

NINE PERSONALITY TRAITS THAT CAN DERAIL YOUR LEADERS

I failed in my first real leadership position. I had been the star performer of the team, and then when my boss left, I was the “obvious” choice to succeed him. But almost immediately, problems started to arise. While we were still getting results, the team began showing more and more signs of disengagement and conflict. What is worse is that I never even recognized or acknowledged that there was a problem until a year after becoming the leader. It took being passed over for a promotion and being at the risk of a demotion to cause me to reflect on my poor leadership qualities. After working with a personal coach, I finally had the “A-Ha” moment, and I recognized why I was struggling as a leader. I realized that the qualities that made me a star individual contributor were the same qualities that made me a dysfunctional leader.

For example, on my own projects I had incredibly high standards of what I thought was ok versus what was great, and I would get super hands on to make sure everything lived up to my expectations. When I was an individual contributor, that hands-on approach led to my success, but as a leader that same hands-on approach manifested itself as micromanagement. I never empowered my people, and instead controlled all of the critical decisions they were facing.

While this was an “A-Ha” for me, for many of you this might seem like common sense. I had always heard that our greatest strengths can also be our greatest weaknesses, but until that moment, I had not really experienced it myself (or at least I had never acknowledged I had experienced it). But seeing it first-hand made me reflect on the majority of leaders that I coached throughout my career. While the specific issues were different, the pattern was the same. Their performance issues came from overdoing their strengths.

Too much of a good thing can be detrimental. Being confident is a positive thing, but I have seen a few leaders overdo their confidence and start verging into arrogance. Similarly, having a high attention to detail can lead to high quality deliverables, but too much attention to detail caused a few leaders I know to get stuck in the weeds. As a Leader, you need to make sure that you take advantage of your strengths and don’t let them derail you.

Nine Personality Traits That Can Be Overdone

There are many different models that help leaders identify their strengths and potential derailers, but the one I want to share with you today is the Hogan assessments for personality and leadership derailers. Created in 1987, Dr Robert Hogan’s models are simple to understand while being based on proven scientific findings. Here are some of Hogan’s top personality strengths that can be overdone and become leadership derailers:

1. Enthusiastic

- a. When done right - You are enthusiastic about your projects and the people you are working with. When something new arises your passion infects others, and they begin to share your excitement.
- b. When overdone - Your excitement causes you to jump from idea to idea. You get so passionate about the “next thing” you fail to deliver on your original tasks.

2. Deliberate

- a. When done right - Your careful nature makes sure that all the “Is” are dotted and the “Ts” are crossed. While others might rush into a knee jerk decision, you analyze the situation and make well thought through decisions.
- b. When overdone - You become overly worried about failure. You become unwilling to take even the smallest risks unless things are all mapped out. Any amount of uncertainty can lead to analysis paralysis.

3. Independent

- a. When done right - You have a strong perspective, and when the going gets tough you stick to your guns. You aren’t afraid to go it alone if necessary.
- b. When overdone - Too much independence can lead to you being perceived as reserved or aloof. You hold yourself apart from others and your team.

PROFESSIONAL CORNER

4. Agreeable

- a. When done right - You are seen as cooperative and an overall a great colleague. You are often in a good mood, and you help build up the moods of the people around you.
- b. When overdone - Your fear of coming across in a good mood can cause you to hide your true emotions. You might totally disagree with an idea, but you keep it to yourself for fear of conflict within the team or hurting someone's feelings.

5. Confident

- a. When done right - You believe in yourself and your ideas. You are willing to pursue bold ideas because you are confident in your abilities to deliver.
- b. When overdone - Confidence can easily become arrogance. You start seeing yourself as significantly better than others. You believe that only you can deliver these bold ideas, and you stop trusting in the capabilities of others.

6. Adventurous

- a. When done right - You have an adventurous spirit when it comes to your work. Change and risks do not scare you. Rather you see them as natural parts of life and something that can be enjoyed with the right mindset.
- b. When overdone - Too much of an adventurous mindset can lead to impulsivity or a willingness to take greater and greater risks. Instead of weighing the opportunities and risks of a decision, you ignore the negatives and just see the positives.

