Civil Service College Singapore

Research Study:

Understanding Managerial Derailment

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This paper is prepared by
Centre for Leadership Development

31 North Buona Vista Road, Singapore 275983
Email: cscollege_cld@cscollege.gov.sg
Website: www.cscollege.gov.sg

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Understanding Managerial Derailment

Executive Summary

Despite the amount of leadership development research exploring the reasons for success in managerial or executive roles, about half of all managers fail. Their failure has adverse consequences on business outcomes, organisational culture, as well as staff productivity and well-being, especially so when they are higher up in the organisational hierarchy where the impact is greater. This suggests a more holistic perspective to understanding leadership might be needed, one where there is a greater understanding on why leaders fail. Hence, in recent years, there has been more focus on understanding the causes of managerial derailment, i.e. talented managers who enjoyed much success early in their career but then have their advancement involuntarily stalled, or are demoted or fired when they fail to perform to expectations.

Research has identified four key dynamics leading to derailment:

An early strength becomes a weakness. The very same skills, characteristics and qualities that enable an individual contributor to excel at work may become liabilities when he/she reaches supervisory or managerial positions and does not develop new skills to balance these early strengths. When the individual persists to over-rely on the same tried-and-tested behaviours, their performance is negatively impacted as their behaviours are no longer effective in addressing the new situation.

A flaw eventually matters. Everybody possesses some inherent deficiencies or undesirable qualities, but some of these may only be noticed by others after a period of prolonged interaction with the individual or when he/she is promoted to a higher level position where the consequences of the flaws become more severe.

Extreme or unexpected challenges. Challenges in the organisation's operating environment that could have arisen or pre-existing problems within the organisation which are beyond the manager's control and capacity may cause his or her flaws to surface, resulting in underperformance and derailment.

Victims of their own success. Managers who enjoyed great success early and easily may develop an unrealistic sense of superiority which affects their judgement. Threatened by the possibility of failure, they may fail to adapt or develop new solutions and strategies to meet the evolving demands of the situation.

These dynamics suggest an interaction between situational and individual factors - managers typically possess some individual qualities that put them at risk for derailment, and these are most likely to surface in the presence of stressful situations at the organisational, job or personal level.

Organisational dynamics. Firstly, organisational cultures set the context for success and define what qualities are considered strengths or weaknesses. Hence, the individual qualities that are derailment factors would vary from organisation to organisation, context to context. In addition, dysfunctional cultures and reward

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structures are more likely to encourage the display of dysfunctional behaviours that are linked to the likelihood of derailment.

Within an organisation, success at different levels of the hierarchy requires different behaviours, skills and perspectives depending on the demands of the job. However, when there is a lack of proper succession management in the organisation, managers are more likely to find themselves being promoted to jobs for which they are not prepared in terms of experience and competence. In particular, young talents who are fast-tracked may be more likely to derail because they are not yet developmentally mature to be more focused on others, which make them less suited to deal with the nature of managerial work. In addition, organisations often require managers to deal with transitions, such as a change of role or assignment or a new supervisor. While these challenging transitions could contribute to skills development, difficulty in managing a transition (e.g. because of the lack of adaptability and lack of emotional resilience) is a strong predictor of derailment.

Job dynamics. Derailment implies a misfit between a manager and the job he/she is holding. In broad terms, the manager's job could be described as getting results through other people, and higher up the organisational hierarchy, a successful manager is one who is able to build and maintain high-performing teams compared to their competitors. Thus, managers who do not possess the necessary business/conceptual (intellectual) skills, the interpersonal skills, or the intrapersonal skills necessary for dealing with the complexities of their job are at the greatest risk of derailment. Depending on organisational needs, the relative importance of each of these qualities may vary, and there may be other unique qualities that are necessary as well.

Personal factors. Beyond organisational and job factors that trigger derailment, there may be personal reasons or circumstances that cause a manager to fail to perform to expectations, such as a lack of motivation, work stress and burnout, a change in stage of life and priorities, or major life events and illnesses.

The individual qualities that are likely to lead to derailment are largely generalisable across genders and cultures, though across cultures, the same qualities may be represented by different behaviours depending on cultural values and norms. However, some questions on derailment remain unanswered. For instance, there could be further research exploring the impact of different combinations and interactions of derailment factors, greater understanding of the most fundamental individual quality that leads to derailment, and a better understanding of how best to measure an individual's risk of derailment. In addition, future research could focus on what individuals or organisations could do to effectively manage potential derailment factors and minimise failure.

The findings on managerial derailment have implications for the Singapore public sector. As the findings are predominantly based on studies in western cultures, it would be meaningful to explore whether they are applicable to the unique Singapore public sector context, and which of the situational dynamics are most salient and which of the individual factors are most harmful and most likely to lead to derailment. The research on managerial derailment also highlights the importance of helping managers be aware of their risk for derailment, through the use of appropriate measurement tools. A holistic leadership development approach would then help the individuals to manage the derailment factors or recover from derailment. In addition, research

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suggests that the public sector could minimise derailment by designing appropriate on-boarding programmes to help managers handle challenging transitions effectively. In particular, given the lack of on-the-job and life experiences of young, fast-tracked managers, more attention should be focused on creating self-awareness and providing them with appropriate developmental opportunities, in order to improve their likelihood of succeeding as a public sector leader in the longer term.

