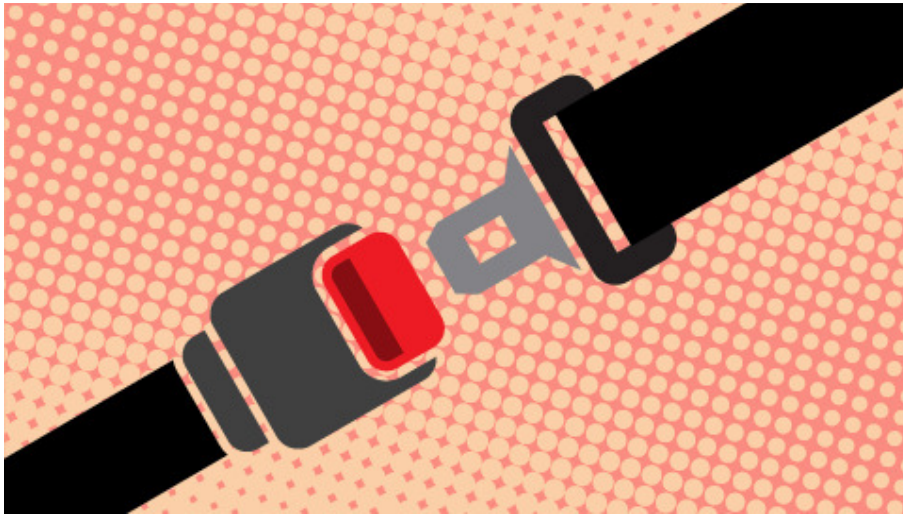

Going nowhere fast: executive derailment and how to avoid it

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Getting stuck in your career doesn't happen overnight. Here's how to spot the warning signs and stay on track



You're a successful executive: well-paid, well-liked, pretty proud of what you've achieved. Then something goes awry. You don't get the promotion you expected. You don't get allocated the resources you need. You don't get fired, necessarily. You just plateau and all your glorious potential starts to stagnate.

This is executive derailment. How can you avoid it? Firstly, you should know that it doesn't come out of the blue. Look closely and you'll be sure to spot one of these three warning signs:



1. You find out about surprising things that are happening in the organisation around you. You can't understand why nobody sought your opinion on the new hire, new initiative, new strategy.
2. You're getting less feedback than you used to. It's gone strangely quiet. People both above and below you seem to have stopped telling you stuff. Sadly this is unlikely to be because you've attained perfection.
3. Your mojo is a bit lower than it used to be, for no obvious reason. Your energy is slightly depleted, you're wading through treacle, but you can't put your finger on why.

Don't panic, this happens to at least 50% of executives at some point in their career. Let's look at what you can do to ensure you don't find yourself huffing and puffing in a cold, dark siding while your peers have all sped off to more exciting places.

Three skills you should learn fast

The fundamental building block, the core skill you have to master in order to reach your greatest personal heights, is exactly the same as it was 40 years ago when academics first started talking about executive derailment. As a senior executive it's essential you develop and maintain self-awareness through feedback. You need to know what your personal strengths and weaknesses are and how other people see you.

Beyond this, focus on the following three areas of self-development. These are what separate the executives who enjoy a very successful career track, achieving their expected potential, from those who start on the same route but later grind to a halt.

1. Learn to deal with change. The world of business has become so much more uncertain and ambiguous – the need to have agility and to be open to change is a fundamental skill. Change doesn't come naturally, we all have habits – both individually and organisationally. Build resilience – develop the capacity to cope with the demands of your environment. This might involve going through some crucible experiences, painful crises when you question everything but emerge with a surer understanding of who you are and where you're going.

2. Learn how to influence people. We're talking 360 influence: you need to be able to map out your stakeholders and figure out what their key interests are. Businesses have moved beyond the traditional hierarchy. In an organisation full of complex interdependencies, you need to be able to build relations with a wide range of people, both within the organisation and external stakeholders, who need to be aligned with what you're trying to achieve for it to happen.

3. Learn to communicate effectively. It's not about what you transmit, it's about the message that's received. It's about understanding how to communicate with a wide range of people in a variety of ways. Wait – you say you're great at this stuff already? Sorry to disillusion you but you almost certainly aren't. Most senior executives think they're good at communicating, but one recent survey found 95% of employees are unaware of or don't understand the company strategy. What other people are hearing when you are communicating?

What if I've already derailed?

If you've derailed, you've failed to influence key constituents for what you're trying to do. The difficulty is that you often don't know you've plateaued until it's too late. You probably didn't see it coming, because you have blind spots. You rarely get the feedback you need in real time and very few people are well-managed enough to be told, "If you don't make these changes, there's a possibility you might derail."

That's not the only pitfall that comes with success. Most executives have a strong sense of their own value. That can be a real asset but the risk is that when you achieve success, you become closed and defensive to anything that challenges your sense of self. You realise too late that you don't know everything and, even if you did, nobody's listening any more.

Maintaining momentum in your career is a challenge for all senior executives because the world of business has changed. You're responsible for the reputation you create around you.

Careers are no longer simply about climbing the ladder, they're more complicated, particularly within a matrix organisation. In complex organisational structures, social capital – your ability to get things done through other people – is now much more valuable than human capital – your knowledge and expertise.

People also often fail to realise that, as you become more senior, the job changes. You might have been rewarded for certain qualities and actions, but what got you here isn't what will propel you to the next role. So don't imagine you'll be promoted just because you're doing a great job. You're missing the point. You should be preparing for the next role.

Getting promoted has very little to do with your actual performance. It's about being able to demonstrate that you understand that operating in senior circles requires political skills – being able to form relationships, being able to adapt. It's not enough to be able to say, "My team has made lots of money for the firm." Do you have the political skills you need to advance?

The other element that will help you get back on track is self-efficacy. Do you believe you can make a difference, that what you do matters? Moving forward in your career requires that continuing sense of agency. When that fails, and you feel you're blowing in the wind, that's when you're in trouble. It's possible to reframe, see the positives and rebuild. But it's a challenge.

Derailment can be an opportunity

Do you have a fixed mindset or a growth mindset? When you fail, do you see that as meaning you don't have what it takes? Or do you think it's time to try harder, try in a different way, do something else? We tend to think linear: we've hit a roadblock, we can't go further. The real survivors find a way around the roadblock.

The first step to coming back from a derailment moment is understanding what has happened. When the initial shock wears off, instead of just feeling defeated, defensive and angry with other people, consider, "What does this tell me about myself and my development needs?"

Careers are an emergent process. You have to figure out the journey you're on. Who are you? Where are you going? What do you need to master in order to get there? Your development needs lie somewhere between your strengths and weaknesses. They are the skills that you can acquire with practise, so you have the widest skillset available to you.

Don't waste time working on your worst weaknesses – you're better avoiding situations that require those particular skills or building a team around you that love the things you hate. But also, don't only focus on what you're brilliant at – unless you do want to be a super-narrow specialist.

Don't just carry on doing the thing you know you can do – becoming indispensable can be a major obstacle to progression. Try something that's a little new and different, building on your existing skillset. Give yourself permission to question your career path.

Maybe you're simply in the wrong career. Well, you know what? So are at least half the people you know. Have the courage to confront these difficult questions and you'll dramatically reduce your risk of derailment.