



HOW BRILLIANT CAREERS ARE MADE AND UNMADE

Carter Cast

What impedes the career progress of talented people?

Why do some careers stall and others flourish? In my new book, I examine these questions and attempt to answer them while also taking a hard look at what high-performing, high-potential people with “the right stuff” do differently.

Research has shown that one-half to two-thirds of the careers of managers and leaders will derail. At some point, over *half of us* will get fired or demoted—or our careers will flat-line and we won’t reach our innate potential.

What Exactly Is Derailment?

Derailment occurs when a manager or an executive previously deemed to have strong potential is fired, demoted, or plateaus below his or her expected levels of performance. It’s the result, two leadership researchers found, of “a lack of fit between individual values and development, on the one hand, and organizational values and needs, on the other.” The reasons for derailment extend beyond job-specific issues, such as a skill gap or lack of experiential knowledge and are often a result of interpersonal issues that impede one’s ability to manage or lead. Derailment often afflicts talented managers who are either unaware of a debilitating weakness or interper-

sonal blind spot or arrogant enough to believe that developmental feedback doesn't apply to them. Talented managers and leaders are often "knocked off the fast track" due to a lack of self-awareness around an interpersonal issue and an unwillingness, once confronted with it, to adjust their behavior accordingly. It is often hubris—not lack of talent—that causes people on the rise to fall.

Getting things done through others—the essence of leadership—requires a combination of technical skills (being proficient in areas important to the success of the business), intrapersonal skills (especially strong self-management skills, which are driven by self-understanding and self-control), and interpersonal skills (the ability to develop and foster strong relationships and gain the enlistment of others). People may derail due to a lack of technical, job-related skills, but more common reasons have to do with intrapersonal or interpersonal issues that impede them from enlisting people to accomplish goals. A revealing part of my research included conducting a survey of one hundred derailed managers and then executing follow-up interviews with a subset of the derailed population. My research found that "a lack of self-awareness" and "difficulty working with others" were the top two reasons that these one hundred people experienced a career derailment event. As the late, great management expert Peter Drucker said, as in the epigraph to this Introduction, "Most people think they know what they're good at; they are usually wrong." Or, as Robert Hogan, Joyce Hogan, and Robert Kaiser, three often-cited derailment researchers, write, "Derailment can almost always be traced to relationship problems."

There are of course times when people derail because of personal circumstances such as health problems or personal priorities, such as a reluctance to relocate or the desire to improve their work-life balance. Although these are critical aspects of a person's career equation, they are of a personal nature and highly individualized and hard to address and generalize at a macro level. Because of that, my focus is primarily on derailment as it occurs inside the walls of the proverbial office.

Tough But Necessary Conversations Aren't Occurring

The popularity of assessment tools designed to measure a person's talents in dozens of competency areas indicates that both companies and employees are taking a positive approach to on-the-job feedback. Each year from 2001 through 2012, more than half a million people used the Gallup StrengthsFinder® assessment tool. In 2014, the number of users jumped to 1.6 million, according to Gallup representative Leticia McCadden, as quoted in a recent *Wall Street Journal* article. "Accentuate the positive" has become a new mantra in many workplaces," writes *Wall Street Journal's* Rachel Feintzeig, where "bosses now dole out frequent praise, urge employees to celebrate small victories and focus performance reviews around a particular worker's strengths—instead of dwelling on why he flubbed a client presentation."

There are two problems with companies' excessive focus on the positive. First, not all strengths are of equal importance. What you're good at might not be what your firm needs you to be good at. The value placed on particular strengths often depends on the job context; the strengths needed usually vary by industry type, by job function, and by firm size and stage of development. You may have a set of skills or several strong behavioral traits that just aren't of primary importance for your company at its particular state of incarnation. For example, you may be an empathetic person with excellent account management skills but that may not be of primary importance if you're at an early stage venture that needs you to have outstanding selling skills to bring in new accounts.

It is often hubris—not lack of talent—that causes people on the rise to fall.

Second and more damaging is that the overreliance on “focusing on your strengths” can mask a critical skill gap or a personal blind spot that stops a talented person’s career in its tracks. The derailment research shows that careers stall more from having the “wrong stuff” (e.g., being insensitive to others) than lacking the “right stuff” (e.g., not having strong analytical skills). Competency assessments are widely used to gauge personal traits such as mental horsepower, emotional intelligence, and decisiveness as well as job skills, such as technical know-how. The problem is, these assessments gauge the “right stuff” areas and do not examine the “wrong stuff” areas, where people are vulnerable to derailment. Negative scores on derailment assessments are more predictive of an impending career problem than low scores on competency tests, which are administered much more often than are derailment assessments.

