

Caution: Career Derailment Ahead!

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Why do executives, managers, and professionals either derail or flounder and then get shunted off to roles that are out of the mainstream? Typically it's because they have a psychological blind spot that is all too visible to others.

Research studies have pegged failure rates for senior executives at up to 33 percent.

There's a good chance that the descriptions below of potential derailers will remind you of some key people in your organization:

He lacks effective interpersonal skills. He's –

- v Insensitive (“He’s too abrasive”)
- v Overambitious (“He batters people with his competitiveness; he needs to be seen as powerful”)
- v Isolated (“He’s a perfectionist and seems to do everything his own way”)
- v Volatile (“He comes apart at the seams when under fire”)

She has difficulty making tactical shifts. She is –

- v Mired in detail; thrown by change and innovation; too cautious; action-averse.
- v Unable to adapt to those who have different styles.
- v Conflict-averse; unable to harness conflict constructively, as a creative medium for change; a poor negotiator.
- v Over-reliant on one skill, on natural talent, or on just raw energy.
- v Rigid in response to most situations; for example, blazingly decisive but without regard for overall organizational strategy.

“Even if executive coaching costs \$50K (which it doesn't), it's barely a rounding error to invest in the coaching of a key player who has responsibility for millions of dollars and for key human resources. Coaching is a success if one direct report, who used to be too intimidated to speak up, comes up with an innovative idea.”

- CEO, Fortune 100 Company

“Well-intentioned, hard-working people often have ‘blind spots’ about important tendencies. In fact, they may be the only ones in their group who do not realize that they have a problem.

Feedback is essential to learning. If people don’t fully appreciate their strengths, how can they use them to their advantage? If they never find out how their actions create problems for others, how will they know what to change? And if they never understand the impact they have, why would they want to make a concerted effort to improve?

Most people want this kind of feedback. They want to know what is working and what is not. They don’t want to cause frustration. They don’t like having blind spots, and they are interested in learning how to improve. They are willing to invest in themselves so they can achieve better results. The problem is that most of their coworkers don’t know how to give feedback in a constructive way and are not comfortable with confronting them about performance issues.”

- Dennis E. Coates, Ph.D.

He lacks follow-through. He –

- v Makes a big splash at the front end of a project, then moves on, leaving a trail of loose ends.
- v Leaves people hanging because of unmet promises and commitments; not fully accountable.

Her area has never really gelled. She –

- Over-/undermanages (Either as the over-controlling Godmother or as the benignly neglectful Ostrich; can’t collaborate or delegate)
- Staffs in her own image (“I have a good gut feeling about him; the chemistry is right”)
- Communicates poorly (“She operates like she thinks everyone can read her mind”)
- Creates mediocrity habitually (Undermines talented subordinates and/or hires weak candidates)

Terminate or Turnaround?

So, what can be done with the under-performing employee? Often, the response is to terminate. But, the company must then absorb the staggering costs associated with the loss of a key person. These costs include:

- v Exit costs
- v Recruiting, hiring, and restart costs
- v Lost training and development costs
- v Cascade effect of multiple position shuffles
- v Opportunity costs, disruption, down time, and lowered morale of the team
- v Disputed termination litigation

“Let him who would move the world first move himself.”

- Socrates

A 1991 study of executives from 1,000 of the nation’s largest companies indicates that managers spend 13% of their time – the equivalent of six-and-a-half work weeks a year – resolving personality conflicts among workers. This compares to just 9%, or four-and-a-half weeks per year, in 1986.

- Robert Half International

A significantly more effective solution is available and it prevents the termination costs. The experiences of our clients have clearly shown that a turnaround program produces better results. In most cases under-performance is not the result of an ability deficit. Rather, it typically results from a person’s blind spots. With the proper intervention, the struggling employee can be turned around and, as a consequence, a number of **benefits** accrue to the organization and the individual:

- v The company is spared the organizational disruption and corporate expense (frequently exceeding \$100K) that inevitably occur with the termination of a key employee.
- v The company is protected from the loss of the person’s accumulated industry knowledge, experience, and competitive information.
- v The turnaround program offers a potent management option for handling a potentially unpleasant and difficult dilemma.
- v The turnaround option brings objectivity and behavioral science to bear on conflict and, thereby, gives the organization and its people a greater sense of mastery and less apprehension about handling difficult human problems. The message: “We care, and we can work it out.”
- v It equips the organization with an effective tool for retaining its human resources, an increasingly critical strategy in an age of a shrinking human resource pool.

