



Leadership Derailment: Does Self-Leadership Matters?

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ABSTRACT

Business conditions today are different from what they were in the past. Public sectors are becoming more dynamic, intricate, and ambiguous. Consequently, these amplify the possibility of leadership derailment among leaders in the public sectors. Although, leadership is a popular research topic, study on leadership derailment is however still relatively new. Hence, knowledge on this construct is quite limited. Furthermore, little is commonly understood on factors that encourage and facilitate leadership behaviors particularly in complex and dynamic work environments as previous studies on derailment involved organizations that are relatively stable in nature. Thus, to gain a better understanding on this construct especially within the context of today public sectors' environments, it is imperative to revisit the current derailment theme. Akin to the early study on leadership derailment (that compares traits of successful and derails leaders), this review seeks to understand the construct by evaluating both leadership competencies and derailment factors. Finding indicates there is indeed a missing element in the existing derailment theme, which the author believes as an important factor in leadership derailment. With support from Systemic Leadership Theory, the author further justified the significance of the new element.

Keywords: Leadership Derailment, Self-Leadership, Leadership Competencies

JEL Classifications: M00

1. INTRODUCTION

Business conditions today are different from what they were in the past. Public sectors are becoming more dynamic, intricate and ambiguous (Van Velsor et al., 2010). In addition, leaders in the public sectors are facing greater scrutiny from various sources (Van Velsor et al., 2010). In fact, public sectors environments are relatively more dynamic than the private sectors (Boyne, 2002). Consequently, these amplify the possibility of leadership derailment among leaders in the public sectors. Leadership derailment is closely associated with change (Van Velsor and Leslie, 1996, Nazir and Shah, 2014), a process that most organizations today are experiencing (Marks, 2007).

As the public sectors are becoming more complex, a higher quality of leadership is demanded. In reality however, it is estimated that the base rate for leadership failure is 30-50% (Gentry and Chappelow, 2009). Leadership derailment is particularly a concern as it usually involved organization's pool of high potential

leaders (Prince, 2005), the organization's future successors. Most derailment cases are however, predictable and with proper intervention can be overcome (Prince, 2005). Thus, it is highly beneficial for public sectors to further explore this concept.

2. LEADERSHIP DERAILMENT

Leadership derailment is a state in which a leader whom organization believes to be qualified and capable of assuming higher positions in the organization is performing below expectation and eventually experiencing career plateaued, demotion or job termination (Gentry and Chappelow, 2009). Studies on derailment therefore, focus on traits or factors that can cause a leader to derail from the initial promising career path (Van Velsor and Leslie, 1996).

Studies indicate that derail leaders are lacking certain positive traits (Torregiante, 2005). The traits according to researchers from Centre for Creative Leadership (CCL) include social, technical

and adaptation skills. CCL (2013) and Khan et al. (2014a) has categorized derailment factors into five themes mainly: (1) problems with interpersonal relationships, (2) failure to build and lead a team, (3) failure to meet business objectives, (4) inability to change or adapt during a transition and (5) too narrow functional orientation.

One of the most common factors that caused leaders to derail is problems with interpersonal relationships (Jandro, 2011). As leaders assume higher position, the nature of organizational relationships is likely to be different. Van Velsor and Leslie (1996) argue that “relational orientation” is critical in higher levels position. At this level, group contributions are becoming more significant (Gentry et al., 2007). Derail leaders usually fail to recognize these differences. They may be blinded by their initial success that was highly related to individual contribution (Denton and Van Dill, 2006). They are regard by subordinates as self-centered, manipulative, insensitive and unwilling to considers others opinion and suggestions (Van Velsor and Leslie, 1996). They are reluctant to share decision making process with others and likely to resort to bullying style when under stress (CCL, 2013; Khan et al., 2014b). Consequently, they are having problems in managing relationship with others.

Similarly, leaders that fail to recognize the importance of working together and insist on individual contribution will face difficulties in building and lead a team. At a higher level of management, teamwork and collaborations are essential to achieve organizational goals (Gentry et al., 2007). Derail leaders are however failing to motivate and engage team members in pursuing organizational goals (CCL, 2013). In addition, they select people for a team who don't work well together and/or hire people with good technical skills but poor ability to work with others (CCL, 2013).