The reason corporations do this boils down to a preference for focusing on the positive—competency development—and not addressing the negative—fixing issues that may lead to derailment. But without having these necessary hard conversations, people suffer because they’re left unaware of a blind spot or area of vulnerability instead of being able to develop a plan to resolve or mitigate it. *As a result, people are not receiving the personal feedback they*

“Focusing on your strengths” can mask a critical skill gap or a personal blind spot that stops a talented person’s career in its tracks.

need to improve, and their careers are suffering. Organizations pursuing a developmental strategy focusing on strengths alone will not lead to the career ascension of their employees. Sooner or later, unaddressed developmental needs will limit the career progress of good people.

Leadership research is clear on the traits of managers who derail, those with personal characteristics that very likely might impede their career progress. Irrespective of variables such as gender, ethnicity, and culture, type and size of industry, and even age or seniority level within an organization, I found that there are five common reasons why it happens, which I've expressed through archetypes — characterizations that demonstrate, in a microcosm, how and why talented people experience career derailment. I use this approach to humanize this uncomfortable topic. If your first reaction is “none of these characters is like me,” look past their specific characterizations and into their behavioral tendencies—and chances are you will find a few gold nuggets that you make you more aware of inherent weaknesses so you can address them and improve your performance.

The Five Derailment Archetypes

1 | Captain Fantastic: With sharp elbows that bruise you on their quest for the Holy Grail of the corner office, these people form interpersonal issues due to their unbridled ego and dismal listening skills. As a result, they have poor working relationships with co-workers.

2 | The Solo Flier: Often strong individual contributors, these folks are very good at executing their initiatives. But when promoted into managerial positions, they have difficulty building and leading teams. They tend to either micromanage or revert to trying to do the work themselves. Their teams become dissatisfied and eventually there's a coup d'état.

3 | Version 1.0: Comfortable in their routines and highly skeptical of change, these people resist learning new skills that would help them adapt to the rapidly changing business environment. Their attitude of “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” will not serve them well over time and eventually their dinosaur-like tendencies may lead to extinction.

4 | The One-Trick Pony: This employee does a good job at some part of his or her job. But, that signature skill—over time, unbeknownst to them—makes them one-dimensional and unpromotable.

5 | The Whirling Dervish: Perhaps the most recognizable of all are those that run around the office like their hair is on fire, late for the next meeting and muttering to themselves about their workload. They lack planning and organizational skills and are known to overcommit and under deliver. Their boss and coworkers can’t count on them to complete their assigned tasks, and eventually people try to avoid working with them.

Sooner or later, unaddressed developmental needs will limit the career progress of good people.

What Constitutes “The Right Stuff?”

I’ve looked at the “wrong stuff” but what about the “right stuff?” Does having “the right stuff” come down to smarts? Is innate IQ the distinguishing characteristic of high-performing people with “the right stuff”? Interestingly, it isn’t. Certainly, IQ plays a part in determining the likelihood of a person reaching a high-level position of leadership, in particular one’s ability to process a lot of information, spin future scenarios of possible outcomes, and make sound decisions. But IQ is not as much of a predictor of future success as you might imagine. A host of studies indicate that IQ only accounts for about 25 percent of the variance in job success. In other words, three-fourths of performance is accounted for by factors besides that of raw intelligence.

So what other factors *really* matter? Are there competencies or behaviors we can develop to help accelerate career success? In a nutshell, yes.

People with “the right stuff” aren’t great at everything—no one is (with one possible exception, baseball Hall of Famer Willie Mays, who could hit, field, and run equally well, arguably better than anyone in each position). But they are good at a handful of things that matter. Success is not a matter of perfection, of mastering all the competencies—the skills and behaviors needed to perform well in a job—that are laid out by an organization. People with the right stuff, those who rise up to leadership positions in their businesses, are in the top quartile of their company at no more than 3–5 of the 10–12 competencies that their organizations track and use for performance development and management. *But they focus their attention on becoming excellent at the right ones.* Research shows that people with the right stuff exhibit three strengths in particular that allow them to succeed in increasingly challenging assignments.

They act on their own initiative. They are learners who pursue a variety of self-starting methods to foster their continued professional and personal development and they seek out challenging assignments that will accelerate their skill development and allow them to realize career advancement opportunities.

They have emotional intelligence, which allows them to build positive relationships with others. In doing so, they avoid the interpersonal problems of a Captain Fantastic. They see themselves as leaders (whether they oversee a big team or are in a role as an individual contributor) who, regardless of their title, have the ability to create positive change in their organization. They adopt a positive attitude about their work, even when the business environment is tough. They know that energy and enthusiasm is contagious. (I have a saying: “Anyone can say what’s wrong. Be the one who says what’s possible.”) These high performers are able to build strong relationships and enlist the support of others because of their strong emotional intelligence. They have strong social understanding — they know how to behave — because of their ability to be self-reflective, leading to their ability to be self-aware and to self-regulate.

