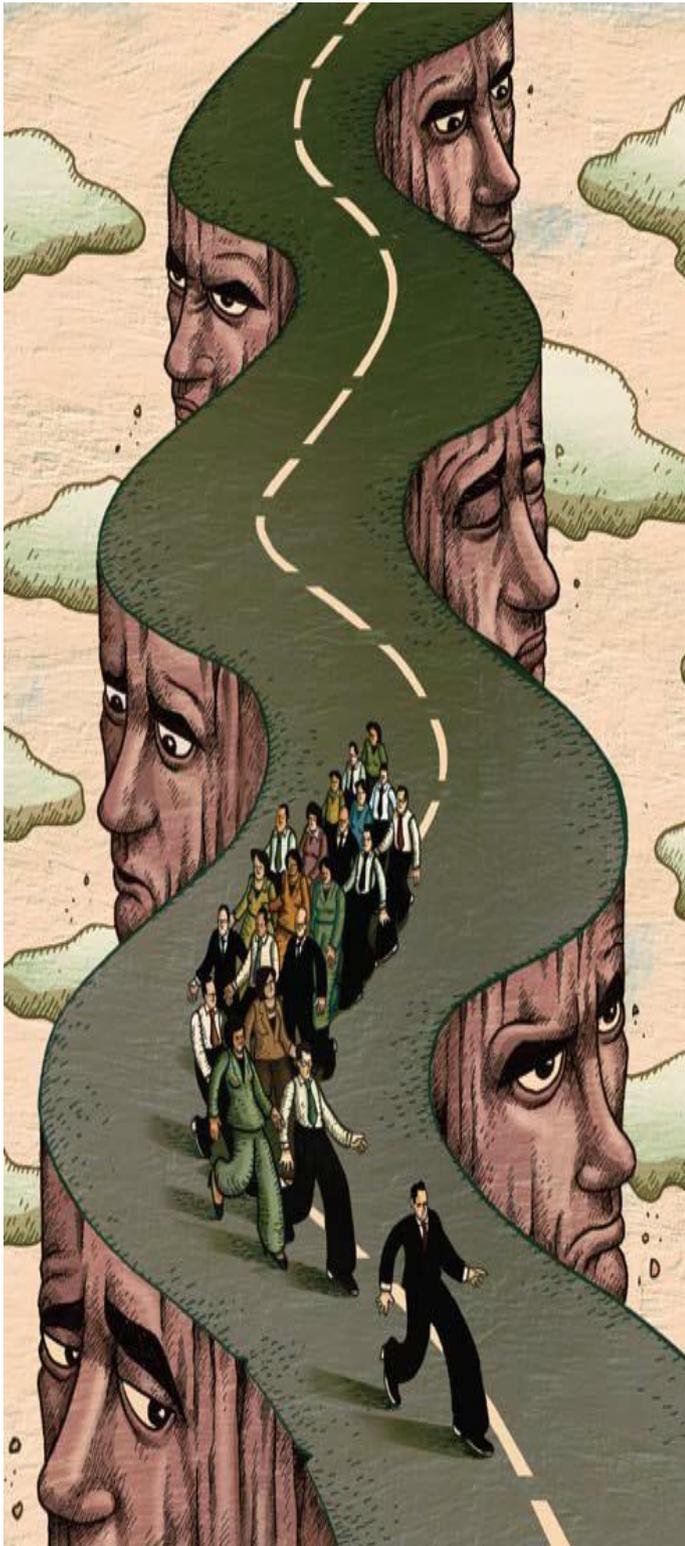


# Six factors of leadership derailment

Text • Jonathan Marshall



With so many leaders coming unstuck in recent times, it's well worth wondering how you can avoid being the next. Rupert Murdoch, ranked the world's 13th most powerful person by Forbes magazine, stands accused of 'wilful ignorance' in his management of one of the most widely distributed English language newspapers. Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the former head of the International Monetary Fund and hitherto a frontrunner in the French presidential race, was arraigned in New York on charges of sexual assault. Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's fourth president, faces charges of corruption and abuse of power. The list for 2011 goes on and on, and by the time this article is published, I wonder how many more top-level leaders would have fallen from grace.