How We Do It

Specializing in human performance, our firm has designed a powerful individual development program that integrates our core competencies:

- v **Expert software systems** that enhance psychological testing and assessment
- v Computerized **360° technology**
- v Keen **diagnostic skills**
- v Advanced **rapport-building** methods
- v **Accelerated** development strategies
- v Motivating and creating **true behavioral change**

“Self conquest is the greatest of all victories.”

- Plato

By integrating these performance development technologies, we assist the candidate in assembling the three essential ingredients for high performance: **feedback** (both broad and deep), multi-lateral **motivation** to make changes, and multi-source **change partners** for their development initiative. Together these three elements serve as the infrastructure for a *Blueprint for Action*, which guides the employee’s achievement of measurable results.

Turnaround Program: Four Key Steps

I. Assess

- v Conduct a series of life-career interviews with the candidate, focusing on:
 - ◆ personal and work history
 - ◆ interpersonal experiences
 - ◆ attitudes, values, and interests
 - ◆ aspirations
- v Assess the candidate, using an array of business-based psychological inventories and 360° tools, most of which are computer analyzed.
- v Integrate performance management data into the assessment. Forge a consensus on the problem areas and the turnaround objectives.

II. Plan

- v Deliver an in-depth, confidential debrief of all assessment findings.
- v Identify the candidate’s key strengths and areas in need of development. Highlight limiting tendencies and origins of the derailment problem.
- v Clarify inner motivators for change and inner resistances to it. Harness the former and neutralize the latter. Explicitly specify WIIFM (What’s in it for me?) and WIIFOrg.

Synthesize findings into a **Blueprint for Action**

- ◆ Detail the **specific behavioral changes** required – precisely what does the candidate need to continue, start, and stop doing? Resources: computerized assessment reports and 90-plus activities for development-in-place (i.e., activities that do not require a job change).
- ◆ Identify all the **benefits** that will accrue to one self and to the organization once the change objectives are achieved.
- ◆ Similarly, identify all potential **impediments** that could hinder the turnaround effort – inner, interpersonal, and organizational.
- ◆ Specify the **action steps** required to achieve the prescribed changes.
- ◆ Enlist the involvement of others. Turnarounds require support from others, playing an array of roles: coach, mentor, colleague, friend, role model, protégé, advocate. **Change requires change partners.**
- ◆ Establish **time frames** and **metrics**, against which progress is measured.

III. Act

- v Acknowledge and reciprocate with those who gave feedback to the candidate. Enlist one or some as change partners.
- v Debrief candidate's manager and involve them in the *Blueprint for Action*.
- v Begin action experiments during real-time, day-to-day work life, then debrief and refine with coach.
- v Adopt high-impact behavioral change techniques.
- v Measure progress against plan. Design simple and practical feedback loops into work routine.

IV. Reflect/Evaluate and Reassess/Refine

This is the final phase of the turnaround process and works best when it is hard-wired into the Action Phase of the cycle. By designing special monitoring and evaluation tools, the candidate can regularly assess progress and then recalibrate the *Blueprint for Action*.

Final Thoughts

If people are truly the primary resource of a company, as most organizations assert, then they must be managed and developed like other assets. It's really not unlike the management of any asset portfolio. That is, every person is like an individual portfolio with a strong potential for either managed growth or sub-par performance. The portfolio, however, is at least partially opaque, as regards its assets and liabilities. We have the expertise, though, to "value" the portfolio. If one is to optimize the asset-liability mix, the portfolio must first be valued, that is, assessed for its strengths and weaknesses. Then after this initial appraisal, we are in an excellent position to optimize the potential of that individual's set of assets. The optimization process involves maximizing the person's strengths, minimizing their weaknesses, and adding new "assets" to their portfolio (i.e., skills, behaviors, and attitudes), in order to maximize performance and protect against downside risk.

Whether we're talking about the development of key contributors, the turnaround of potential derailers, careerpath development, or even teambuilding, there is one strategy that is more effective than any other. People *can* change, but the most substantive and permanent change is realized when people develop *from the inside out*. This is the surest way to prepare and motivate someone to accept the new change opportunities made available to them.

Consequently, whenever we're working to enhance an "individual human resource portfolio", the surest strategy is to begin at the beginning and focus on the *inside* (that is, self-awareness and self-understanding) before the *outside* (that is, skillbuilding and on-the-job development). This change strategy has proven to be a more certain way of assisting people through the process of behavior change, self-development, and performance enhancement.