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Introduction

Research on leadership development has traditionally focused on exploring the reasons for success in managerial or executive roles and finding various ways to develop leadership talent, with less attention devoted to exploring why leaders fail. Yet, a recent review found that the mean failure rate of managers across a number of studies is as high as 50.5% (Gentry and Chappelow, 2009). This suggests a more holistic perspective to understanding leadership might be needed, and one thread of research that has generated much interest in recent years is that of managerial derailment.

The term 'derailment', drawing on the metaphor of a train coming off the track, is commonly used to refer to talented managers who enjoyed much success early in their career but then have their advancement involuntarily stalled, or are demoted or fired when they fail to perform to expectations. It is not the same as 'plateauing' (i.e. 'topping out') (Lombardo and Eichinger, 1989; Montross, 2001), or voluntarily deciding to opt out of further advancement, such as because of a personal re-evaluation of aspirations and priorities. Fundamentally, derailment indicates a lack of fit between an individual and the evolving demands of the job and the organisation, which often arise when a person moves up the organisational hierarchy over time (Leslie, 1995). Implicit in the concept of derailment is that managerial success in the organisation comes through promotions and upward mobility (Kovach, 1989).

Consequences of Derailment

Derailment is of concern to any organisation because of the adverse consequences on business and financial outcomes, the organisational culture, and the staff, especially at the executive and senior management levels.

Impact on Business and Financial Outcomes

Derailed managers deliver substandard work and do not meet business goals. In some situations, the organisation may face financial and legal difficulties or a loss of reputation as a result of the actions or decisions of the managers. In addition, recruitment costs and salary paid to the managers are wasted, severance packages may have to be forked out, and there are costs in replacing the managers (Hogan and Fernandez, 2002; Jones and Lewis, 2005). Estimates indicate that when both direct and indirect costs are considered, managers and executives who derail can cost their companies more than 20 times their salary (Finkelstein, 2004; Gentry, Mondore and Cox, 2006).

Impact on Organisational Culture

Derailed managers who treat their subordinates poorly may create dysfunctional cultures that encourage deviant behaviours (i.e. irresponsible or unethical behaviours such as fraud, sabotage, aggression towards others) (Litzky, Eddleston and Kidder, 2006). Some derailed managers promote a defensive and negative culture that generates passive and aggressive behaviours (Balthazard, Cooke and Potter, 2006) Interdepartmental rivalry, poor coordination and cooperation among co-workers are also typical consequences of derailed managers (Hogan and Fernandez, 2002).

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Impact on Staff

Subordinates are often the immediate victims of derailed managers. Some researchers describe the disengagement, disappointment and distress experienced by the subordinates of the managers to be tantamount to psychological harm (e.g. MacKie, 2008). The subordinates are likely to have lower morale and productivity, low self-confidence, and experience higher levels of stress, absenteeism and turnover (Hogan and Benson, 2009; Jones and Lewis, 2005). When competent or key personnel choose to leave the organisation as a consequence of derailed managers, the talent loss will have an impact on the organisation's viability and succession plans as well.

How Does Derailment Happen?

Research has identified four key dynamics leading to derailment:

An Early Strength Becomes a Weakness

A key feature of derailed managers is that they enjoyed success early in their careers. However, over time or in a new situation, the very same skills, characteristics and qualities that enable an employee to excel as an individual contributor may become liabilities when he/she reaches supervisory or managerial positions and does not develop new skills to balance these early strengths (Frankel, 1994; McCall and Lombardo, 1983). In such contexts, the relationship between strengths and performance is best described as an inverted U-shape, where the top of the U-shape is the turning point beyond which displaying more of the behaviour becomes more and more of a liability (Benson and Campbell, 2007). See Figure 1 below:

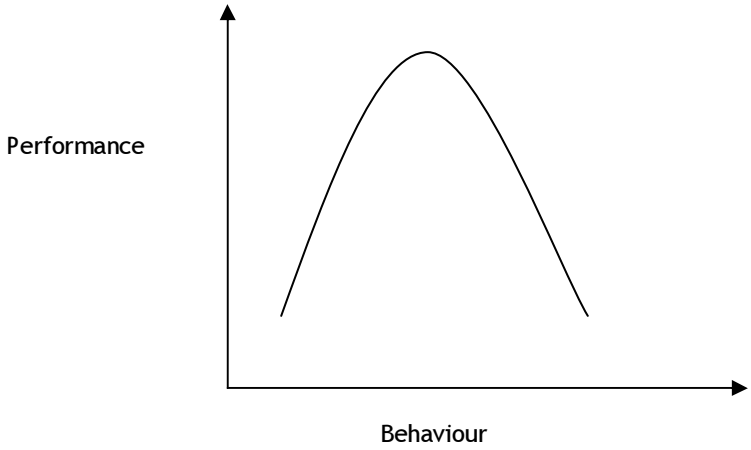

Figure 1: Relationship Between Strengths and Performance

A common example cited in the literature on derailment is that of a diligent, conscientious, task-focused individual contributor whose strength in completing tasks and achieving results independently becomes a weakness over time when he/she advances up the organisation hierarchy and fails to shift the focus to building relationships with co-workers. Another example is that of an individual contributor who is excellent in executing operational work but fails to balance this strength by developing his/her skills in strategising and planning when he/she reaches managerial positions.

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Ironically, people may continue to rely on or over-value the same tried-and-tested behaviours that have contributed to past successes even when these behaviours are no longer effective; and in the face of problems, some may even display more of these behaviours, but this only sets up a vicious cycle where the problem gets escalated further (Berglas and Baumeister, 1993; Frankel, 1994; Kaplan and Kaiser, 2009).