7. Engaging

- a. When done right - You have one of those personalities that people love at parties. You are outgoing, tell colorful stories, and actively engage people in conversation.
- b. When overdone - Your need to be with people can quickly become a need to be the center of attention. Your larger-than-life personality can lead to you adding extra drama into your team.

8. Innovative

- a. When done right - Your mind is always looking for ways to improve. Sometimes that will come from incremental improvements to your processes, products, or deliverables, or sometimes it will lead to completely new ideas.
- b. When overdone - Too much of an innovative mindset can lead you to become a little too eccentric. You lose your grasp of what is practical. You risk becoming such an early mover that you leave people behind.

9. Detail Oriented

- a. When done right - You see all the little details that need to be finalized. You are hardworking and make sure you are delivering to the expected quality levels.
- b. When overdone - Too much detail orientation can lead you to be inflexible in your approach. While the details might seem critical to you, they may not be critical to your stakeholders, so you end up spending resources on something that isn't valued.

Identify Your Leadership Derailers

Based on the descriptions above, some of you might have already identified your own personal strength that might also be your derailers. But if not, there are many different tools that you can use to identify your strengths and potential weaknesses. If you have the time and resources, then I recommend either the Hogan assessment or the Clifton Strengths assessment. Both are invaluable tools in helping you improve your leadership capabilities.

For the sake of simplicity, here is a mini assessment that is based off of the Hogan personality traits from the previous section. For each of the below statements, answer yes or no on whether the statement generally describes you.

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1. Enthusiastic - Sometimes I get so excited about a new project or idea, that I lose focus on my current deliverables.
2. Deliberate - Sometimes I struggle to make a decision when things are ambiguous, or if I am missing “critical” data.
3. Independent - Sometimes I find myself wishing that I could just do the job myself, and not have to rely on my colleagues.
4. Agreeable - Sometimes I just agree to something because I don’t want to rock the boat.
5. Confident - Sometimes I find myself thinking I am smarter than my colleagues.
6. Adventurous - Sometimes I take bigger risks than I really should.
7. Engaging - Sometimes I find myself wanting to be the center of attention.
8. Innovative - Sometimes I get too excited about the new thing, even though it might not be ideal for right now.
9. Detail Oriented - Sometimes my attention to details leads me to missing key deadlines.

If you have answered yes to any of the questions, then it is likely that you have periodically shown this strength/derailer. While this is not a scientific assessment of your strengths/derailers, it can give you a glimpse into what personality traits you should be aware of. If you aren’t aware of your own strengths and weaknesses, then you are no better than a blind person trying to color in a picture. You won’t know what you are doing right or what you are doing wrong.

Leveraging Your Strengths, So They Don’t Derail You

So now that you know what some of your potential leadership derailers are, you might be asking yourself what you can do to fix them. The first thing you need to do is remember that your derailers are just your strengths taken to an unhealthy level. This is critical to acknowledge, as it will make addressing them even easier. It is incredibly difficult to grow and develop weaknesses, but a derailer isn’t a weakness. It is just an overdone strength. So, your growth plan shouldn’t focus on building your weaknesses, it should focus on taking your overdone strength from a “10” down to a more manageable “8.”

For example, my drive for high standards and tendency to get hands on in my people’s projects was derailing my ability to lead them. But instead of trying to lower my standards and fully empower my people, I focused on identifying when I needed my strengths and when I could be more flexible. When we had a presentation going to the Senior Executives, I would dial my strengths up to 10, and be OK with getting my hands dirty. But for other (less critical) presentations, I would dial my strengths down to 6-7 and focus on empowering my people and staying out of the way.

For me, the problem wasn’t that I overdid my strengths. The problem was that I ALWAYS overdid my strengths. By realizing that I could scale up or down my strengths based on the situation, I was able to dramatically improve my leadership quality. My people learned that in some critical situations I would be super into the details, but in other situations I would give them space and trust them. I went from being a micromanaging jerk, to being a leader who was hands on when I needed to be.

So, when it comes to your own improvement as a leader, stop trying to fix your weaknesses. Instead, look at your strengths, reflect on how overdoing your strengths can derail your leadership performance, and create a plan to dial back your strengths in some situations.

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