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There's a lot to be said for [playing to your strengths](#), but when you suffer a career setback, it's rarely because of something you're doing *well*. Psychologists Eric Nelson and Robert Hogan [have noted](#) that it's the dysfunctional habits that “interfere with the leader’s capacity to build and maintain high-performing teams.” More [recent research](#) supports and expands on this finding. This tracks with my decade of consulting with CEOs and likely your own experience: When was the last time something

threw your team off track? Was it because of a team member's strength, or did it have to do with an unchecked recurring tendency?

These “dysfunctional interpersonal and self-regulatory patterns,” are derailers, and everyone has them. In [this HBR article](#), Tomas Chamorro Premuzic focused on the “dark-side” personality traits that make workers, and particularly managers, less effective. I find it useful to also focus on behaviors or habits — ones that might have served us well at one point in our lives but now get in the way of success. Maybe avoiding conflict at home as a child was beneficial. Maybe blaming someone else got you out of trouble in your teens. Maybe striving for perfectionism in young adulthood helped you achieve what you thought was impossible. Derailers don't start off derailing us, but left unchecked, these tendencies can wreak havoc on your ability to manage effectively.

Because derailing habits start in the limbic system — the emotional center of the brain, which triggers a flight-or-fight response every time we feel threatened — they can be hard to break. However, emotionally intelligent leaders know what triggers their limbic brains and learn how to control their responses. Strategic ones also design their environments and teams to keep themselves — and everyone else — on track.

In my work, I've identified six common derailers and ways to overcome them.

Conflict avoidance

This isn't just about avoiding difficult discussions, though that's certainly part of it. At its core, conflict avoidance uses escape or intimidation to mask insecurities and avoid having our fears, uncertainties, or mistakes exposed. I once worked with a firm who called me in because an important team was about to implode. Its manager — we'll call her Shelly — was alienating her reports. The senior leader, who we'll call Bryan, knew a situation was brewing, but he wasn't willing to confront Shelly and intervene. Instead, he would listen to team members who complained about her and verbally validate them, but do nothing else. Eventually, the group's top performer went around both Shelly and Bryan to the firm's vice president, threatening to quit unless the firm took action.

Once you label conflict avoidance as a fear and derailer, it becomes easier to face. Seek advice on how to confront the issue. If you're nervous, start by simply writing down your plan. It's best to respond to the situation directly and in person. For example, Bryan could sit down with Shelly, discuss the problem, and offer support through additional coaching and training. This is the skill-building approach. Or they might talk about where her existing skills are of most use to the firm and consider shifting her away from her leadership role.

Impulsiveness

This derailer might include unpredictable emotional responses, such as anger and frustration, or going after the new, shiny idea without vetting it. It's a habit that loses you relationships, support, and buy-in.

Let's go back to Shelly. She tended to shoot from the hip, which could hurt the feelings of her direct reports and disrupt the team. If impulsiveness is one of your derailers, too, start by carving out time to reflect on previous knowledge, successes and failures and consider what you missed in your haste. For future projects, anticipate consequences by asking problem questions such as:

- What is most likely to fail in execution?
- What have I missed?
- How will this be perceived by others inside and outside of the organization?
- What kind of experience do I want to create for the people who are reading my communication or following my direction?

Blame-shifting

This is the most common derailer I see in the corporate world and, according to the psychometric data collected by our company, Aperio, it's the number-one cause of poor problem-solving and a lack of innovation. Blame shifters exaggerate the negative, feel like victims, and pass the buck to colleagues, different departments or managers. I once worked with a leader I'll call Peter who, when we were looking into problems in his department, initially claimed he didn't know about them, while simultaneously insisting they weren't his fault. When we found emails from him indicating he did know about the issues, he shifted his story: "I'm so busy."

To break this habit, you have to call out the assumptions that enable it:

- that you/your team "did everything you could" and are therefore not responsible for an outcome;
- that you/your team are powerless and, since you lack control, deserve no blame
- that other actors are bad, mean, or otherwise worthy of blame

Next, move into problem-solving mode. Learn from your failures, acknowledge current constraints and ask what you can do with the control and influence you do have.

Insisting on control

You might be trying to avoid failure, but others will no doubt perceive you as rigid and micromanaging and disengage. This is exactly what happened with a research manager I knew: he and his team were working hard on a high-stakes project. His control derailer kicked in and started taking on responsibilities that had belonged to his team members. Because they felt they weren't needed and shut down, the project fell short of its goal. In extreme situations, employees working for a controlling leader stop taking initiative, no longer offer ideas, avoid giving valuable feedback, can't develop their skills, and often quit.

If you have a tendency to micromanage, consider spaced-out check-ins in which you get updates, share goals and metrics, and offer advice, while still empowering your team. You need more communication, buy-in and alignment to loosen control, but the results are shared team success.

Perfectionism

We should all strive to do our best, but [people who always aim for perfect](#) often miss deadlines and opportunities. I've seen executives derailed so badly by this habit that they fail to submit work because they never see it as good enough.

The solution is to focus on confirming standards with others. Seek their feedback on expected results, costs, and timelines rather than adopting the extremely high ones your perfectionism tends to manufacture. Can you build in checkpoints where you submit work at 50% done or 80% done, at which point your boss might tell you it's good enough? If that feels like too big of a stretch, try small experiments where you relax your standards slightly. What happened? Were your worst fears realized? Also ask yourself how perfectionism impacts your relationships. Are you setting unrealistic standards for those around you? The need to have it "perfect" will often annoy others, and in extreme cases, drive them away.

Power hunger

This includes claiming control over the resources in a relationship, due to lack of empathy, a laser-focus on your own goals at the expense of others, an unwillingness to compromise, or seeing others as a means to an end. Power hungry leaders tend to make snap decisions and alienate the people around them.

I once worked with a chief information officer who would charm C-Suite leaders by saying "yes" to all of their requests and then return to his team and assign them these impossible tasks. By the time I came in, he was adored by his bosses and abhorred by the rest of his organization. My suggestion was to put accountability measures in place. Lack of accountability had enabled his power-hunger. For every promise he made, he now had to have someone else on his team sign off. For every decision, he had to provide evidence and a plan. He had to build back trust, but he's now on the right track.

All of us can create systems to hold ourselves and others accountable through advisers, assessments, or just asking for feedback. You can also share power by engaging individuals around their strengths and expertise.

These derailers may have once been habits that served you, but when it comes to leadership and relationships, you either kick them or they'll kick you. If you don't recognize yourself in any of the examples, or if you're unsure which is most salient for you, consider asking a trusted mentor, colleague, or friend. Over time, you'll become better at recognizing what's derailing you in real time and shifting your behavior accordingly.

Kerry Goyette is the president of [Aperio Consulting Group](#), a certified professional behavior analyst, a certified forensic interviewer with postgraduate studies in psychometrics and neuroscience, and the author of [The Non-Obvious Guide to Emotional Intelligence](#). Connect with her on Facebook [@thinkaperio](#), Twitter [@ThinkAperio](#), and LinkedIn [@aperio-business-consulting](#).