A Flaw Eventually Matters

Everybody possesses some inherent deficiencies or undesirable qualities. The commonly cited flaws of managers include arrogance, narcissism, passive-aggression and scepticism, and it is estimated that most executives have two to three flaws (Dotlich and Cairo, 2003). Such qualities tend to have a linear relationship with performance such that the more an individual displays these qualities, the lower the level of performance (Benson and Campbell, 2007).

Some of these tendencies may only be noticed by others after a period of prolonged interaction with the individual (Hogan and Fernandez, 2002). Hence, while the manager might have enjoyed early success, the impact of such counter-productive behaviours eventually leads to his/her derailment. In addition, at lower levels in the organisation, inherent flaws tend to be more easily compensated for by other strengths the individual possesses and are more readily overlooked by others. However, as one advances up the organisation and the jobs become larger, the consequences of these flaws become more public and severe as there is greater impact on others and work outcomes (McCall and Lombardo,1983;Lombardo, Ruderman and McCauley, 1988). Hence, these flaws become less acceptable over time, and if not managed, could ultimately contribute to the derailment of the manager.

A common scenario is of an executive who possesses several strengths such as being intellectually sharp, results-oriented and an agile learner, but at the same time, is known to be arrogant, impatient and short-fused, and uses his position to push his agenda forward. Such an executive would be identified as someone with long-term potential in the organisation based on his strengths. However, his inability to develop good relationships with his peers calls into question his ability to fulfil the organisation's expectation of him in leading teams as he progresses up the organisational hierarchy.

Extreme or Unexpected Challenges

In the course of an employee's career, he/she may be exposed to extreme or unexpected challenges beyond his/her capacity that may cause his/her flaws to surface (McCall, 2009). Challenges such as environmental constraints, market shifts, economic downturns, politics, downsizing, buyouts, merger and acquisitions, and even the wrong decisions or poor strategies of one's predecessors, are often beyond the manager's control and yet may be the very circumstances that cause him/her to under-perform and derail (Conger and Nadler, 2004; McCall, 2009).

Victims of Their Own Success

'Pride comes before a fall' applies to some derailed managers. People to whom great success comes early and easily may develop an unrealistic sense of self-

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confidence. This sense of superiority and the halo projected onto them by themselves and others as a result of their history of success may cause them to be less receptive to alternative ideas or feedback from others (Chaleff, 2008). They may also make unbalanced judgements in the mistaken belief that they can do no wrong (Berglas, 2009).Berglas (2009) also described how some managers may be threatened by the possibility of failure. Hence, to protect their self-image, they cling to outdated but tried-and-true solutions rather than embarrass themselves experimenting with new strategies that may fail. Ironically, this fear of failure and inability to adapt and develop new problem-solving strategies to meet the evolving demands of the situation may eventually cause the managers to derail.

When Does Derailment Happen?

The derailment dynamics described above imply an interaction between situational and individual factors: managers typically possess some individual qualities that put them at risk for derailment, and these are most likely to surface in the presence of stressful situations (Dotlich and Cairo, 2003). Situational factors can be explored at three levels – organisation, job, person – together with the associated individual qualities that are likely to become derailment factors.

Organisational Dynamics

Organisational Culture

Different organisations have different cultures, i.e. values and norms that affect the way people and groups in the organisation interact with one another and with stakeholders outside the organisation (Hill and Jones, 2001). Organisational cultures set the context for success and define what qualities are considered strengths or weaknesses (Capretta, Clark and Dai, 2008). Hence, the individual qualities that are derailment factors would vary from organisation to organisation, context to context. For instance, in a hierarchical culture that supports controlling, planning and doing work independently, a manager who is more collaborative may be seen as less effective. In contrast, the same manager would thrive in an affiliative culture that supports teamwork, collaboration and consensus (Frankel, 1994). Nonetheless, across organisations, if the organisation is intolerant of failure and does not help staff to develop and learn from their mistakes, then even someone with relatively minor problems could derail (Van Velsor, 2003).

The organisational culture also influences the likelihood of expressing behaviours that tend to lead to derailment. Research has found that dysfunctional cultures are more likely to encourage the display of antisocial and inappropriate behaviours such as aggression and hostility towards others, and unethical conduct towards others and the organisation, and these behaviours are flaws that have been found to be linked to the likelihood of derailment (Balthazard, Cooke and Potter, 2006; Dotlich and Cairo, 2003; Van Fleet and Griffin, 2006). As the organisational culture is determined in part by the compensation and reward structure of the organisation, the latter will also be a contributing factor in influencing the display of behaviours that lead to derailment. For instance, compensation and reward structures that focus on rewarding end results regardless of the process may encourage employees to behave unethically; and compensations that are commission-based may encourage employees to unscrupulously put their interests above their co-workers (Litzky, Eddleston and

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Kidder, 2006). Although these employees may enjoy success initially, their behaviours would distance them from others and ultimately lead to their derailment.

