

Professional Opinion

A proactive approach to preventing train wrecks, landmines, and derailment

By: *Barbara Kaufman*

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Mission accomplished. After a rigorous recruiting and hiring process, the new dean, president, chancellor or other key senior administrator is now onboard. All well and good? Not quite... Challenged by high expectations and a sense of urgency to hit the ground running, newly appointed leaders are prime candidates for performance derailment even on day one. Compounded by insufficient or less structured on-boarding, leaders with the potential to succeed simply don't. Worse yet, they don't know what hit them. It's called tunnel vision.

Tunnel vision manifests itself when recently hired leaders and even seasoned leaders fail to recognize the impact of an increasingly unstable and unpredictable work environment, fraught with complex challenges coming from all directions. A typical response is to simply do what worked in previous positions and campus communities, without taking into consideration the new cultural milieu, varying styles and unclear expectations of the new team and stakeholder groups.

In this environment, a leader's ongoing success, regardless of his or her tenure, is dependent upon understanding both the external and internal landscape. Accomplishing this requires the ability to recognize red flags, anticipate problems still on the horizon, address competing priorities and manage expectations. In other words, it requires utilizing peripheral vision to prevent executive performance train wrecks, landmines and derailment.

Why leaders veer off course

The causes for executive derailment are numerous and span all levels of leadership. For newly appointed leaders, the pressure to succeed is often to blame. Nagging uncertainty about how to proceed or just the opposite—a feeling of over-confidence—causes new leaders get off on the wrong foot by attempting to roll strategies forward that worked in the past. This approach can be misguided. Without a clear understanding of the new campus culture, unwritten norms and shared governance roles, leaders are likely to plow into cultural and political landmines.

The stated and unstated expectations of the institution compound the problem. Assuming smart, highly-skilled leaders need little direction, the search committee, board or senior leadership fail to provide structured on-boarding. Lacking the necessary compass, new hires attempt to navigate unfamiliar waters. To avoid appearing weak or incapable of handling their new position, they refrain from asking questions that could make the transition smoother. What makes the situation worse occurs when priorities are piled on and/or additional skill sets are suddenly required in areas where new leaders may lack proficiency. For example, the board uncovers a budget deficit and expects the new leader to immediately secure alternative resources by initiating a fundraising campaign without the newly appointed leader having the experience

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to do so. Or, newly appointed leaders may find themselves on shaky ground when they are expected to calm the waters in the midst of systemic or unexpected faculty unrest.

In addition, team expectations can be unrealistic and troublesome. For example, assuming new leaders will blend seamlessly with the existing team or immediately assessing who should get off the bus, is misguided. In reality, adjusting takes time and effort. For newly appointed leaders, situations are rife with landmines that can go off at any time. As a result, a derailment can quickly accelerate to a full-fledged train wreck.

Although seasoned leaders face similar issues, derailment can take a different course based on behavioral styles. In this scenario, they become comfortable in their roles and accustomed to doing things “the way we’ve always done them.” This mindset comes at a high price, especially in a changing environment. It can lead to: **Inflexibility:** Overconfident about relationships, seasoned leaders rely heavily on certain team players who may no longer have the skills to deal with today's challenges. Or, cabinet members leave and are replaced, forcing leaders to accommodate and adjust to what can seem like a revolving door of new faces with diverse styles. Distractions of this nature drive leaders off track, preventing them from achieving critical goals and priorities.

Perfectionism: Seasoned leaders may develop a high level of perfectionism, making them difficult to work with, and unwilling to delegate. The “I have a reputation for getting things done” trumps “let’s work in unison to achieve our goals.” At that point, communication breaks down. The leader may add fuel to the fire by discouraging honesty and openness in discussions. Over time, they create an environment with an absence of “speaking truth to power,” a term coined by the Quakers to address nonviolent ways to deal with conflict. Losing the respect of team members who sense their opinions have no merit, the relationship damage undermines future team collaboration.

Narcissistic behavior: In some cases, seasoned leaders develop a narcissistic behavior, which can poison the team beyond repair. According to the book, *The Wisdom of Failure*, by Laurence G. Weinzimmer and Jim McConoughey, “It is virtually impossible for the self-absorbed leader to be effective in the long term. Not only is it annoying for employees to work under them, but the entire work environment suffers. A self-absorbed leader surrounds himself with codependent performers (aka ‘yes people’) to support his ego. This often leads to poor performance as outside perspectives and ideas that challenge the leader are not tolerated...The only people who interact with them are the politically inclined who feel the need to ‘play the game.’ For those subjected to a self-doubting and self-absorbed leader, either by choice or by their place in the organizational hierarchy, the environment can become toxic.”

Neglecting the red flags

Regardless of the cause, derailment is serious business, especially when the widening ripples negatively impact other areas of the institution. Yet, too often leaders miss the red flags that could steer them clear of impending trouble and an ultimate train wreck. Here’s a list of some of the most common warning signs: Time. Though indicators vary depending upon the individuals, the leadership positions and the circumstances, some red flags are common occurrences across

the board. Limited time for self-reflection falls into this category. By the nature of the beast, leadership positions are demanding, and it is easy to become overwhelmed by increasingly more responsibility and pressure to meet high expectations. Without time to fully consider all of the issues and the strategic implications, potential unintended consequences, risks and potential rewards of situations, leaders can miss the warning signs of trouble ahead.

