

Leadership Derailment Series

Part Four: Avoiding Leader Derailment through Leadership Development

Derailer Overview

As described in earlier installments of this series, derailers, also referred to as back-up behaviors, are maladaptive coping behaviors that are displayed under conditions of stress, fatigue, or temptation. Back-up behaviors are often categorized as either *fight* or *flight* behavior. Fight tendencies include *excessive* assertiveness, independence, self-confidence, risk-taking, self-focus, and self-promotion. Flight tendencies include being excessively withdrawn, conflict- and decision-avoidant, skeptical of people, and timid.

A General Development Strategy for Avoiding Derailment

The tendencies described above have the potential to derail leaders. Leadership derailment generally occurs because of one or more of the following:

- A leader lacks awareness of his/her destructive behavior.
- A leader lacks understanding of what constitutes effective leadership.
- The organization implicitly or explicitly tolerates or even supports potentially destructive behavior.

The organizations that experience the least (and least destructive) leader derailment are those that (1) have leaders who demonstrate good awareness of their own behavior and how that behavior is perceived and interpreted by others (such as followers), (2) have leaders who understand what it takes to be an effective leader and (3) support and foster effective rather than destructive leadership behavior.

The key to avoiding leadership derailment is to align leaders' behavior, leaders' conceptions of leadership, and the organizational system with an effective leadership model.

What (and Where) is the Problem? – Identifying the Alignment Gaps

The following section describes scenarios in which specific elements of the desired alignment described above are missing.

Scenario #1: Unconscious Destructive Leadership (“I don’t act that way.”)

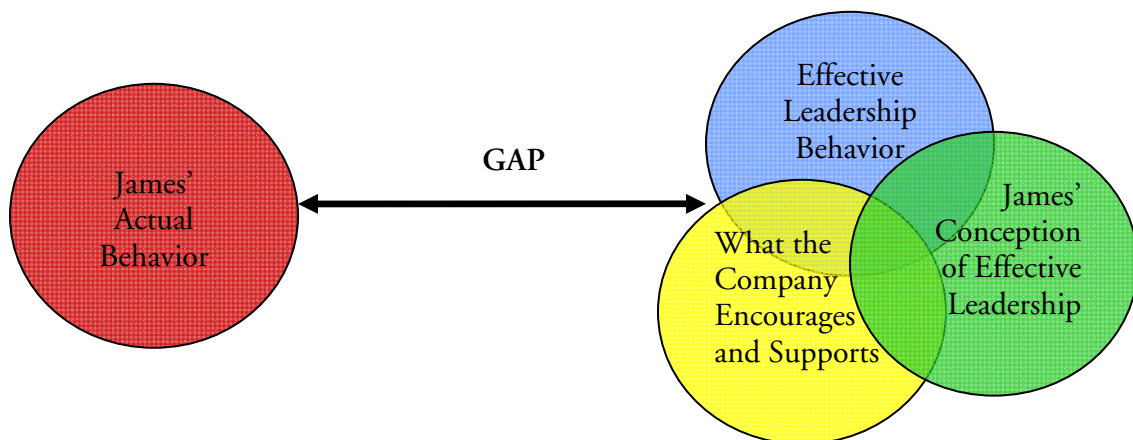
In this scenario, the organizational system encourages and fosters effective leadership behavior and the leader has a good understanding of what it takes to be an effective and successful leader. What is missing is good self-awareness by the leader of his behavior.

Example: James, a V.P. of Marketing, works for a company that values people and is committed to treating employees with respect, promoting teamwork, and providing opportunities to people based upon performance. James recognizes the importance of engaging team members, gaining their commitment, and working in a collaborative manner.

However, despite the company’s focus on teamwork and James’ own recognition that teamwork is critical to success, James does not consistently work in a team-oriented manner. Specifically, when tired or pressured, James becomes overly independent, assertive, and self-focused. At such times, he becomes preoccupied with implementing his ideas and demonstrating his competence. These self-focused and self-promoting tendencies constitute detriments to teamwork and ultimately limit the quality of James’ decisions, solutions, and performance.