Lack of Succession Management

Within an organisation, succession planning and leadership development processes are essential for building a pipeline of talent with the necessary skills (Conger and Fulmer, 2003). It is evident that success at different levels of the organisational hierarchy requires different behaviours, skills and perspectives because the demands of the job are different (Charan, Drotter and Noel, 2001; Kaiser, 2005). Despite these differences in job demands, middle managers and individual contributors were found to have similar skill profiles, and the skills needed at the senior executive level were in the bottom of all competencies rated for managers and senior executives (Lombardo and Eichinger, 1989). When there is a lack of proper succession management by the organisation, employees are more likely to find themselves being promoted to jobs for which they are not prepared. This is particularly the case in functionally organised companies where people tend to rise through the ranks within one division. However, when they reach the point where they have to manage more than one division, they may lack the necessary experience and strategic perspective because they have not been adequately prepared for the role (Leslie, 1995).

In addition, demographic changes brought about by the retirement of the generation of baby boomers, coupled with falling birth rates in subsequent generations, mean that there is a shrinking pool of talent (Capretta et al, 2008; Chambers et al, 1998), which necessitates the earlier promotion of those who are young and talented. However, from the perspective of adult developmental theory, these young adults are mostly at the life stage where they are focused on meeting their own ego needs. Hence, the fast-tracking of these young talents may mean that they may be less suited to deal with the nature of managerial work because they are not developmentally mature to be more focused on others. Moreover, despite assuming positions of formal authority, these young managers may not yet have developed the necessary knowledge, skills, relationships and resource networks that would provide them with the personal power to manage others (Kovach, 1986; Gentry and Chappelow, 2009). Importantly, they may not have had adequate opportunity to develop their self-knowledge and emotional intelligence in dealing with other people (Bunker, Kram and Ting, 2002). As a result, fast-track managers may be more prone to derailment, particularly at the passage from mid- to higher-level management (Kovach, 1986).

Stressful/Challenging Transitions

Organisations often present stressful and challenging situations to employees that require them to make a transition, i.e. to make a passage that takes them 'from one place to another', where going through the events and emotional states that define each passage prompts them to view the world and themselves differently (Dotlich, Noel and Walker, 2004). Typically, transitions involve a separation phase where the individual has to make a psychological shift and let go of past assumptions and formerly effective behaviours and strengths, followed by an ambiguity phase where the individual is neither what he/she was nor what he/she will be, and finally, an integration phase where the individual accepts the fundamentally different role and becomes someone different such as by learning new skills and adopting a new set of beliefs (McCall, 2009).

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Managers may derail when faced with transitions such as a change of role (which may or may not be a promotion), a new assignment, a new supervisor or a relocation to another country (Gabarro, 1987). In fact, difficulty making a transition was the strongest predictor of derailment in a study by McCauley and Lombardo, 1990. Yet, at the same time, challenging assignments that take someone out of his/her comfort zone can contribute to skills development by building a broader base of experiences (Hawkins, 2004). This suggests that not everybody will derail because of stressful or challenging transitions. Indeed, it is through transitions in their professional and personal lives that people develop (Ibarra, 2004) and the study on Lessons of Experience in the Singapore Public Service found that challenging assignments at work were the most significant stimuli for leadership development (Yip and Wilson, 2008). Hence, individual differences in managing transitions are important. More specifically, those who are unwilling or unable to adapt and learn new skills, those who lack emotional resilience in dealing with stressful situations, and those who do not have the relevant experience are most likely to derail (Klie, 2009).Figure 2 presents the demands of each phase of a transition (as identified by McCall, 2009) and the individual qualities that are important, together with the associated derailing factors.

Demands of Transition	Individual Qualities Needed	Derailment Factors
Letting go of old beliefs, assumptions and strengths	• Adaptability	• Unable or unwilling to adapt
Dealing with ambiguity	• Adaptability	• Unable or unwilling to adapt
Integrating into the new role, e.g. by learning new skills, changing one's beliefs, etc.	• Preparedness for new role • Relevant experience • Able and willing to learn new skills • Emotional resilience	• Lack of preparedness for new role • Lack of relevant experience • Unable or unwilling to learn new skills • Lack of emotional resilience

Figure 2: Derailment Factors During a Transition

Job Dynamics

As mentioned earlier, derailment implies a misfit between a manager and the job he/she is holding. In other words, the manager possesses weaknesses in the very areas that are critical to the job. Hence, it would be worthwhile to explore the qualities that are typically needed for success in managerial roles. It should be noted that depending on organisational needs, the relative importance of each of these qualities may vary, and there may be other unique qualities that are necessary as well. For instance, if the manager needs to implement an aggressive turnaround policy in the organisation, then all else being equal, a more authoritative leader is likely to be more effective (Coleman, 2004).

In broad terms, the manager's job could be described as getting results through other people. At lower and middle managerial levels, the focus tends to be on providing task-based leadership to enable one's unit to complete tasks and obtain quick results (Kovach, 1986; Van Velsor and Leslie, 1995). This involves upfront managerial skills, i.e. ability to provide direction and support to others in order to get a project moving, as well as follow-up managerial skills, i.e. ability to monitor the level of

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performance (Shipper and Dillard, 2000). Managers at these levels also need to have sound technical skills in order to guide the work of their staff (Hawkins, 2004). Hence, those who derail at lower and middle managerial levels tend to be those who are lacking in these job-critical qualities. In other words, managers who derail tend to possess poor upfront and/or follow-up managerial skills, poor face-to-face leadership skills, or inadequate technical skills (Lombardo et al, 1988).

As lower and middle managers need to work closely with upper management to ensure that their unit's work is aligned with larger organisational goals and is endorsed by their supervisors and supported by the necessary resources, those who derail may have conflicts with their supervisors or have poor interpersonal skills that prevent them from establishing good working relationships with their supervisors (Gabarro, 1987; Kotter, 1980; Lombardo et al, 1988). Figure 3 summarises the typical derailment factors for lower and middle managerial levels.

