

# Why executives derail: perspectives across time and cultures

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## Executive Overview

*Derailment studies conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) in the 1970s and 1980s provided many valuable insights into the developmental needs of managers aspiring to senior leadership positions in the United States.<sup>1</sup> This most recent study by CCL attempts to determine whether or not the concept of derailment and the factors involved have stood the test of time and are applicable across cultures. The answers are critical in light of today's global and ever-changing business environment where executives are likely to live or work on assignments outside their native countries and where the very pace of change has created new and different challenges for managing people.*

A derailed executive is one who, having reached the general manager level, finds that there is little chance of future advancement due to a misfit between job requirements and personal skills. The executive is either plateaued or leaves the organization altogether. Derailment in one company, however, does not permanently end a manager's career. Those who leave their organizations because they resign, are fired, or take early retirement often go on to either start their own companies or join other firms where they are successful.

### **Derailment then . . .**

Table 1 shows how derailment factors have fared over the years. The earliest study by McCall and Lombardo in 1983 was based on a set of interviews with senior executives in three U.S.-based industrial organizations.<sup>2</sup> This study found that executives who later derailed had typically run up a string of successes early on and were viewed as technical geniuses or tenacious problem solvers. Yet as they moved up in their organizations and job demands changed, some early strengths became weaknesses and some early weaknesses began to matter. The most common reasons for derailment were specific performance problems, insensitivity to others, failure to delegate or build a team, and overdependence on a single advocate or mentor.

A later study by Morrison, White and Van Velsor in 1987 focused on women derailleurs.<sup>3</sup> Conducted in 25 companies across a variety of industries, this study found that women who derailed were seen as exceptionally intelligent with good track records early in their careers. They derailed because they were unable to adapt to a boss or culture, experienced performance problems, came across as overly ambitious, or did not have the ability to lead subordinates or to be strategic.

A third study by Lombardo and McCauley in 1988 expanded upon the earlier two studies and used an even larger data base that included both male and female managers.<sup>4</sup> The derailment factors that emerged included problems with interpersonal relationships, difficulty in molding a staff and in making strategic

transitions, a lack of follow-through, and overdependence on and strategic differences with management.

**And now . . .**

What differences in derailment can be attributed to the passage of time and the context of other cultures? In the most recent derailment study conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership, twenty senior executives from fifteen U.S.-based *Fortune 500* companies were interviewed along with forty-two English-speaking executives from twenty-four large companies in Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Spain.<sup>5</sup>

As in the studies conducted in the 80s, executives were asked to describe the careers of two managers they knew well (Americans in the U.S. case, Europeans in the E.U.), one who had made it to the top of the organization and one who had been seen as having senior management potential but who did not make it to the top or made it and was not successful.

Looking at Table 1, we can see that while there are some differences among the derailment factors from study to study, there are four enduring themes. They are present, both over time and across countries. They include:<sup>6</sup>

- problems with interpersonal relationships
- failure to meet business objectives
- failure to build and lead a team
- inability to change or adapt during a transition

#### *Problems with Interpersonal Relationships*

On the whole, problems with interpersonal relationships were mentioned in two-thirds of the cases in Europe, as compared to one-third of the cases among derailed American managers.<sup>7</sup> Managers who have problems with interpersonal relationships are those who are successful early in their careers generally because they are good at what is often referred to as task-based leadership. When presented with a higher level job that requires a more relationship-oriented leadership style, however, they have a difficult time. Among other things, such managers are often described as insensitive and manipulative.

He was a bad people manager. . . . A manipulator of people. He started creating a poor climate in the office, making the work life not productive. After several warnings, he was fired. [1993, Europe]

He is a great strategic thinker and he has high ethical standards, but he lashes out at people, he can't build trusting relationships. He is very smart, but he achieves superiority through demeaning others. He is abusive, he hits people with intellectual lightning. He instinctively goes after people. Many people have tried to work on this flaw because he has such extraordinary skills, but it seems hopeless. [1994, United States]

Being overly critical and using others to further one's own ambitions are two other characteristics of managers with interpersonal relationship problems. A European senior executive described what this looked like in terms of the behavior of one country manager.

