

Leadership Derailment Series

Part Two: Types of Derailers and their Underlying Causes

Derailment and Back-up Behavior

The term derailer is used to describe aspects of judgment, decision-making and behavior that can and, under the wrong circumstances likely will, result in leadership failure. Derailment results from uncharacteristically poor decision-making. Derailers do not describe the way people normally think and act. Instead, they describe infrequent and uncharacteristic tendencies that come out under the most trying of situations. Unfortunately, it is at these very times that leaders are in most need of objective thinking and sound decision-making and leadership. Because these tendencies and the subsequent behaviors they produce are uncharacteristic of “typical” behavior and because they generally rear their ugly head when people are experiencing stress, fatigue, or temptation, these behaviors are referred to as *back-up behaviors*. Back-up behaviors tend to fit into one of two broad categories: *fight* and *flight* behaviors.

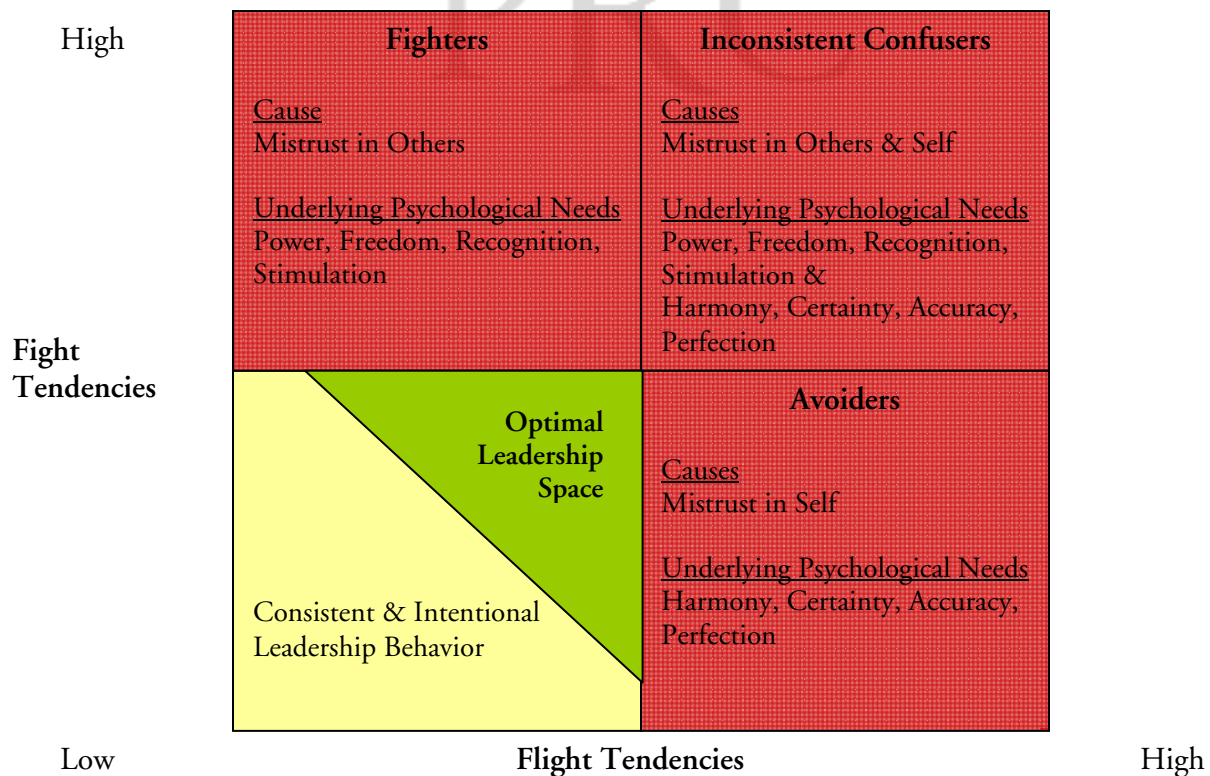
Fight Responses: Fight responses include such behavior as: being overly self-confident, assertive, and independent; making decisions too quickly and with too little information; cutting corners, breaking rules, and taking ill-advised risks; becoming preoccupied with one’s own perspective (versus being open to the ideas and perspectives of others); and speaking in distractingly self-serving and self-promoting ways. A leader exhibiting fight tendencies is likely to be perceived by others as cocky, impulsive, and too often “shooting from the hip.”

Former WorldCom CEO Bernie Ebbers demonstrated risk-taking and rule-breaking behaviors associated with fight tendencies. He had always been something of a risk-taker, but when he condoned the “cooking of the books” conducted by members of the accounting department and the CFO, he quickly moved himself further down the path of derailment.