Demands of Lower-Level Managerial Jobs	Individual Qualities Needed	Derailment Factors
Guide discrete unit to complete tasks and obtain results	• Able to provide task-based leadership, i.e. upfront managerial skills and follow-up managerial skills • Sound technical skills	• Poor upfront and/or follow-up managerial skills • Poor face-to-face leadership skills • Poor technical skills
Work well with upper management	• Able to develop good working relationship with supervisor	• Poor interpersonal skills • Conflict with management

Figure 3: Derailment Factors for Lower-Level Managerial Jobs

Higher up the organisational hierarchy, a successful manager is one who is able to build and maintain high-performing teams compared to their competitors. This involves developing and promoting a vision, recruiting and retaining talented people, motivating a team, as well as being persistent and persevering (Hogan and Benson, 2009; McCall and Lombardo, 1983). Hence, the demands of the job become more complex and the manager needs to develop a greater repertoire of skills to succeed. The demands could be clustered into three domains: business/conceptual (intellectual), interpersonal, and intrapersonal.

Business/Conceptual (Intellectual) Demands

Higher-level managers typically need to work within a larger sphere of diverse functions and across levels of organisation (Kovach, 1986). This requires them to have a total organisational view and a broader and longer-term perspective for viewing complex problems and anticipating the consequences of various solutions. Hence, having a range of relevant experience and possessing a good information and knowledge base would help them to be more effective (Kotter, 1985). At this level of the organisational hierarchy, managers are also required to develop a vision for their team (Hogan and Benson, 2009; McCall and Lombardo, 1983) and to balance strategic and operational considerations (Kaplan and Kaiser, 2009). Therefore, it is not surprising that research has found that higher-level managers who derail are those who have poor cognitive skills in handling complex and difficult problems or strategic issues (McCall and Lombardo, 1988), those who have a narrow range of experience and over-

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emphasise their technical skills (Hawkins, 2004), or those who over-emphasise operational considerations at the expense of strategic concerns (Kaplan and Kaiser, 2009). As a result, they are unable to meet business objectives.

As the business environment in the 21st century becomes more dynamic and global, as well as fast-paced and competitive, jobs have become correspondingly less structured and more ambiguous (Gentry and Chappelow, 2009; Kotter, 1985; Van Velsor and Leslie, 1995: Webb, 2006). To meet the demands of their job, managers need to demonstrate good judgements in making timely and tough decisions and planning intelligent action steps (Kotter, 1985), and be able to handle the ambiguity and uncertainty that accompany the constantly evolving situation. Hence, those who are unable or unwilling to change their mindset, adapt and learn and grow to meet with changing or ambiguous situations tend to derail (White, 2009). Those with poor judgement and are unable to make high quality decisions would also perform poorly on the job (Finkelstein, 2003).

Figure 4a summarises the typical business/conceptual (intellectual) derailment factors for higher-level managerial jobs.

Demands of Higher-Level Managerial Jobs	Individual Qualities Needed	Derailment Factors
Work within a larger sphere of diverse functions and levels of organisation	• Total organisational view, broader perspective • Able to focus on long-term goals • Diversity of experience • Good information / knowledge base • Able to develop a vision • Able to balance strategic and operational considerations	• Poor cognitive skills in handling complex and difficult problems • Poor strategic thinking skills • Narrow range of experience • Over-emphasis on technical skills • Over-emphasis on operational considerations
Work within a fast-paced, competitive, dynamic and global business environment, i.e. handle job that is less structured and more ambiguous	• Show good judgements • Have good agenda for action • Able to make timely and tough decisions • Able to handle ambiguity and uncertainty	• Unable to make high quality decisions • Unable or unwilling to handle ambiguous and uncertain situations • Unable or unwilling to change mindset, adapt, learn and grow to meet with changing situations

Figure 4a: Derailment Factors for Higher-Level Managerial Jobs: Business/Conceptual (Intellectual)

Interpersonal Demands

Managers manage teams of people. In other words, a key aspect of their work is to build and lead high-performance teams to achieve team or organisational goals. This

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requires them to be able to promote a vision, direct and motivate a team, delegate appropriate responsibilities, and balance task achievements with relationship building (Hawkins, 2004; Hogan and Benson, 2009; Kaplan and Kaiser, 2009; McCall and Lombardo, 1983; Van Velsor and Leslie, 1995). In the dynamic and global work environment of the late 20th and early 21st century, work is frequently accomplished in teams that comprise members from different cultural or values backgrounds, and the composition of the teams frequently change from project to project (Kovach, 1986). Such a work arrangement additionally means that managers need to be able to establish rapport and work with people from diverse backgrounds and of diverse belief systems.

Thus, managers who are at the greatest risk of derailment are those who are unable to build, direct and motivate their team, or are unable to teach and develop their team (Kotter, 1985; Lombardo et al, 1988). Over-managing the team and over-emphasising task achievement while under-emphasising developing relationships within the team have been identified as derailment factors as well (McCall and Lombardo, 1983; Bentz, 1985). In fact, a major derailment risk factor for managers is the inability or unwillingness to build and maintain interpersonal relationships (Leslie, 1995), especially with the current generation of workers who tend to expect and respond better to a relational management style rather than an authoritarian style (Van Velsor and Leslie, 1995). Managers who derail may possess flawed interpersonal strategies arising from distorted beliefs about self and others, which cause them to behave in ways such as being abrasive, aloof, arrogant, untrustworthy, etc. These behaviours prevent them from interacting and resolving conflicts with others effectively (Hogan and Fernandez, 2002; Kaiser and Kaplan, 2006).