Distracted by too many priorities. When priorities are never established, never clarified, are all given the same weight, or have fallen by the wayside, foreseeing potential course corrections or consequences is clouded by scattered thinking. For some leaders this situation is complicated by existing in a state of denial. Adopting an attitude of “this can’t happen to me,” the leader never watches for landmines that can trigger derailment.

Sudden decline in influence. For the leader heading for derailment, red flags show up as an abrupt drop in invitations for essential meetings and/or noticeably fewer opportunities to serve as a senior advisor.

A shrinking portfolio. This trend should be cause for alarm for it represents a loss of influence, as well as positional power. When this problem arises, the likely consequence is difficulty implementing decisions. This is because the challenges and issues related to the implementation never get on the table or implementers feel they no longer have to listen to this leader.

Developing coping mechanisms rather than dealing with core issues. For example, there is a heavy reliance on external consultants to the exclusion of the internal leadership team. Or, in attempt to avoid addressing a team member’s poor performance, the leader may quietly and systematically relieve them of responsibilities rather than engaging in dialogue to resolve the issue. Even if these approaches are well-intentioned, it damages morale as team members worry which of them will be next on the chopping block.

Sending mixed messages. Actions such as these precipitate an erosion of trust, prompting team members who had previously looked to the leader for guidance to disengage. Quality of performance suffers as problems develop throughout the implementation cycle and projects are not delivered on time. Further signaling the severity of the situation, the board starts to micromanage.

For all leaders, dismissing red flags is a slippery slope which can end in a loss of leadership influence and, in the extreme, a vote of no-confidence. Fallout from derailment can additionally lead to serious consequences for the team and the institution as a whole. For these reasons, a short-sighted approach is not enough. Successful leadership requires a broader vision.

Peripheral vision and its essential role

According to the American Heritage Dictionary, peripheral is defined as “related to, located in, or containing an outer boundary or periphery,” or “perceived or perceiving near the outer edges of the retina, as in peripheral vision.” Authors Mark H. Ronald and Robert B. Shaw provide a clearer definition of the term in their article Developing Peripheral Vision (Leader to Leader,

2008). They define peripheral vision “to refer to the ability to surface and prioritize weak or ambiguous signals (those pieces of data or points of view that would in most cases fail to gain a leader’s attention).”

Another way to think about peripheral vision as it relates to leadership is by envisioning the outside mirrors on a car. A cautious driver checks these mirrors before venturing into the adjoining lane. Until that moment, the driver may be unaware of the approaching vehicle, but by utilizing the mirrors to see the other car ahead of time, the driver can make a more educated decision and avoid a collision. Peripheral vision for leaders works in a similar fashion, allowing leaders to make better judgment calls. In this respect, an expanded definition of the term includes:

- An intuitiveness and awareness of everything that is happening in the immediate vicinity. For instance, recognizing the importance of body language or silence in a room as indicative that attendees are losing interest, and the direction of a speech needs to change. Ronald and Shaw refer to these often subtle and often misread human behaviors as “Behavioral Flags” (Leader to Leader, 2008).
- Recalling something of importance and utilizing that knowledge at a later time. Using pertinent information from a previous event to reframe how to approach someone, such as a potential donor, based on his or her interests.
- A proactive approach to leadership that is not just focused on the tasks at hand. This would include such measures as building a strategic network today to ensure it can be tapped when needed in the future.
- The ability to see what is barely on the horizon and recognize what is changing. Diligently scanning the external environment for advance knowledge for more evidence-based decision-making.
- The capacity to recognize red flags earlier in the process. This ability enables leaders to change course before problems become insurmountable.

Peripheral vision and an eye on the future

In a changing and demanding environment, peripheral vision is not just a valuable tool, but a necessity for survival. There are many ways for leaders to take advantage of this skill set. Start by hiring cabinet members with complementary skills to minimize weaknesses and create a high performing and diverse team. Build a strategic network with a more thoughtful approach by including people with backgrounds that can offer mentoring and aid the team in developing additional skills. Work on personal professional development for the future. Jumpstart divergent thinking with external consultants, but be judicious. Think about what the campus will look like in five or ten years and work with advisers to put well-conceived plans in motion to meet those goals. At the same time, encourage all team members to utilize their own peripheral vision, so that everyone is working toward the same goals.

Although today’s leaders face many challenges, staying on course by providing effective leadership is often the most difficult. Envisioning clear goals and following through in the midst of increasing responsibilities and high expectations can test the effectiveness of any leader, new

or seasoned. Yet, preventing derailment and train wrecks is essential to leadership continuity and achieving institution goals with a sense of urgency.

Leaders who understand this concept can adopt a proactive and anticipatory approach by using their peripheral vision. Foreseeing what is on the horizon, they make the necessary changes to survive and thrive in an often unpredictable environment. By avoiding the pitfalls that lead to derailment and working more effectively with their teams and communities, they are clearing the tracks for their institutions to continue moving forward.

—Barbara Kaufman is president of ROI Consulting Group, specializing in leadership effectiveness and organizational development strategies for private and public sector leadership teams and boards.