When asked to describe his own leadership style, James used terms like “collaborative,” “people-oriented,” and “team player” to describe himself. He failed to recognize his tendencies to avoid teamwork when it was most needed.

The Source of Derailment: Lack of awareness of his own potentially derailing behavior.



The Development Strategy. To increase his awareness of his tendencies through assessment feedback, 360 feedback, and other means of gathering information about his exhibited behavior.

Scenario #2: Self-Justified Destructive Leadership ("I know what I'm doing and it is the right way to lead.")

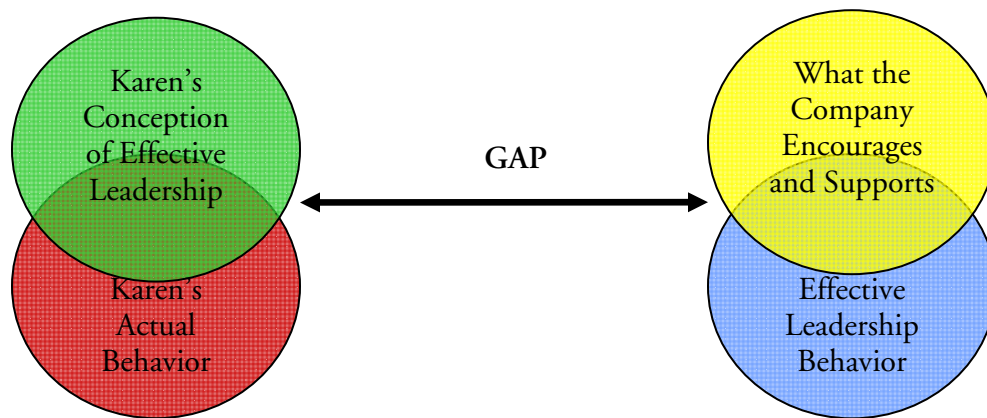
In this scenario, the organizational system desires and encourages effective leadership behavior but the leader lacks a good understanding of/disagrees with what it takes to be an effective leader. The leader recognizes her own behavior and she knows that her way of leading does not align with what the company wants her to do. However, she believes her way is the best way.

The Example: Karen, a Director of Operations, works for a company that is highly systems-based. The company encourages, supports, and rewards leaders who follow policies and procedures and consistently implement proven standards and practices.

While Karen understands what the company wants, she does not believe such an approach produces optimal results. She believes that leaders must be given the freedom to explore new ideas and approaches. She believes great leaders take risks, sometimes wild risks, to achieve their greatness. She cuts corners and works outside the boundaries of company rules and regulations in pursuit of success, particularly when faced with pressure or time constraints.

When asked to describe her own leadership style, Karen used terms like "unique," "spontaneous," and "risk-taking" to describe herself. She was aware of her impulsive, risky, and rule-breaking tendencies. However, she believed her approach was better than the one desired and endorsed by the company.

The Source of Derailment: Lack of alignment between her approach to leadership and actual effective leadership.



The Development Strategy: To change her perspective on leadership through education (feedback, coaching, leadership seminars, observation of successful leaders, etc.). To help her understand the current and future leadership demands faced by the company and align her behavior with the company's needs.

Scenario #3: Organizationally Supported Destructive Leadership (“This is how we do things here and it works for us.”)