Apart from working well with their subordinates, managers need to navigate organisational complexities and work well with other significant parties. They need good relationships with their bosses, peers and stakeholders, which can then be tapped on when garnering support for their projects and initiatives (Gabarro and Kotter, 1990). Building resource networks with these parties would also facilitate the accomplishment of their projects and initiatives (Kotter, 1985). These job demands further heighten the importance of interpersonal skills, the lack of which is likely to lead to derailment because of conflict with or lack of support from others (Leslie, 1995).

Figure 4b summarises the key interpersonal derailment factors for higher-level managerial jobs.

Demands of Higher-Level Managerial Jobs	Individual Qualities Needed	Derailment Factors
Work well with significant others, e.g. peers, bosses, stakeholders	• Good relationships with bosses • Able to work with people from diverse backgrounds and with diverse belief systems • Able to build good resource networks	• Conflict with bosses • Unable or unwilling to build and maintain interpersonal relationships, e.g. flawed interpersonal strategies, poor conflict management skills

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Demands of Higher-Level Managerial Jobs	Individual Qualities Needed	Derailment Factors
Build and lead high-performing teams consisting of members from a range of backgrounds	• Able to promote a vision • Able to direct team • Able to motivate team • Able to balance task-achievement and developing relationships • Know how to delegate • Able to work with people from diverse backgrounds and of diverse belief systems	• Unable to build, direct, motivate team to achieve goals • Unable to teach and develop team • Over-manage team • Over-emphasis on task-achievement coupled with under-emphasis on developing relationships • Unable or unwilling to build and maintain interpersonal relationships, e.g. flawed interpersonal strategies, poor conflict management skills

Figure 4b: Derailment Factors for Higher-Level Managerial Jobs: Interpersonal

Intrapersonal Demands

As managers have to constantly handle complexity and change, they need qualities that would enhance their personal effectiveness in these difficult situations. First of all, they need to have the confidence, courage and integrity to take a stand and make difficult decisions (Ramos, 1994; Lominger, 1992). They also need to be persistent and persevering (Hogan and Benson, 2009; McCall and Lombardo, 1983), and display emotional resilience in the face of adversity (Harrison, 2006). In addition, they need to be able to adapt to changing roles and dynamic environments, and being aware of their own strengths and limitations, be eager to learn, seek feedback, and grow to overcome weaknesses and develop new strengths (Conger, 2006; White, 2009).

Thus, the derailment factors that have emerged from research include lack of confidence, overconfidence and arrogance, lack of ethics and integrity (Lominger, 1992), and lack of control over one's emotions and coming across as angry, excitable, melodramatic or volatile. Inability to adapt is another key reason for derailment (Leslie and Van Velsor, 1996) and this may involve rigidly adhering to an outdated strategy in the face of changing situations, or being unable or unwilling to develop and learn (e.g. through mistakes) to enhance one's strengths and minimise one's limitations (Hogan, Hogan and Kaiser, in press).

Figure 4c summarises the key intrapersonal derailment factors for higher-level managerial jobs.

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Demands of Higher-Level Managerial Jobs	Individual Qualities Needed	Derailment Factors
Work in complex, difficult and changing situations	• Show appropriate confidence, courage and integrity in making difficult decisions • Persistent and persevering • Show emotional resilience and composure in managing difficult situations • Able to adapt to changing roles and dynamic environments • Possess self-awareness • Able and eager to learn and grow to overcome weaknesses and develop new strengths	• Lack of confidence • Overconfidence and arrogance • Lack of ethics and integrity • Unable to manage one's emotions • Unable or unwilling to adapt to changing situations • Lack awareness of one's strengths and limitations • Unable or unwilling to learn and develop • Defensive in handling mistakes

Figure 4c: Derailment Factors for Higher-Level Managerial Jobs: Intrapersonal

Personal Factors

Beyond the organisational and job factors that trigger derailment, there may be personal reasons and circumstances that cause a manager to fail to perform to expectations.

Lack of Motivation

Some individuals who are in managerial roles lack the passion for the job. Some have lost their passion and no longer see the meaning in their work (Waldroop and Butler, 2000). Some others do well and enjoy technical work, but accept or move into management roles, in which they have little or no interest, to get ahead in their careers or to receive higher salaries (Ramos, 1994). However, their lack of motivation means that they may not be fully committed to their job. This, often coupled with a corresponding lack of the necessary managerial skills, may cause a manager to eventually experience performance problems and derail.

Work Stress and Burnout

Stress and fatigue are prime reasons that people behave in counterproductive ways (Dotlich and Cairo, 2003; Nelson and Hogan 2009), and stress tends to be greater as one moves up the organisational hierarchy because the work scope and impact on others is greater. Hence, it is all the more important for managers to manage their time effectively, establish boundaries between work and personal life, and find a right balance between work and other personal commitments. While different people can cope with different levels of stress, once stress is overwhelming, people may under-perform or be even more inclined to rigidly adhere to their preferred behaviours and be less able to adapt (Frankel, 1994; Kaplan and Kaiser, 2009).