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Table 1 Themes in Derailment Research					
Four Enduring Themes	McCall & Lombardo (1983)	Morrison, et al. (1987)	Lombardo & McCauley (1988)	United States (1993-94)	Europe (1993-94)
<b>Problems with Interpersonal Relationships</b>	Insensitive to others	Poor relationships	Problems with interpersonal relationships	Poor working relations	Poor working relations
	Cold, aloof, arrogant		Isolates self		Organizational isolation Authoritarian
	Overly ambitious	Too ambitious			Too ambitious
<b>Failure to Meet Business Objectives</b>	Betrayal of trust		Lack of follow-through	Too ambitious	Too ambitious
	Poor performance	Performance problems		Lack of hard work	Poor performance
<b>Inability to Build and Lead a Team</b>	Failing to staff effectively	Can't manage subordinates	Difficulty molding a staff	Inability to build & lead a team	Inability to build & lead a team
<b>Inability to Develop or Adapt</b>	Unable to adapt to a boss with a different style	Unable to adapt to a boss or culture		Unable to develop or adapt	Unable to develop or adapt
	Unable to think strategically	Not strategic	Strategic differences with management Difficulty making strategic transitions	Conflict with upper management	
<b>An Emergent Theme</b>		Too narrow business experience		Not prepared for promotion	Not prepared for promotion
				Narrow functional orientation	Narrow functional orientation
<b>A Disappearing Theme</b>	Overdependent on advocate or mentor		Over-dependence		

He was always criticizing others, he felt free to do so without taking any responsibility for himself . . . His relationships with subordinates were not sound; he could be over-friendly but not over-concerned. His behavior was arrogant. In fact he used other people for his ambition. When he hired people he looked for people like himself, mirror images. Always a mistake. He left the company two years ago and I think that he is still looking for a job.

A penchant toward authoritarianism emerged as a factor among derailed European managers. They were often seen as ruling by fear or acting in a dictatorial manner.

People were quitting or requesting transfers. She expected complete loyalty, to the extreme. She was dictatorial, overly protective of the group and her own ideas which she forced onto the group. Once someone left, she barely said hello to them after that, and their accomplishments were forgotten. She tried to isolate the team almost completely from the other departments and the outside world, cutting all the links. That way her people couldn't learn about how other units functioned, how other managers behaved.

He (the derailed manager) stopped delegating and became the only central decision maker. He tried to centralize only around him. He became a dictator.

On the other hand, the only time an authoritarian style was identified as a derailment factor in the U.S. data was in the case of a manager who was unable to adapt to a change in the organizational culture.

This difference between European and U.S. managers may be explained in a couple of ways. First, the movement toward participative management has been underway in the U.S. for a longer time than it has in Europe. Second, the results may reflect differences in the cultural dimension known as power distance. Power distance is the extent to which one person; e.g., a boss, can determine the behavior of another person; e.g., a subordinate.<sup>8</sup>

The final characteristic of managers with interpersonal relationship problems is an unwillingness to communicate or a preference for operating on a solitary basis.

He was not interested in communicating with his team, co-workers or peers; not committed to sharing and transferring experience, information, knowledge or process. He tended to be a block in the flow of information, a bottleneck within the company. (1993, Europe)

He was too individualistic. He was not a team worker, and unable to work with others. A one-man show. He did not accept belonging to a big company. (1993, Europe)

Although problems with interpersonal relationships is one derailment factor that has endured over time and across the cultures considered here, this does not mean that all managers who have problems with interpersonal relationships will derail, or that problems with interpersonal relations (or any other single derailment factor) will lead to derailment in all organizations.<sup>9</sup> The factor appears to be one that has much to do with the organizational culture. It also may be the case that, even if a manager derails for a combination of reasons, problems with interpersonal relations is one of the most obvious explanations for derailment after the fact.

#### *Failure to Meet Business Objectives*

In every derailment study done, a track record of performance has been a typical reason given for derailed managers' initial success. Early in their

careers, when jobs required technical skills or making and implementing decisions on one's own in a relatively stable system, derailed managers were able to meet business objectives. But when conditions changed and new skills and ways of working with others were expected, productivity problems arose for these same managers.

