

# Preventing Individuals' Career Derailment

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Sara was an engineer with an outstanding record of achievements in her midsize manufacturing firm until eight months ago, when she was promoted to manager of her department. Although she was able to produce high-quality results for the six years she was an individual contributor, she's currently foundering in her role as a leader. She tries to do it all herself. Not only does she exclude others from the decision-making process, but she also fails to delegate. It appears that the skills that enabled her to accomplish so much at lower levels in the organization are the same ones that are now impeding her progress.

Sarah's not alone. Those skills, characteristics, and qualities that contribute to success early in the career of an employee are the same ones that often serve to derail the same employee when he or she reaches levels of supervision and management within an organization. Paradoxically, the behaviors were learned early in childhood as *defense mechanisms*; that is, they enabled the employee to survive what might have been a difficult, traumatic, or demanding childhood. In corporations every day, adults succeed by using the same survival skills they learned in childhood. These skills normally work, but only up to a point.

This phenomenon is played out over and over with minor variations in the script. It typically begins with a phone call from a senior-level manager who wants coaching for a direct report. The descriptions are similar: "I've got this employee who was *outstanding* when he first came on board. He could crank out the work like no one else. We promoted him to manager and now he's on probation. He needs help." When asked for a more detailed description of what the employee is doing wrong, the employer continues: "He is like a bull in a china shop. Runs roughshod over people. Even embarrasses them in front of their peers. He just cannot seem to understand that what it takes is a collaborative effort, not muscle.

## **REPEATING PAST BEHAVIORS**

Whether the description is of someone who runs roughshod, does all the work without delegating, sees only the pieces of the puzzle instead of the bigger picture, has difficulty with authority, or is so easygoing that people walk all over him or her, it is a variation on the same theme: an employee who has not developed new skills that will provide balance to those that have contributed to his or her early career success. Someone who continues to rely on behaviors that enabled him or her to survive childhood, despite the fact that those behaviors have become counterproductive, has not yet come of age in today's corporation. Although many of Freud's theories have been questioned in recent years (and for good reason), he was right about the repetition compulsion: the tendency of human beings to return to past states, to repeat certain acts over and over again.

It makes sense that one would generalize, consciously or otherwise, behaviors that would please or satisfy his or her primary caretaker during childhood, whether that be a parent, grandparent, favorite teacher, or child-care worker. Even a preverbal child knows that his or her survival depends on the caretaker. Therefore, it is logical that those behaviors that pleased the caretaker would then be generalized as behaviors that please others. Most of us want to be loved, and often our behavior is motivated by this rather than an objective assessment. Because the caretaker is also the first authority figure in one's life, it would seem logical that the behaviors that please him or her should also please another authority figure. In adulthood, we call that authority figure a boss.

What does all of this psychological jargon mean in today's corporate arena? Let's go back to Sarah for a moment. She is an outstanding individual contributor, but she can't quite empower others. Sarah's direct reports complain about her grandstanding (keeping the high profile projects for her self), not trusting them with an entire project, and micromanaging their work. To understand these behaviors, we need to look at how they developed and what functional purpose they served in the past. As it turns out, Sarah was the oldest of six children. Both parents worked, and she had responsibility for taking care of her younger siblings after school, getting dinner started, babysitting during summer vacations, and so on. She learned early in life that her survival approval from her parents was dependent on taking responsibility for whatever needed to be done, without being asked. In order to juggle school and her chores at home, she had to be organized, plan her activities in advance, and keep a close eye on her siblings.

In college Sarah was the ideal student. She not only had her papers done on time, she had them done in advance. She remained current with her studies while holding a part-time job from the second semester of her freshman year. As a young engineer, Sarah was every boss's dream. She showed initiative by anticipating what needed to be done and did it thoroughly, paying close attention to detail, and with little supervision. Her performance reviews were, as might be expected, outstanding. The reward for her accomplishments as a superb worker was a promotion to a management position. As in most corporations, good individual performance in Sarah's company led to being promoted to leader of a team of employees. The problem inherent in this common practice is that the skills needed to lead a team are substantially different than those needed to succeed independently.