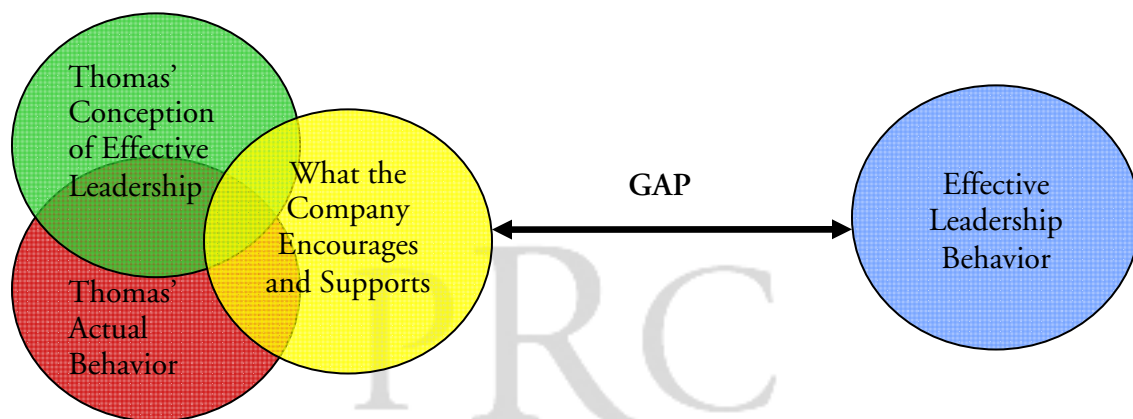
In this scenario, the organizational system encourages and fosters leadership behavior that is ineffective and perhaps destructive, given the current leadership demands faced by the company. The leader is being a “good soldier” by acting in accordance with the expectations (implicit or explicit) of the company. In this scenario, the issue is as much with the company's leadership model as it is with the specific leader.

The Example: Thomas, a CFO, works for a relatively young company that has spent its entire existence attempting to establish market share through an aggressive, hard-charging business strategy. Consistent with their business strategy, the company's leadership model consists of a competitive, fast-paced, and challenging results focus. The company has cornered a good chunk of their market and they are now looking to increase profits through more efficient execution. While their business strategy and focus has changed, their leadership model has remained largely the same. Thomas exhibits a demanding, assertive, and the ends-justify-the-means approach. Thomas' assertive tendencies become amplified when he is fatigued or under considerable stress.

Thomas has good recognition of his leadership behaviors and these behaviors are in line with company expectations. However, the company's leadership model (and therefore Thomas' behavior) is misaligned with *current and future* business goals. While challenging team members and maintaining high performance expectations remain important, focusing leadership behavior around crisp and

disciplined execution becomes paramount. Thomas' Ready-Fire-Aim approach consistently interferes with the stated goals of increased efficiency and discipline.

The Source of Derailment: Lack of alignment between leader behavior, leaders' conceptions of leadership, and what the organizational system encourages and supports (on the one hand) and what is needed from leaders to improve efficiency (on the other hand).



The Development Strategy: To shift the company's leadership model, as well as the leader's conception of leadership and the leader's behavior, to better align with current and future business strategy, focus, and objectives through top-down organizational transformation (executive coaching, team facilitation, development of communication strategy regarding leadership shift, etc.).

Derailer Assessment: Identifying Potentially Destructive Tendencies

The scenarios presented above demonstrate a variety of ways in which destructive leadership tendencies can impact business success. A critical step in addressing potential leader derailment is identification. At PRC, we use state-of-the-art tools specifically designed to identify the derailment potential of leaders. Such psychologically-based assessment tools are helpful because identification of back-up behaviors can be extremely difficult for multiple reasons.

First, the organizational system may make identification and proper labeling of back-up behaviors difficult due to a relatively high tolerance of such behaviors (see Scenario #3 above). Imagine a person wearing a plaid suit standing in front of a wall covered in the same plaid wallpaper. The person will blend into the

background. Similarly, an organizational system (i.e., culture, norms, procedures, etc.) that tolerates back-up behaviors, such as conflict- and problem-avoidance, will inhibit the identification of a leader's potentially destructive avoidant tendencies. Such an individual will blend right into the background that is the organizational system. However, the fact that the system tolerates avoidant behavior makes such behavior no less destructive.