Aside from having poor interpersonal relationships skills, derail leaders are also having issues with change. Derail leaders failed to make themselves relevant by resisting to change. Change is inevitable. Hence, to be effective leaders need to constantly adapt to the ever changing business conditions and job requirements. They need to be able to adapt to changing job context, culture and organizational transition periods (Van Velsor and Leslie, 1996). Studies indicate that some derail leaders fail to make mental transition from technical manager to general manager while some have not adapted fully to the management culture of the organization (CCL, 2013). Most importantly, these leaders may resist learning and do not use feedbacks to make necessary changes to their behaviors (CCL, 2013).

Resistance to learn new things can lead to leaders' incompetence as their knowledge, skills and abilities are now too limited (highly functional oriented) and may be obsolete (CCL, 2013). In early stage of a leader's career, he is accountable for specific function that is usually within his area of expertise (Van Velsor and Leslie, 1996). This limited functional orientation is insufficient as leader assumes broader job roles and responsibilities. A leader that assumes higher position but still equipped with the same capabilities is likely to fail as he is ill-prepared for the new job (Gentry et al., 2007). Derail leaders may overestimate their own

abilities (CCL, 2013) and are blinded by their past successes that were highly attributed to their outstanding technical skills (Denton and Van Dill, 2006). Consequently, they are viewed as being overly ambitious or unjustified self-promotion (Van Velsor and Leslie, 1996). Eventually, they fail to achieve business objectives.

3. LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES

To enable organizations to develop the right leaders, it is important for organizations to identify skills, knowledge and abilities that fit future leadership competencies framework. Early studies on leadership derailment involved comparing between traits of successful leaders with derail leaders (Bentz, 1967). Akin, this paper seeks to revisit the current derailment theme by comparing leadership competencies with derailment factors. Derailments are the negative effect of ineffective leadership, a leadership failure. By linking the requirements (competencies) of effective leaders with leadership failure factors, organizations will have a more thorough understanding on effective leadership. A thorough understanding on effective leadership requires both positive and negative perspectives (Gentry et al., 2007; Gentry et al., 2006).

Based on the works of Perrin et al. (2012), Ashridge (2009), and Joiner and Joseph (2007), leadership competencies can be categorized into common themes. These themes include management skills, relational skills, personal leadership skills and skills in handling change. Here skills are referring to skills, knowledge and other abilities pertinent to effective leadership. Management skills involve abilities of leaders to manage aspects of a business (or an organization). These include technical skills such as planning and executing business strategies. It also involves leaders' abilities to come out with creative and innovative business solutions. This theme (Table 1) includes business skills and ingenuity, abilities to execute organizational strategy in creative and innovative ways, complexity cluster as well as context setting agility. In the complexity cluster, business skills include leaders that are capable to plan for organization future direction without losing sight on day-to-day business operations. In managing business aspects, leaders are expected to view business issues from multi-perspectives and produce creative and innovative solutions.

Relational skills on the other hand refer to soft skills i.e. ability to develop effective work teams (Gentry et al., 2007). This theme reflects leaders' abilities to develop effective interpersonal relationship with internal members and establish strong relationship with external stakeholders. Leaders may need to be more sensitive to internal issues such as diversity and talent management as well as pressures from external stakeholders such as business partners, regulators, and non-governmental organizations. Table 1 provides the content for relational skills theme.

The third theme refers to individual intrinsic qualities. It involves leaders' abilities to reflect on own weaknesses and strengths and translate them into learning opportunities (Table 1). This according to Ashridge (2009) involves leaders' ability to learn from mistakes. Learning however can only takes place when a leader is willingly and honestly admit his flaws (Perrin et al., 2012).