The repetition compulsion suggests that Sarah would naturally rely on the same skills that made her successful up to this point to ensure her success in her new assignment, and she did. What was perceived as grandstanding, not trusting others, and micromanaging was merely the repetition of the same childhood behaviors that contributed to her survival. She wasn't consciously keeping the high-profile projects to herself, nor was she intentionally trying to impede the growth of her followers by giving them only small pieces of projects. Given an assignment from upper management, she would simply plan out what had to be done and diligently go about doing it. She was more than happy to assist those who reported to her with their routine tasks, in much the same way as she would help her younger siblings with their homework, but they perceived it as micromanaging. Sarah had no inkling that her behavior was unusual or inappropriate. It was almost as if she thought, "If it got me to this point, I should do more of it." And herein lies the problem for so many employees at all levels: not only doing what has worked in the past, but doing more of it.

## TURNING UP THE VOLUME

When faced with the prospect of failure, the child part of the adults psyche kicks into gear and turns up the volume on the same old behaviors and then wonders why there's static on the new station. The old station didn't have static! If controlling, planning, and doing the work herself worked for Sarah in the past, then certainly doing more of the same will work. As Sarah met with resistance from her staff, in the form of missing deadlines, withholding critical information, or doing work that wasn't up to acceptable standards, her survival instincts told her that she needed to engage *more* in the behaviors that contributed to her past success. The obvious problem is that these were the same behaviors that now contributed to poor morale, low productivity, and lack of cooperation within her department. Doing more of the same only served to escalate the problem.

Behaviors that are appropriate in one situation can become potential career derailers when applied in a different situation. The Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina, has conducted extensive research in the area of derailment. Their findings suggest that anywhere from 30 to 50 percent of high-potential managers and executives derail. These are people who were identified as having the skills and strengths needed to succeed at higher levels of management but failed in their assignments because of the concomitant weaknesses associated with their strengths.

Promotions are not the only situations that can contribute to derailment; the inability to recognize and make the shift to the requirements or the organization culture can cause derailment in moving from one company to another. If the culture of Sarah's company was more hierarchical, one in which people expected close supervision and little responsibility for entire projects, her behavior would not have been considered problematic. In fact, she would have continued to succeed using the behaviors she learned early in life.

Margaret Thatcher provides a familiar example of someone who derailed because of her failure to balance strengths with complementary skills when the situation called for it. As prime minister of England, Margaret Thatcher had a clear vision of where she wanted to take her country and how that should be accomplished. She was willing to take on tough and, at times, controversial issues. Her strengths earned her the nickname "The Iron Lady." Early in her tenure as prime minister, she was welcomed by many citizens as one who stood by her convictions and who could lead the nation out of a difficult period of social and economic decline. She never faltered during the Falklands War and is characterized by her statement during the poll tax controversy, "You turn if you want to. The lady's not for turning."

So, what went wrong? Thatcher failed to come of age in her country. Her independent, self-sufficient behaviors required complementary skills in consensus building and succeeding through cooperative efforts—skills that she not only never developed, but ones that she eschewed. Shortly after her election she proclaimed, "I am not a consensus politician. I am a conviction politician." And when the going got tough, Thatcher got tougher. She turned up the volume on her convictions. Throughout her tenure, she relied on the same skills she learned and relied on in childhood, and they ultimately failed her.

By all accounts, Thatcher grew up in a joyless household. Outsiders report that there was never much gaiety or laughter in the home. Her mother was competent but remote. Thatcher never really forged a relationship with her and rarely makes mention of her. It

was her strict, work-oriented, and devoutly religious father with whom she aligned and to whom she credits her success. When she went to school and realized that other children actually had fun in their families, she asked him why their family never went on picnics, rode bicycles, or played games. His reply was, "Margaret, never do things or want to do things just because other people do them. Make up your own mind about what you are going to do and persuade people to go your way." Clearly, she learned that lesson well. So well that she was alienated from her close peers throughout her school years and to this day claims no close friends with the exception of her husband.