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Personal Developmental Stage

According to adult life stages developmental theory, between the ages of 38 and 50 years, adults generally experience a period of mid-life transition, during which they tend to re-evaluate their life priorities. At this point in time, individuals could either stagnate at the stage where they continue to aim to meet ego needs, or shift the focus towards more spiritual needs. Those who choose the latter tend to gain a higher level of self-knowledge, a greater acceptance of one's strengths and weaknesses, as well as greater tolerance towards others and a greater desire to help the next generation. Hence, these individuals might be better able to deal with the nature of managerial work. In contrast, those individuals who continue to focus on ego needs may face more interpersonal problems at work, including more problems managing their subordinates (Webb, 2006), and are hence more likely to derail.

Major Life Events and Illnesses

Major events and circumstances in one's personal life may interfere with one's ability to keep up with the pace and demands of work. Having a young family, ageing parents or financial concerns may lead to temporary or permanent performance problems at work (Dotlich and Cairo, 2003; Harrison, 2006). Experiencing a major illness may also have adverse consequences on job performance because of possible alienation from colleagues and being physically unable to keep up with work (Bertagnoli, 2006).

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How Generalisable are the Research Findings on Derailment?

Generalisability across Genders

The derailment factors identified are largely relevant to both male and female managers. Nonetheless, there are some differences: female managers who derail are more likely to have a poor or negative image, be overly ambitious, and have difficulties adapting (Morrison, White and Van Velsor, 1987). Lombardo and McCauley (1988) noted that the latter may be particularly critical for female managers as they experience greater pressure to change or adapt to suit the predominantly male corporate culture.

Generalisability across Cultures

Cross-cultural studies on derailment have identified similar key derailment factors for North American and European managers (Leslie and Van Velsor, 1996), which are 'inability to develop or adapt' and 'poor working relations'. Research by the Center for Creative Leadership found that poor interpersonal skills consistently emerged as the top derailment factor regardless of country, and respect for others is a key theme of successful leaders (cited in Seinborn, 2006). However, good interpersonal skills are represented by different behaviours in different countries, depending on national values and norms.

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Further Questions on Derailment

Further Understanding of Derailment Factors

Hitherto, most studies have explored derailment factors in isolation and most have concluded by presenting a list of potential derailment factors. While such research is useful in providing a preliminary understanding of derailment, it would be interesting for future research to consider the interactions across factors and identify what are the moderating or compensating factors, and what are the combinations of factors that are associated with the greatest risks of derailment.

Another thread of research could focus on identifying the fundamental quality that leads to derailment. Some leadership development models emphasise the importance of being able to manage oneself before being able to manage others and the organisation successfully (Bell, 1996). Hence, the tendency for derailed managers to have blind spots, lack of self-awareness and the consequent inability to manage oneself and one's impact on others may emerge as the most fundamental reason managers derail.

In addition, most of the existing research relies on post-hoc explanations of derailment provided by the subordinates, peers and supervisors of the derailed manager. A key limitation of such a methodology is that people's perceptions of the manager may be biased by the fact of his/her derailment. Thus, longitudinal studies of managers may help to provide another perspective on the qualities that are most closely associated with derailment.

How Do We Measure Derailment Factors?

While research has identified a number of individual factors that could lead to derailment, questions remain as to how best to measure these factors in a person. Personality questionnaires have been developed to measure dispositions that could potentially be counter-productive, i.e. the 'dark side' of personality (Hogan, Hogan and Kaiser, in press). Undesirable factors could also be included in 360-degree questionnaires (Lombardo et al, 1988). In addition, as an individual's strengths may become a liability over time, very high ratings on 360-degree questionnaire items should be reviewed and balanced with qualitative questions on the behaviours the individual should display more or less of, or what the individual should continue to do (Kaiser and Kaplan, 2009). Alternatively, the rating scale that traditionally assesses the extent to which an individual displays the described behaviour could be changed to a scale that measures if the individual is 'doing too little', 'just the right amount', or 'doing too much' (Kaiser and Kaplan, 2009).

How Can Individuals Manage Potential Derailment Factors?

That some managers recover after being derailed and ultimately succeed, while some managers never recover after being derailed suggest that there may be fundamental differences between these two kinds of managers, and it would be useful to study these qualities further. In addition, self-awareness and coaching have often been cited to be helpful in the management of an individual's derailment factors (Nelson and Hogan, 2009). However, the extent to which it is possible for an individual to change his/her derailment factors is controversial. Some researchers think that

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derailment factors are part of personality and as such, would be difficult to completely eliminate (Brookmire, 2007; Dotlich and Cairo, 2003). Their recommendations for managing an individual's potential derailment factors include developing compensating strategies using existing strengths and resources, as well as developing new strengths to neutralise the problem. In some cases, a modest improvement in one's derailment factor may be sufficient (McCall, 2009). It would be useful to explore the circumstances in which the different strategies would be most effective.

How Can Organisations Manage Potential Derailment Factors?

Successions within the organisation represent significant transitions that employees go through. This raises questions as to how organisations can improve their succession management processes so that there is a higher managerial success rate. Since the qualities needed for success vary at different levels of the organisational hierarchy, organisations need to give more thought to how best to identify and develop high-potential performers. This includes reviewing the design of on-boarding programmes for managers in new roles, the succession planning strategies, as well as the leadership development plans. Besides successions, other challenging assignments could also be better designed or managed to generate more positive outcomes for the individual and reduce the risk of derailment. In all these areas, it would be insightful to better understand what steps organisations could take to manage potential derailment factors.

