the CEO, who had virtually no contact with the meeting participants. Five months later he put everyone through a fire drill to put together one-year and five-year plans. Because of the earlier lack of follow-up and relationship building, the whole process lacked credibility—and so did the CEO.*

One reason that a lack of interpersonal skills plays such a large role in executive derailment is that the behaviors associated with those skills are difficult to change. A turnaround is not impossible, however. It doesn't require a personality transplant. What it does require is an honest assessment of the executive's behavior and an action plan to improve interpersonal competence.

Executives can begin by asking themselves a series of questions:

- How would I describe my interpersonal skills?
- Have my boss, peers, direct reports, or customers given me feedback about my approach to relationships?
- What did they say?
- How do I feel about what they said?

Answering these questions will help executives assess their relationship-building skills, then set goals and take action to improve their interpersonal competence. Here are some strategies executives can follow to take the next steps in developing interpersonal skills.

#### **Identify the People with Whom You Want to Improve Your Relationships**

Select specific places, times, and situations for practicing new behavior aimed at improving the identified relationships. For example, you might tell yourself: "I will not interrupt Mary in our Tuesday morning staff meetings during the question-and-answer period." Such a small action might seem insufficient for addressing such a large problem. The power of this strategy, however, is in developing individual plans for interacting with each person with whom you want to improve your relationship.

It's important to set plans that are specific. Setting a goal to "improve my working relationship with Mary," for instance, would be ineffective because it wouldn't address changing a specific behavior. Also be careful to avoid tunnel vision. Executives are often tempted to focus on their toughest cases, but they should set specific interaction plans for all the people with whom they have contact.

#### **Build on Your Existing Relationships**

Scheduling a weekly lunch meeting with each of your direct reports to get to know them better may seem like a good idea, but is it really what they want? Spending their lunch breaks with you may be the last thing they want to do.

A better idea is to take advantage of the regular interactions you already have. Changing your behavior during short, face-to-face interactions with others can make a big difference in how they view your interpersonal skills. Be attentive, genuine, and open. Ask for their opinions, ask how you can help them get their work done, and listen to what they say.

Avoid coming across as insincere. For instance, don't use a tired icebreaker such as "How's the family?" unless you're familiar with the family members' names and interests. Also don't assume that people want to chat with you about their personal lives. It may be better simply to act more pleasantly when discussing work issues.

#### **Display Empathy Toward Others**

Whether you're dealing with your boss, your peers, or your direct reports, take the feelings and perspectives of others into account. Listen without judging. Don't cut off people in the middle of a sentence. If you're talking with a direct report, be aware of and diplomatic about the power relationship between managers and subordinates.

Be careful not to use humor inappropriately. Your closest friends may appreciate your dry wit and sarcastic asides, but those you work with may not. Also, if something is said to you in confidence, keep it private. If you make private information public, you will lose credibility and trust, both of which are essential to effective leadership.

#### **Learn to Listen**

Hearing and listening are not the same thing. If you're holding a conversation with someone in your office, turn away from your e-mail and the papers on your desk. Separate your opinions about the person from what he or she is saying. Ask questions to make sure you understand what has been said, and take notes to help you remember.

Don't be a passive listener, and don't let information go in one ear and out the other. Participate in the conversation, but don't monopolize it. Translate what you hear into concepts, but don't get stuck on one idea. If the person with whom you're talking makes a particularly intriguing point, take a note on it and get back to listening.

#### **Collaborate**

Be willing to share information with others to achieve mutually beneficial goals. Involve others in making decisions but don't lock yourself into collaborating on every decision or action. Effective

leadership is partly about making decisions and partly about reaching consensus—and knowing when to do which.

Don't, however, keep others in the dark about your decision-making process. If you gather new facts that prompt you to reach a new decision or to change direction, share those facts with others so they can understand why you acted as you did.

#### **Change and Development**

Successful executives make mistakes; it is the ability to learn from mistakes that distinguishes successful executives from those who derail. The ability to adapt is an important component of executive success, and successful executives tend to take responsibility for their own development and improvement. Executives who are flexible in the face of change are described by their bosses, peers, and direct reports in the following terms:

- Handles mistakes with poise, and learns from them.
- Is open to feedback, and learns from it.
- Is self-assured, and stays composed under pressure.