Second, back-up behavior may be misinterpreted as adaptive and desirable leadership behavior. For example, a leader may be perceived by others as courageous and decisive when she is actually reckless, overly independent, and impulsive. Similarly, a leader may be perceived by others as deliberate and cautious when she is actually timid and decision- and conflict-avoidant.

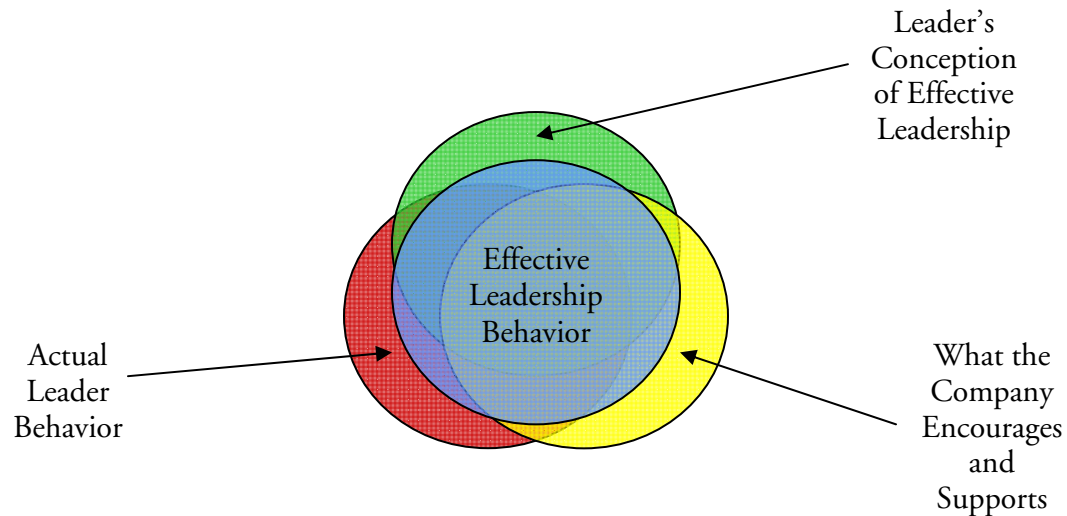
Third, limited information of a leader's behavior and/or the outcomes it produces may also serve as barriers to accurate diagnosis of derailment potential. Supervisors often observe only a small percentage of their subordinates' behavior. Therefore, back-up behavior may be exhibited by a leader but go unobserved and unidentified by the leader's superior.

A General Development Strategy for Avoiding Derailment

Aligning leader behavior, leaders' conceptions of leadership, and the organizational system with an effective leadership model.

It is our belief that avoiding leader derailment is best accomplished by evaluating leaders' behavior (i.e., potential for derailment), their conceptions of leadership, and the surrounding organizational systems in which leaders operate. Once these factors are evaluated, a determination of critical derailment levers (within the leaders and the company) can be made and specific intervention activities can be planned.

These activities should all be conducted with the following goal in mind: *the successful alignment of leader behavior, leader conceptions of leadership, and the organizational system with an effective leadership model* (illustrated below).



In some situations (e.g., Scenarios #1 and #2), individual feedback and coaching efforts are sufficient to keep leaders on track. In other situations (e.g., Scenario #3), integrated and systems-based organizational development efforts may be needed.

In either case, accurate assessment of individual leader derailment potential and identification of individual- and organizational-level derailment enablers is a necessary starting point. Individual- and system-level efforts to avoid, reduce, and eliminate leader derailment should only occur subsequent to a thorough discovery process that reveals the critical factors related to leader derailment. At PRC, we utilize state-of-the-art tools in conjunction with a systems-based perspective to help clients recognize and address derailment potential within their leadership ranks.

To read Parts I (An Introduction to Leadership Derailment), II (Types of Derailers and their Underlying Causes), and III (Avoiding Potentially Destructive Leaders through Effective Personnel Selection) of this series, please click [here](#).

To learn more about Peter Rock Consulting®, Inc., visit us at www.peter-rock.com.

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