He had very disappointing business results. The marketplace competition was tight and at that time there were poor quality products to sell, but there was a great pressure to produce profits. There were wrong strategic decisions made. In general, corporate headquarters was very upset. His very senior level position was a make or break position but he could not produce results. He left the company and is now general manager of another business.

Failure to meet performance expectations has been identified as a source of derailment throughout the Center's program of research. It was attributed early on in research to a lack of follow-through on promises or to being overly ambitious. Frequently, the inability to deliver results was viewed as a betrayal of trust or unjustified self-promotion.<sup>10</sup>

The case of self-promotion without the deliverables to support it was cited by many European senior executives in the most recent derailment studies. One interviewee offered this account:

He was very ambitious and spent a lot of time demonstrating it by telling others "I want to replace Mr. X or Y: I deserve it. I'm in a position to replace him." But there was no demonstration of competence to accompany this ambition. Over time, he demonstrated that he was less competent for the job he had . . . He is not trusted by *internal* customers in the field. They didn't see him as credible, knowledgeable enough to be competent.

#### *Inability to Build and Lead a Team*

Typically, derailment causes are closely related. For instance, the inability to build and lead a team may have led to a failure to meet business objectives, but it might also have been a function of some of the more personality- or relationship-oriented factors described earlier.

The inability to build and lead a team was an important derailment factor in one out of four of the European interviews and in one out of five of the American cases. One European executive described a manager who derailed as follows:

When he reached a position where he had to deal with significant numbers of people at different levels, he could not do it. He was very isolated, did not create a team, was over-confident, tough and individualistic. (1993, Europe)

One explanation for this outcome may be that traits such as assertiveness and initiative which get managers onto the fast track tend to be the same traits that later get in the way as these managers face the challenges of employing a more participative approach at the executive level.<sup>11</sup> The ability to use a more relational orientation, to strike a balance between "mastery over" and "connection to" is critical to success at higher levels.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, there is reason to believe that the changing times have only increased the salience of a relational management style. One American senior executive told us:

Today, the leadership skills required are different, even from five years ago. The expectations of people around style have changed greatly. A manager can no longer rely on position power to get the job done. People want to see their leaders, hear them talk from their hearts, roll their sleeves up and spontaneously and genuinely build that trust. Followership is critical, especially in downsizing organizations. People don't want to see you only when there is a downsizing announcement to be made. People want to know what's in it for them and if the person leading them knows and cares about them enough. Today, if you're going to spill your blood for the organization, it will be because of personal loyalty to your team, not to some abstract organization.

This stands in stark contrast to the mechanistic leadership style preferred in the bureaucratic organizational model followed by many companies. One American executive described a derailed manager's success early on as follows:

. . . at that time, these things (e.g., building a team) were not important. But the culture has changed. It used to be hard-nosed and authoritarian. In that context a manager could make decisions on his own, implement those, and be seen as successful. He has not been able to make this transition.

#### *Inability to Change or Adapt During a Transition*

The fourth enduring theme has to do with a manager's ability to adapt to changes required during transitions. When examined across studies, this theme has several dimensions. It includes the failure to adapt to a new boss with a different style; overdependence on a single skill and/or failure to acquire new skills; and the inability to adapt to the demands of a new job, a new culture or changes in the market (refer to Table 1).

Yet, despite its persistence over time, this is a theme that appears to have evolved in meaning and significance to senior executives. When adaptability was mentioned in the early derailment studies, it was chiefly in connection with adapting to a new boss with a different style.<sup>13</sup> Overdependence on a boss or mentor was a key derailment factor then. The inability to be open to new ways of working required by different bosses caused many managers to derail. In later studies overdependence on a single mentor or on a narrow set of skills became important, although it was not one of the factors with the strongest relationship to derailment. The inability to adapt is a critical factor in the derailment of women managers, partly because women, or anyone regarded as different by the dominant culture, may experience more pressure to change or adapt to the existing culture.<sup>14</sup>

Today, in both Europe and the United States, senior executives appear to be placing a great deal more emphasis on the importance of being able to change or develop in job, culture or organizational transition periods. Just as important is the ability to adapt one's thinking to changes in the marketplace.