Flight Responses: Flight responses include such behavior as: physically withdrawing from people and challenges; demonstrating inconsistent levels of energy and enthusiasm; consistently avoiding decision-making based upon a need for more data and information; becoming overly skeptical of the motives and capabilities of others; and quickly backing down and giving in when challenged with dissenting ideas or perspectives. A leader exhibiting flight tendencies is likely to be perceived by others as decision-avoidant, and lacking leadership courage.

Former Xerox CEO Rick Thoman reportedly demonstrated clear flight tendencies. He was characterized as aloof, standoffish, and disconnected from the experiences and perspectives of his employees. His derailment and removal as CEO after only 13 months was, in part, due to his failure to adequately engage and utilize the thinking and ideas of his sales management team. His tendencies to withdraw and make decisions in isolation limited his access to sources of critical information that would have helped him anticipate the likely challenges and threats associated with his planned course of action *before* enacting it.

Because back-up behavior is uncharacteristic and atypical, it introduces inconsistency and unpredictability into the leadership context. In addition to the negative impact back-up behavior has on a leader’s judgment and decision-making, it also creates uncertainty for followers. Leaders who fight, flee, or both under difficult circumstances erode their leadership credibility and shake the confidence of their followers. In contrast, leaders who remain consistent and predictable in their demeanor and judgment, even under trying circumstances, provide a sound foundation for followership to occur. Typically, the optimal leadership style includes *appropriate levels* of and *deliberate use* of assertiveness and cautiousness. The figure below illustrates the optimal leadership space as well as the psychological causes and needs related to fight and flight tendencies.



Why Do We Do It? Underlying Causes of Back-up Behavior

Why do we engage in back-up behavior? Does it serve a purpose? Does it address a need? Back-up behaviors are maladaptive coping strategies. As coping strategies, they are *intended* to help us manage difficult and potentially dangerous situations. However, they are maladaptive because, while they might provide some short-term relief, in the long run, they tend to compound and exacerbate problems.

Fight Responses and Mistrust in Others: Back-up tendencies develop as the result of some fundamental psychological processes. In effect, fight responses represent attempts to cope with difficult circumstances *and* a lack of trust in others. That is, fighters tend to be self-focused, self-promoting, and independent because they do not believe others are capable of doing and/or willing to do what it takes to get things done. Fight responses are maladaptive because they limit (or in some cases eliminate) the collaboration upon which most effective decisions and solutions are based.

Flight Responses and Mistrust in Self: Conversely, flight responses represent attempts to cope with difficult circumstances *and* a lack of trust in oneself. That is, avoiders tend to withdraw, defer to others, and be preoccupied with details because they lack the confidence and courage to make decisions, and more importantly, make mistakes. They bury themselves in information, isolate themselves from others, and defer decision-making responsibility to the people around them in order to avoid being wrong. Flight responses are also maladaptive because they limit (or in some cases eliminate) the collaboration upon which most effective decisions and solutions are based.

Addressing Underlying Psychological Needs

In order to understand back-up behavior, it is helpful to understand the underlying psychological needs they are intended to address.

Psychological Needs and Fight Behavior: The assertive, independent, impulsive, self-focused and self-promoting behaviors collectively referred to as fight responses address a series of related psychological needs. People who engage in fight behaviors are generally in need of power, freedom, recognition, and stimulation. They want control over their environment, to be recognized for their uniqueness, and the thrill of “shooting from the hip.” Because they have little trust in other people, fighters seek to do things themselves and do them *their way*.

Psychological Needs and Flight Behavior: The avoidant, skeptical, deferential, and detail- and information-obsessed behaviors collectively referred to as flight

responses also address a series of related psychological needs. People who engage in flight behaviors are generally in need of interpersonal harmony, certainty and predictability within their environment, and accuracy. They would rather not make a decision than make a wrong decision. They abhor the turmoil they associate with interpersonal or task-related conflict. Because they have little trust in themselves, avoiders seek to avoid making decisions or taking action that can lead to mistakes.

It is important to note that the psychological needs described above are normal and experienced by each of us to some degree. The challenge is to address these needs in a manner that is adaptive and allows one to successfully function within the leadership role. Recognizing back-up behaviors and replacing them with more adaptive and functional behaviors will greatly increase the likelihood of leadership success and greatly reduce the likelihood of leadership derailment. Developing leader awareness of potential derailers will be addressed in a subsequent article in this series.

Learning More About Leadership Derailment...

To read Part I of this series (An Introduction to Leadership Derailment), please click [here](#).

Stay tuned for the subsequent articles in this series. In the coming weeks, we will provide an in depth look into:

- Personnel Selection & Derailment (Part III)
- Leadership Development and Derailment (Part IV)

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If you have questions or inquiries about leadership derailment or other leadership challenges, or if you would like to receive advanced copies of the subsequent articles in this series, contact us directly at:

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