They have tremendous perseverance and drive for results. They seek to understand the standard of excellence for their assignment and try to place themselves in positions where they’ll be held accountable for results. They respond well when things don’t go as planned. They lead with a cool head under stressful circumstances. They have the emotional resilience and grit to bounce back from failure, seeing it as a learning experience, not a personal indictment. They establish stretch goals, focus on the work that provides the greatest return on investment, and take personal responsibility for the outcomes of the group. In doing so, they avoid becoming an unfocused Whirling Dervish.

In terms of all the competencies organizations use for employee skill development, having these three surpasses all others in gauging the likelihood of a person becoming a top performer over time.

Of these three strengths, none is more important than *taking the initiative*. High performers with the right stuff accelerate their personal and professional development by having a “learning orientation”—a curiosity to constantly learn and improve. This disposition allows them to derive meaning out of experiences so they learn from the past and don’t repeat their mistakes. They have the ability to determine what to do when they’re stuck. They are curious and seek out new knowledge and experiences. They read a lot, from industry news and white papers to “how-to” books and biographies. They have a passion for inquiry, asking, “How might we . . .” and “If we tried this, what would happen?” They ask questions to understand how things work today, why the current state is what it is, and how it might be improved. They seek feedback on their own performance—they want to hear the constructive criticism of others, in order to improve. They view conversations as opportunities to learn from others’ experiences.

High performers with the right stuff accelerate their personal and professional development by having a “learning orientation”—a curiosity to constantly learn and improve.

Final Words

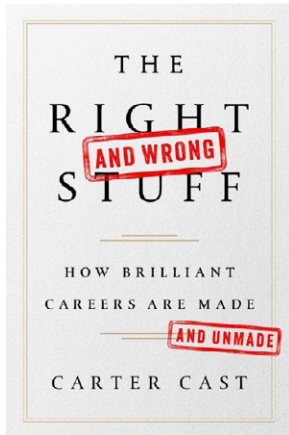
A friend of mine who is an executive coach calls derailers “blind spots with trap doors.” Our blind spot doesn’t allow us to see an area of personal vulnerability until we’ve already dropped through the floor. Although these derailers often surprise us, they don’t surprise those around us. Ironically, they’re often blind spots in clear sight. But because our bosses often provide little more than sporadic (at best) and nonspecific performance feedback, it’s common that we aren’t made aware of a performance issue until it’s too late. As a result, the uncomfortable truth is that many of us are closer to career derailment than we might think. So we cannot rely on others to help us – we must act as our own agents of change.

The goal of my book is to help you identify and examine your own potential derailment area(s) so you won’t be blindsided by them.

Then you can continue to ascend, and unleash your “right stuff”—by being a persistent learner who listens carefully and knows how to enlist the support of others, a person who adopts a mind-set of being “in a persistent state of beta,” observant and questioning, trying new things and testing new approaches, knowing you can always improve, that you are an ever-developing work in progress. 📖



Info



Ready to dig deeper into this idea? Buy a copy of *The Right (and Wrong) Stuff.*

Want copies for your organization or for an event?

We can help: customerservice@800ceoread.com 800-236-7323

About the author

Carter Cast, a professor at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, was selected by his students three years running to receive the Faculty Impact Award. When not teaching, Cast is a venture partner at Pritzker Group Venture Capital, where he invests in early stage technology companies such as the Dollar Shave Club and Honest Company. He is a lead mentor for TechStars Chicago. Cast's writings have appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times*. He has been a guest on shows on Bloomberg, CNN, CNBC and Fox. Prior to his academic and venture-capital career, Cast was the chief executive officer at Walmart.com. Prior to that, he was vice president of product marketing for Electronic Arts, launching products such as *The Sims*. Cast started his career at PepsiCo, where he derailed early on before recovering to become director of marketing in the Frito-Lay division.



Powered by the love and tender care of 800-CEO-READ, ChangeThis is a

vehicle for big ideas to spread. Keep up with the latest developments in business books and ideas at 800ceoread.com

This document was created on January 16, 2017 and is based on the best information available at that time.

The copyright of this work belongs to the author, who is solely responsible for the content. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit Creative Commons. Cover image from Adobe Stock.

Share this

Pass along a copy of this manifesto to others.



Subscribe

Sign up for e-news to learn when our latest manifestos are available.