Many executives who derail do so because they are unable or unwilling to adapt. They may be unable or unwilling to change their management

### **Many executives who derail do so because they are unable or unwilling to adapt.**

style. Or they may resist making changes because their past success indicates to them that they don't need to change and they fear that any changes might lead to failure. Executives who are unable or unwilling to adapt are described by their bosses, peers, and direct reports as:

- Avoiding risk.
- Disliking authority figures.
- Defensive.
- Not open to diversity.
- Resistant to learning from mistakes.
- Closed to feedback.
- Not handling pressure well.
- Having narrow interests.

Like interpersonal skills, the skills of flexibility and adaptability to change can be developed with effort. Again, such development begins with an objective assessment of the executive's behavior and a plan to adopt behaviors that lend themselves to an openness to change.

Executives can begin by asking themselves a series of questions:

- Am I resistant to change?
- Do I look for opportunities to learn new skills and take new perspectives?
- Do I admit and accept my mistakes and learn from them?
- What kind of feedback have I received about my adaptability and openness to change?

The answers to these questions will help executives assess their adaptability and openness to change, then set goals and take action to improve those skills. Here are two strategies that executives can follow to develop adaptability.

#### Become More Self-Aware

Self-awareness is important to remaining flexible and being comfortable with change. Recognize your emotional reactions to change. Maintain standards of honesty and integrity. Know your values and be comfortable with them; they can be an anchor during times of transition. Don't let success go to your head and interfere with your willingness to learn from mistakes.

Work on understanding which leadership style best fits a given situation and putting that style into

## It's important to act on the feedback you receive and not dismiss it.

use. Leadership styles range from command and control (making decisions unilaterally and passing them down to direct reports) to collaboration (defining and solving problems in concert with direct reports).

#### Seek and Make Use of Feedback

Feedback given to you should focus on a specific situation, describe your behavior in that situation, and communicate the impact of your behavior. Effective feedback is based on fact, not opinion. It's important to act on the feedback you receive and

not dismiss it. Your sources of feedback—both at and outside the workplace—should be people whose opinions you trust and respect and who will support you in making changes based on the feedback.

#### Staying on Track

Career derailment is often highly predictable by co-workers, but the executives themselves are usually unaware of or unwilling to fix the flaws that lead to derailment. Executives need to commit to their own professional development before reaching the critical point beyond which there is no salvaging their careers. Executives who have potentially derailing flaws but who also have an ability to assess themselves and to learn and develop can avert career failure and progress smoothly up the management ladder.

#### SUGGESTED READING

- Browning, H., and Van Velsor, E. *Three Keys to Development: Using Assessment, Challenge, and Support to Drive Your Leadership*. Greensboro, N.C.: Center for Creative Leadership, 1999.
- Leslie, J. B., and Van Velsor, E. *A Look at Derailment Today: North America and Europe*. Greensboro, N.C.: Center for Creative Leadership, 1996.
- Morrison, A. M., White, R. P., and Van Velsor, E. *Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Can Women Reach the Top of America's Largest Corporations?* Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1987.
- Van Velsor, E., and Leslie, J. B. "Why Executives Derail: Perspectives Across Time and Cultures." *Academy of Management Executive*, 9(4), 62-72.

*Craig Chappelow, a CCL product manager, is currently fulfilling a one-year appointment as a visiting professor of leadership studies at Wake Forest University. He holds an M.Ed. degree from the University of Vermont.*

*Jean Brittain Leslie is manager of instrument development research at CCL in Greensboro. She holds an M.A. degree from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.*

---

This article is based on *Keeping Your Career on Track: Twenty Success Strategies*, a CCL Ideas Into Action Guidebook that examines the main reasons why promising leaders derail and suggests strategies to help leaders remain on track and perform up to their potential. For more information, call 336/545-2810 or visit CCL's Web site, at [www.ccl.org](http://www.ccl.org)