In the corporate arena, an example of an employee turning up the volume is one who moves from a department that places high value on teamwork, collaboration, and consensus to another department in the same organization that requires independent decision making, quick turn-around, and minimal interaction among team members. Because the employee came from a family where harmony was the norm, it is expected that he would be successful in the first department; its requirements match his behavioral schemata. Moving to the latter department, he will be unsure of what behaviors are expected and will, most likely, rely on the people skills that secured his career success thus far. When at first they don't work, he will likely engage in the behaviors to an even greater degree. He will founder if he doesn't recognize the need to engage in alternative, situationally determined behavior. As he tries to reach consensus and build collaborative relationships, he may meet with resistance from his new co-workers. His method for dealing with this resistance is to turn up the volume even further on the affiliative skills- and wonder why there is static on the line.

## **HIGH TOLERANCE LEVELS**

Another aspect of the failure to come of age in the corporation involves the ability to tolerate bad employment situations or poor leadership. When confronted with a boss who is unreasonable (or downright impossible), employees will tolerate those behaviors that are congruent with their primary family experience. At the end of a leadership workshop, Tim took the facilitator aside and asked how to cope with a boss who made unreasonable demands, embarrassed him in front of others, and never gave any praise. When asked, "Does he remind you of anyone?" he hesitated for a moment and finally replied, "My father."

Employees will have a high level of tolerance for inappropriate behaviors that are familiar to them, especially if feelings about being treated in a particular way haven't been worked through in psychotherapy or via other developmental opportunities. This person is one who seeks approval from authority, cannot see when he or she is being treated unfairly or inappropriately, and thus assumes responsibility for making the situation better. This is another instance in which behaviors that worked in the past to assure survival will be turned up in volume.

Rita worked for a boss who confided in her about myriad personal problems with her children, parents, and spouse. On some occasions, the boss would go into Rita's office, close the door, and break down and sob. Rita said she was uncomfortable being used as a confidante in this manner because it prohibited her from going to the boss with her own work-related problems, since she felt sorry for her and didn't want to burden her any more than necessary. As a result, Rita was left having to figure out for herself how to resolve problems and create programs for which she had little experience. Because she

grew up with a mother who needed excessive attention and was histrionic, Rita felt as responsible for her boss as she did for her mother. She turned up the volume on her listening and caretaking behaviors in order to soothe the boss. The child in the workplace needed to make things better, never expecting that she was entitled to leadership and direction from her boss.

Tim and Rita tolerated bad employment situations because the scenarios were familiar and they knew how to survive them. However, their performance and self-esteem suffered from lack of mentoring and growth opportunities expected from people in management positions. Both employees eventually left their positions and companies once they understood the dynamics and decided not to be controlled by behaviors that have outlived their usefulness. Tim and Rita came of age in the corporation.

**Exhibit 1** provides examples of ineffective management behaviors, possible causes, and areas for development.

## COACHING TO COME OF AGE

To help people grow and become fully functioning employees, rather than children responding in familiar ways, managers must see that (1) employees do not intentionally behave inappropriately or ineffectively; (2) employees do best what they've been rewarded for in the past; (3) they themselves may play a part in inhibiting employee growth; and, most important, (4) employees need to add alternative behaviors to their repertoire of skills in order to be successful in the future. Employees often don't know that anything is even missing from their repertoires, and managers have difficulty diagnosing problem behavior, which is the first step of good coaching. In most cases employees change positions, companies, departments, bosses, or jobs, and no one bothers to tell them that different behaviors are expected. In their heads is a tape that plays over and over what they think is expected of them, and they try harder and harder to behave in a manner that is consistent with the tape.

