

Keep moving ahead on the job by identifying career derailers

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Why do some executives seem to self-destruct in the middle of their careers?

Researchers at the Greensboro, N.C.-based Center for Creative Leadership have studied this phenomenon for more than 20 years. Recent research by the center suggests five reasons that an executive's career can derail:

- Problems with interpersonal relationships.
- Difficulty building and leading a team.
- Difficulty changing or adapting.
- Failure to meet business objectives.
- Too narrow functional orientation.

Technical skills, at the executive level, are a given, but the "people" skills needed to prevent an executive's career from stalling are those that are frequently lacking.

There are several ways an executive can determine if he may have one or more of these potential career problems.

One way is to get feedback on performance from subordinates, peers, the boss and customers. One option is the Benchmarks 360-degree feedback process, which was designed and built around the Center for Creative Leadership's career

derailment research. There are many other feedback questionnaires available to executives as well, from a variety of suppliers.

An alternative or supplement to Benchmarks is the Birkman Method, which identifies an executive's strengths in relating to others and what the executive needs from others and the corporate environment to be effective. Stress behaviors the executive may exhibit (if environmental needs are not met) are also identified.

The Birkman method can tell an executive why he may not be effective in a certain corporate culture/environment.

There are several ways an executive can get back on track if his career has stalled.

- Problems with interpersonal relationships. Look for common themes. Are peers and subordinates seeing the same things as the executive's supervisor?

- Difficulty building and leading a team. The executive should think about the best team he ever was a member of (it may be back in high school). What was different about that team than the current teams he is attempting to lead?

- Difficulty changing or adapting. Some executives thrive on change — others barely tolerate it. Specific tools and

methods are available to help an executive in this area.

- Failure to meet business objectives. Have the executive's skills gone stale? Was he put into an impossible situation due to a merger, acquisition or unrealistic change in organizational strategy?

- Too narrow functional orientation. Some executive's careers "plateau" because they are too good at what they do. They are so valuable in their current role, they seldom get opportunities to try new things. Taking on a task force or leading a high-profile team is one way to get valuable experience outside of the executive's normal functional responsibility.

An executive should be open to examining how his career is progressing throughout the career. Once potential career derailers are identified, a personal development plan can be created and executed. This can prevent a promising executive career from stalling unnecessarily.

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