When seeking advice from the estimated 50,000 leadership books out there, you are spoilt for choice. How does one choose between top titles, such as 'The 21 Irrefutable Laws', 'Six Steps to Transforming Performance' and 'Seven Key Principles of Effective Development'? Armed with those pointers, it's hard not to think, "if only I could master those tips, I'd be really successful".

Successful leadership basically boils down to three key skills: task management, people management, and most significantly, personal management. Personal management is the cornerstone for the other two. Weaknesses in this area are responsible for the vast majority of all leadership derailment. It is so important that some of the oldest documents on human psychology systematically describe the key

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ways personal management fails. One of the clearest and most comprehensive of these comes from the 2,500-year-old teachings found in Buddhism on The Five Hindrances. For application to modern management, I have described them here as six factors. By being sensitive to our tendencies to fail in these, we may be able to avoid joining the list of the dethroned. At the very least, we would be more self-aware. No one is immune to the dangers of success.

The first two factors lie on the ‘desire’ continuum: greed (too much desire for something) and hatred (too much desire not to have something).

Tabloids love to report on cases of greed derailing a leader. The coverage of U.S. Congressman Anthony Weiner’s recent upload of photos of his bulging underwear on Twitter eventually forced him to resign. Given the many other recent scandals related to ‘greed’ for sexual attention, one might be forgiven for thinking it all ends there but hatred is also a cause of derailment. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair was accused of having such antipathy for Iraq’s prime minister, ‘the monster’ Saddam Hussein, that he believed ‘beyond doubt’ that Iraq held weapons of mass destruction despite the lack of evidence behind his claim. He brought Britain into a war that was ultimately to lead to his resignation.

The next two reasons are on a continuum of ‘energy’: sluggishness (too little energy) and agitation (too much energy).

Burnout, exhaustion, and depression are classical examples of too little energy. Too much energy is equally damaging; the leader who is jumpy, restless, and worried drives people crazy. We now know moods can be physiologically more contagious than the common flu. The moods of leaders are particularly infectious because we all tend to focus on our bosses more than on other people.

That ‘exposure’ affects our minds and bodies. Leaders who are sluggish or agitated will neither be effective at their tasks nor appealing to the people who work with them.

The final two reasons are on the continuum of ‘resolve’: insecurity (too little resolve) and dogmatism (too much resolve).

Leaders without confidence in themselves or their direction do not inspire confidence. To maintain the confidence of their followers, successful leaders embody clarity of purpose and a willingness to adapt to new circumstances. A significant reason for Singapore’s success as a nation is related to Lee Kuan Yew’s skill in this area. He continually adjusted his response to changing circumstances while moving towards his goal of national prosperity. As one civil servant put it, ‘Lee Kuan Yew almost obsessively reassessed situations with a view to changing his course of action if needed.’

Too much resolve, however, can produce an inflexible over-confidence and the perception that new ideas are threatening and cause followers to stop contributing. An extreme example is violent fundamentalism. More subtle variants of dogmatism are much more dangerous. Leaders become unconsciously wedded to a plan of action and fail to respond to new information; their followers become a means to an end; and ultimately those followers turn away feeling used and disrespected.

In the Buddhist texts, dogmatism is a manifestation of attachment (greed) to a direction. Given our culture, this understanding of greed may not be readily apparent. Also, subtle dogmatism is without doubt the most important factor in leadership derailment; therefore, it may be valuable for managers to regard it as a separate factor.

I experienced a classic example of this in modern governance while observing a senior civil servant of a neighboring nation. He felt his administration worked ‘well enough’ but had ‘a few issues’. They included losing bright young officers faster than any other service in the government, low morale, and a high incidence of stress-related health problems among senior officers. He was confident that the current system ‘should’ work and he was afraid of ruffling the feathers of his colleagues by making changes. In the hopes of getting support for his non-action, he ordered a slew of different consultants’ reports. All pointed to the same dangers ahead. Nevertheless, he insisted on keeping the status quo and his inability to adapt caused his administration to continue to decline.

One simple way to avoid these derailment factors is to resign now, join the Buddhist monks in seclusion and leave leadership behind. But a more plausible alternative would be to be more self-aware, to wrestle with the messiness of our human condition, to strive for the middle path between these six hindrances, and to forgive ourselves time and time again as we struggle to make progress.

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