Sarah's boss wanted to help her but didn't know how. He could see that she was on a path toward derailment and didn't want her to fail. With help from his company's human resources manager, he decided to use an executive coach to work with Sarah one-on-one. The HR manager knew the importance of matching coaches with players and suggested one who could help Sarah to develop the *people* skills needed to complement her more *task oriented* behaviors. When the boss approached Sara with the idea, she expressed reluctance. She knew, however, that something had to change if she had any hope of meeting the requirements of her new position and agreed to at least meet with the coach for one session.

During the first session, the coach focused on the building of a safe place for Sara to discuss her work-related problems. He asked Sara what she perceived the problem to be, how the company contributed to these concerns, and about her career aspirations. It was a get-acquainted session with the coach gleaning a sense of Sarah from her behaviors in the room at the moment and from her perception of her situation. He told Sarah that he thought he could help her move from her current level of managerial functioning to a higher one if she was willing. In essence, he asked her permission to proceed, and she agreed to a second session.

Sarah and her coach met for a total of four sessions, two hours each. She was initially asked to help the coach understand where she learned to be so good in the areas where

she was successful. No mention was made of what she was doing wrong, the focus was on what she did right and why. Sarah opened up to the coach, telling him about her early childhood and college experiences. Each step of the way, the coach affirmed how these experiences contributed to her success. He took the time to create a safe environment for Sarah to explore her behavior in the context of her experience.

This is where many managers fail to help employees change ineffective behaviors. The typical focus is on what's wrong and the need to correct it. There is often no clue to the employee as to how to correct it, why it is happening in the first place, or the fact that the behavior is in some ways functional. Sarah's manager didn't want her to completely cease getting the work cranked out. He wanted her to achieve more balance in her leadership style.

Employees frequently leave coaching sessions more confused than when they first came in and fearful of engaging in the problem behavior at all. They wind up going to the opposite extreme and are no better off than before the coaching.

At the end of the second session, Sarah's coach helped her to integrate the information she shared in a way that she could understand. Using the analogy of a prizefighter that had a terrific left jab but never built up the muscles in his right arm, he explained that Sarah had developed in a similar way. She had built up certain muscles, but others were underdeveloped. The goal wasn't to stop doing anything, but rather to balance her already good skills with complementary ones. He also helped her understand that the behaviors she was most comfortable with were those that had assisted her in childhood and that now, used by themselves, were counterproductive.

## **EXPANDING THE REPERTOIRE OF SKILLS**

The remaining sessions were spent providing Sarah with specific new skills to add to her repertoire. The coach knew that Sarah wasn't intentionally withholding the behaviors she needed to succeed, but rather that she didn't know what they were. She was instructed to do three very specific things, beginning with holding weekly staff meetings. She could use the time to keep her staff informed of what was going on, and they could use it to express their concerns to her. The meetings were to be a forum for exchanging ideas, solving problems as a team, and getting to know one another on an informal basis. It was suggested that she could hold these meetings over lunch and bring in pizza or sandwiches as a means of creating a congenial atmosphere. It was also recommended that the leadership of the meetings rotate among the team members so that she was not perceived as such a strong authority figure.

The second action item for Sarah was to meet with team members individually to discuss their strengths and interests. This would enable her to become familiar and comfortable with their skill levels so that she could begin delegating projects to her staff based on each member's abilities and interests. The coach explained to Sarah the need to reach mutual agreement with regard to follow-up on delegated assignments in order to avoid the appearance of micromanaging. If she and an employee agreed to a biweekly update on the project status, then it was hands off until then or until it was apparent that there was a problem. It was anticipated that the staff meeting would also serve to diminish her anxiety, because she would have a weekly opportunity to discuss the status of longer-term projects and feel more in control of the overall departmental picture.

Finally, Sarah agreed to explore options for hobbies outside of work. The coaching sessions revealed that work was not merely a part of her life, it was her life. She displayed impatience with people who had to leave early to take a child to the doctor or take a day off to attend a training program. Her strong task orientation precluded her from being involved in any kind of pleasurable activities outside of work. Not only were her management skills out of balance but also her life was out of balance. The coaching process took into consideration the whole person, not just the employee. Sarah needed to come of age inside and outside of work.