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Implications for the Singapore Public Sector

What Derailment Factors Are Most Relevant to the Singapore Public Sector?

As a cosmopolitan city-state, Singapore is partly influenced by the west in its cultural values and leadership styles. The recent Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness (GLOBE) research project further found that in Singapore and western countries, similar leadership competencies were rated to be important to organisational success (cited in Leslie and Chandrasekar, 2009). In addition, in analysing the generic job of the senior manager and executive (based largely on western research and perspectives), three skill domains were identified: business/conceptual (intellectual), interpersonal, and intrapersonal. A closer examination of the elements within each of these domains suggests that the three domains approximate the three competency clusters in the AIM model identified be essential for public sector leaders in Singapore – the cluster of business/conceptual (intellectual) skills describe qualities similar to those in the A (Analytical and intellectual capacity) cluster of the AIM model; the cluster of interpersonal skills is similar to the I (Influence and collaboration) cluster of the AIM model; and finally, the intrapersonal cluster can be mapped to the M (Motivation for excellence) cluster of the AIM model. Hence, given the similarity in job demands and the required competencies of managers from the western and Singaporean perspectives, it would be interesting to explore if the findings on derailment factors, which are predominantly based on studies in western cultures, are applicable to the Singapore public sector context. It would also be meaningful to explore which of these situational dynamics are most salient, and which of the individual factors are most harmful and most likely to lead to derailment in the context of the unique public sector culture. Further study might also be undertaken to ascertain the current public sector culture and the extent to which it supports leadership development.

How Should the Public Sector Minimise Derailment?

Focus on Potential Derailment Factors in the Selection of Talent

Current selection processes typically focus on evaluating applicants against a list of organisational- and job-relevant competencies. Since the existing research on derailment has shown that being able/willing to learn and adapt are particularly important for managing transitions in one's career and that being deficient in this quality is a key derailment factor, this quality should also be given some emphasis in the selection process. Furthermore, as derailment factors tend to be overplayed strengths or deficiencies, it is recommended that during the selection phase, assessors seek to have a better understanding of the strengths and limitations of the applicants. Where there are overplayed strengths and/or significant limitations, assessors could consider the extent/severity and likely impact of these flaws, the individual's awareness of his/her flaws and how he/she manages the potential negative implications, the likelihood that these flaws would be overcome over time (such as through feedback, coaching and developmental opportunities), and the extent to which the candidate's strengths could compensate for these flaws.

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Have a Holistic Leadership Development Approach that Helps Managers Identify and Manage Their Risk for Derailment

Just as research on leadership development has traditionally focused on exploring what makes leaders successful but not what makes leaders derail, leadership development in the public sector has had a similar biased focus. It is evident that this is not adequate – what the public sector needs is a holistic leadership development approach where managers are not just helped to understand what is needed for success, but also helped to understand their risk for derailment. This could be achieved, for example, through workshops that help them to gain self-insight into their strengths and limitations, and be aware of how these could potentially lead to derailment. In addition to relying on information gathered during the selection process, tools for self-development, such as personality questionnaires or 360-degree questionnaires that incorporate the appropriate measurement of potential derailment factors, could be used to facilitate the self-understanding. This is particularly important because managers often perceive themselves as less likely to derail than others see them (Goleman, 1997; Hogan, Hogan and Kaiser, in press), suggesting there are blind spots to the individuals' self-perception.

With a good understanding of their risk for derailment, managers can then work on developing new and relevant strengths, recognising and minimising the impact of their flaws, and avoiding becoming victims of their own success. This same information on the pattern of an individual's strengths and limitations, and in particular, the potential derailment factors, could be provided to supervisors so that they are better able to manage the career of their staff, or to mentors and coaches who could then help the individual to develop new strengths or minimise the impact of their limitations. Subsequent studies on how the public sector and the individual managers could best manage the derailment factors that are identified or recover from derailment would also be insightful. Such interventions may include coaching, action learning, and targeted on-the-job assignments with appropriate feedback and self-reflection to help staff develop and learn from their mistakes.

Design Appropriate On-boarding Programmes to Manage Transitions

As discussed earlier, more research could be undertaken to understand how organisations could improve their succession management processes to encourage a higher managerial success rate, given that successions are significant transitions that are likely to lead to derailment. Similarly, within the Singapore public sector, more work could be done to design and implement relevant on-boarding programmes for managers in new roles, to help them understand the current and future demands of their job and to help them acquire the necessary skills, and to provide them with the necessary support and resources during the various career transitions. Other challenging assignments (such as involvement in special projects) could also be better designed or the individual could be given greater support, so that there are more positive outcomes for the individual and, at the same time, a lower risk of derailment.

How Should the Public Sector Manage and Develop Young, Fast-Tracked Managers?

In the Singapore public sector, there is a sizable proportion of young, fast-tracked managers who are identified as potential public sector leaders. Based on what we know of derailment dynamics, managers who derail are sometimes victims of great,

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early success. Thus, there may need to be a more deliberate focus on helping these managers to be self-aware and adaptable so that they understand the potential derailment risk, and work towards developing greater managerial and leadership effectiveness as they ascend the organisational hierarchy. In addition, though talented, the relative youth of these managers may mean that they require specially tailored developmental opportunities to compensate for their lack of on-the-job and life experiences. The question remains what would be the best way to do this.

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