Table 1: Leadership competencies theme

Leadership competencies	Perrin et al. (2012)	Ashridge (2009)	Joiner and Joseph (2007)
Management skills	Business skills	Complexity	Context-setting agility
i. Skills related to managing department/organization	e.g. able to plan, organize and implement business strategies	e.g. ability to balance short term with long term considerations	e.g. ability to recognize and manipulate internal and external trends into strategic decision making
ii. Abilities to initiate and execute creative and innovative business solutions	Ingenuity e.g. able to share organization vision and think way ahead in a creative and innovative manner	Complexity e.g. ability to find creative, innovative and original ways of solving problems	Creative agility e.g. approach problem from multi-perspectives and come out with creative solutions
Relational skills	People skills	Connectedness	Stakeholder agility
i. Abilities to establish effective interpersonal relationship with internal stakeholders	e.g. ability to interact and promote team engagement.	e.g. identify, engage in effective dialogue and build partnership with key external stakeholders	e.g. ability to identify, engage and align with stakeholders' perspectives
ii. Foster good relationship with external parties	Diversity e.g. able to openly accept and work with people with diverse background Society e.g. ability to bond and foster relationships with external partners		
Personal leadership skills	Reflection	Complexity	Self-leadership
Abilities to evaluate oneself	e.g. inner strength and willingness to honestly evaluate oneself	e.g. ability to learn from mistakes	e.g. ability to reflect on inner self and more fully align behavior with self-values and aspirations
Skills in handling change	Business	Complexity	Context-setting agility
Abilities to lead in complexity and ambiguity	e.g. able to deal with complexity and ambiguity	e.g. ability to be flexible and responsive to change	e.g. ability to anticipate important changes and it impact and undertake visionary initiatives

The last theme is on change-handling skills. As the business environments are becoming more complex and ambiguous, leaders are therefore need to be able to manage and initiate change (Boatman and Wellins, 2011). This includes abilities (Table 1) such as anticipating important changes and its impact on organization, be responsive to these changes (for example developing inspiring vision) and exercise flexibility (Ashridge, 2009).

4. DISCUSSION

As indicated in CCL's derailment theme, the missing or lacking positive traits include social abilities (problems with interpersonal skills and inability to build and lead teams), having narrow functional orientation, failure to achieve business objectives and skills in dealing with change or transition. These are indeed some of the factors that modern leaders need to be effective (Table 1). By establishing common themes that capture both of the two themes, a clear link emerges between the two categories (Table 2).

Torregiante (2005) argue that derail leaders lacked certain positive traits that interfere with their abilities to lead effectively. If we assume that derailment factors are the missing traits, this indicate that there is a gap in the current derailment factors. Table 2 shows that one area in the competencies theme is not being addressed by the derailment factors. Table 2 indicates that the gap is in the Self-leadership Skills theme.

Self-leadership skills involve leaders' abilities to reflect on self-strengths and weaknesses. Abilities to engage in reflective thinking

will influence leaders learning agility. The argument is simple, a person can only rectify or compensate his weaknesses or flaws if he is aware or realized that he is indeed own the weaknesses. This is supported by Hamill (2011) who stated that self-awareness is the starting point for leader development. He explained that leader development involved a process of self-reflection, developing self-awareness and followed by self-cultivation (process of cultivate and grow), a process which lead to behavioral change.

According to Systemic Leadership Theory, managing relationship involve managing both intrapersonal and interpersonal relationship. The heart of effective leadership according to Pinnow (2011), is the ability to effectively manage relationship of the self (the leader), the employees and the organization. System theory postulates that we are actually live in a system, and be part of it. This system is formed and sustained based on the relationships of its members, its networking.

Various studies have proven that effective interpersonal relationship is one of the major factors in both leader's success and failure (Jandro, 2011). This is also clearly shown in CCL (2013) derailment themes. Derailment factors such as problems with interpersonal relationship indicated the blind spot lies on leader's inability to appreciate contribution of others and fostering effective interpersonal relationship with organizational members. Arrogance, aloof, insensitive, dictatorial, overly critical and self-isolating are among traits of derail leaders (Van Velsor and Leslie, 1996). Besides, leaders' strong points such as assertiveness and initiative that works well in early career stage become setback as