## CONCLUSION

These three simple but specific coaching hints helped Sarah avoid derailment. Her manager wouldn't have needed to use an executive coach if he had taken the time to get to know her and discover the ways in which she had not yet come of age. Sarah will probably never feel completely at ease sharing control and building consensus, but she now understands that the old messages that got in her way can be taped over. She has created more balance in her life and catches herself when she reverts to familiar behavior. Spending more time with her employees has enabled Sarah to understand their motivations and needs so that she can help them with their developmental needs in the context of their old messages. It has also served to make Sarah appear more human with her staff so they, in turn, are more patient with her.

If you are a manager who is thinking that all of this is fine, but you don't have time for it, you may need to reconsider. The fact is that you must make time for it if you are to succeed in your role as a leader. In his book, *Certain Trumpets* (Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1994), Garry Wills claims that, "The leader needs to understand followers far more than they need to understand him. This is a time-consuming aspect of leadership." He uses Abraham Lincoln as an example of a leader who was successful because of his ability to "understand the mix of motives in his fellow citizens, the counterbalancing intensities with which the different positions were held and in what directions they were changing, moment by moment."

The goal is not to become an armchair psychologist, but rather to look at the employee in the context of his or her experiences and motives. Employees are not one-dimensional objects. They bring to the workplace a host of multifaceted intentions, which, when developed in light of organizational needs, can contribute significantly to works synergistic process. When managers view ineffective behaviors as overdeveloped, purposeful strengths, rather than insurmountable obstacles, then the real business of leadership will unfold.

## Exhibit 1 — Ineffective Management Behaviors

Management Behavior	Possible Early Causative Factors	Skills to Develop
<b>Overly Critical</b>	Critical parental messages. Unreasonably high demands placed on him/her. Perfectionistic parent(s).	Realistic assessment of requirements. Ability to positively reinforce others. Less self-criticism. Focus on what is needed to solve the problem, not on what is wrong with the individual. Let go of "right" and "wrong." Develop an attitude of discovery and curiosity.
<b>Defers to Authority</b>	Controlling parent(s). Abusive parent(s). Unpredictable family environment.	Take more risks. Explore your limits. Be willing to do whatever it takes. Give your personal opinion to management more often. Explore solutions rather than spend excess energy on blame and justification.
<b>High Task Orientation</b>	Alcoholism in family. Lack of emotional communication in family. Only recognized for exceptional achievement.	Balance personal and work lives. Spend time building relationships. Don't sweat the small stuff; ask yourself "Will this matter in five years?" Be willing to change.
<b>Low Tolerance for Confrontation</b>	Emotional outbursts in household. Abusive parent(s).	Allow others to vent. Express minority opinion. Go directly to the source to resolve conflict.
<b>Rigid / Inflexible</b>	Lack of consistency in household. Ritualistic behavior in household. Secrets in the family. Chaotic family interactions.	Allow others to do things their way. Seek input from others before acting. Don't make assumptions. Be willing to admit you're wrong. Let go of preconceived ideas, opinions, and judgments.
<b>Caretaking</b>	Alcoholism in family. Responsible for younger siblings. Infirm family member.	Identify and meet personal needs first. Be selfish. Give yourself permission to be fully present. Engage in one act of self-kindness daily. Just say "no" to unreasonable demands or requests.
<b>People-Pleaser</b>	Being a minority in the community. Narcissistic parenting. Conditional love and acceptance.	Voice a differing opinion. Be more objective; critically assess people and processes. Don't personalize criticism. Increase level of tolerance for receiving anger. Solicit feedback.
<b>Naiveté</b>	Healthy family interactions. Youngest of siblings. Unconditional love and acceptance. Strong religious upbringing.	Increase political astuteness. Learn to question; don't accept things at face value. Study people, processes, and organizational dynamics. Learn to ask "why?"