Table 2: Linking leadership competencies and derailment

Leadership competencies	Perrin et al. (2012)	Ashridge (2009)	Joiner and Joseph (2007)	CCL derailment theme (2013)
Business skills	Business skill	Complexity	Context-setting agility	Inability to achieve business objectives
Skills related to managing business	e.g. able to plan, organize and implement business strategies	e.g. ability to balance short term with long term consideration	e.g. ability recognize and manipulate internal and external trends into strategic decision making	Lacked a broad functional orientation
Abilities to initiate and execute creative and innovative business solutions	Ingenuity e.g. able to share organization's vision and think way ahead in a creative and innovative manner	Complexity e.g. ability to find creative, innovative and original ways of solving problems	Creative agility e.g. approach problem from multi-perspectives and come out with creative solutions	
Relational skills	People skills	Connectedness	Stakeholder agility	Problems in interpersonal relationship
Ability to establish effective interpersonal skills with others (both external and internal stakeholders)	e.g., ability to interact and promote team engagement Diversity e.g. able to openly accept and work with people with diverse background Society e.g. ability to bond and foster relationship with external business partners	e.g. ability to identify and build partnership with internal key stakeholder Connectedness e.g. identify, engage in effective dialogue and build partnership with key external stakeholders	e.g. ability to identify, engage and align with stakeholders expectation	Fail to build and lead a team Problems in interpersonal relationship
Self-leadership skills	Reflection	Complexity	Self-leadership	*the missing link
Abilities to effectively evaluate oneself	e.g. inner strength and willingness to honestly evaluate oneself	e.g. ability to learn from mistakes	e.g. ability to reflect on inner self and more fully align behavior with self- values and aspirations	
Skills in handling change	Business	Complexity	Context-setting agility	Unable to change and adapt during transition
Abilities to lead in complexity and ambiguity	e.g. able to deal with complexity and ambiguity	e.g. ability to be flexible and responsive to change	e.g. ability to anticipate important changes and its impact and undertake visionary initiatives	

they need to be more relational-oriented as they moves upward (Denton and Van Dill, 2006). Derailment themes such as *inability to build and lead a teams* as well as *failure to meet business objectives* pointed out this loophole.

On the other hand, intrapersonal relationship is the hidden zone that seems to be neglected. The need for intrapersonal (self-leadership) skill is genuine as a blind spot is inevitable in every leader (Pinnow, 2011). As Pinnow (2011:130) states “we (human) are much more of the product of irrational, partly unconscious principles, images, messages and role expectation”. Therefore, a leader’s interpretation of outside stimulant will be based on his context of reality or “self-definition” (Pinnow, 2011) which may be contradicted to the perception of others. Self-definition dictate ones inner script, his beliefs on what is right and wrong, his view on others, his motivation, weaknesses and fear (Pinnow, 2011). Leaders can only view issues or situation objectively if he is able to “step back from conscious self-definition in order to realize who they really are-not who they want to be” (Pinnow, 2011:131).

Pinnow (2011:131) highlighted the importance of self-reflection as it crucially shape leadership style and the organization; “there is no complete objectivity, no unbreakable reality, and no absolute truth, but always only an individual understanding of it”. He added that leaders that fail are those that fail to see or understand

real reason for their action and eventually send out the wrong signal. For example, leaders need to understand why they behave aggressively or defensively in certain situation or to certain people (Pinnow, 2011). Once they understand the actual reasons, they are able evaluate a situation or people more objectively, without being clutter by predefined internal script (Pinnow, 2011). This will help leaders to more fully align their behavior with self-values and aspirations (Joiner and Joseph, 2007). They then can manipulate flaws as learning opportunities for self-development (Ashridge, 2009; Rasli et al., 2014).

The importance of self-leadership is shown in a study by Gentry et al. (2007). Their findings showed negative relationship between individual willingness to change with immediate superior derailment ratings. This means a leader that is rate by peer and direct reports as individual that is not willing to improve, learn from mistakes and reflect honestly on his weaknesses are likely to display derailment characteristics. Furthermore, study conducted by Shipper and Dillard (2000) on fast-trackers at various level of their career to some extend validate the importance of self-awareness in leaders success. Their findings indicated that successful early and mid-career fast trackers are more accurately estimated their managerial and interpersonal skills compared to impending derailleurs who tend to overestimate their capabilities.

5. CONCLUSION

Effective leaders need to develop their understanding of themselves, so they can know how to use their gifts, how to compensate for their limitation and how to develop new skills or improve weaknesses (Hollenbeck and McCall, 2003). Based on the comparison made between leadership competencies and derailment themes, a gap in the current derailment studies is worth further investigation by researchers. Empirical studies will be needed though to verify this assumption and validate the missing link as hypothesized above.

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