On the whole, almost two-thirds of both the American and the European managers who derailed in recent years were described as being unable to change or adapt. A European senior executive, reflecting on the climate of rapid change said:

Our industry was characterized by nationalization and privatization and periods of recession which were rapid and unpredictable. We were affected by global disorder and the fragile nature of the world economy. America and Japan exercised control. There was an emphasis on changing culture and the attitudes of people. One needed to understand different cultures, especially European and Japanese: "think globally, act locally." The company was over-structured and top-heavy with a "squelchy" middle management. Those who survived were efficient, flexible, and versatile.

While resistance to accepting change in organizational culture was a flaw among both Americans and Europeans, European managers are likely to derail because of difficulties in adjusting to other country cultures. This finding did not appear to be a factor in the derailment of U.S. managers. This is not to say that American managers do not have difficulty in this area, but that the senior executives interviewed did not raise it as an important aspect of derailment.

In many cases, the senior executives described repeated efforts to give the managers feedback on areas for improvement. For whatever reason, the derailed managers were unable or unwilling to learn from or apply the feedback.

I was coaching her. We had many sessions together where the problems were identified and we tried to come up with an action plan. Some problems she "owned," others she didn't. She really didn't change. She would change for a week or two, then return to base line.

When the inability to develop or adapt was related to a change in the nature or scope of a position, a derailed manager's plight was often attributed to a lack of depth or "too narrow a functional orientation." Because these managers never had the opportunity to develop multiple perspectives, when they were given the responsibility for much broader cross-functional areas of the organization, they derailed.<sup>15</sup>

#### **The Changing Dynamics of Derailment: Differences Over Time**

Although these four themes have consistently appeared in derailment studies over time, the actual dynamics of derailment seem to be shifting. These shifts reflect the changing and ever more complex demands on managers in more highly matrixed and often downsized organizations operating in global markets.

Several differences stand out when we compare the earlier U.S. studies to the most recent derailment research. First, in the view of senior managers, the ability to adapt and develop in the face of change or transition is more important now than ever before. It appears to be a factor in two-thirds of all derailments both in Europe and the United States. In fact, one issue mentioned in previous research but not found in recent interviews; i.e., strategic differences with management, is now seen as the failure on the part of managers to adapt to changes in the market or the organizational culture.

In a sense, our study is as much a study of senior executives' perspectives of contemporary management competencies as it is a study of what derails managers. As the organizational environment has grown more uncertain and the marketplace more global, senior executives appear to be using different language to describe what is needed for success and what is involved in derailment. Rather than pointing to specific skill deficits, executives are beginning to recognize that it is more important to have managers who know how to *learn* to deal with change and complexity.<sup>16</sup>

A second difference in derailment dynamics over time is the absence in this most recent study of any mention of overdependence on a boss or mentor—an important derailment factor in early studies. It may be that, given the downsizing and turbulent environments in organizations today, overdependence on a single boss or mentor has become an anachronism.

Third, although the inability to build and lead a team is a theme that can be found in all derailment research, the scope of what it captures has clearly changed over time. In the early interviews, this derailment factor had to do mostly with failing to staff effectively, to hire the right people or to hire one's own image. The language of those early interviews was set in the context of traditional hierarchical organizations operating in relatively stable environments. Yet in recent interviews, in both Europe and the U.S., senior executives place more emphasis on building productive teams and leading them effectively over time. Again, this shift in language may reflect the movement over the last decade toward flatter structures and the use of teams.

### Discussion and Implications

#### *European vs. American Derailers: More Alike than Different?*

The enduring themes in derailment factors detailed earlier are consistent for both European and American derailers. Whenever studies are done on leadership or leadership development, we expect to see significant differences between American managers and those in other countries. Such differences are usually notable when the issue at hand has to do with values, which tend to differ across cultures,<sup>17</sup> or when managers in the U.S. are compared to those working in organizations in very traditional or rural economies.

In reality, however, the economies and environments that form the working context for European organizations are not vastly different from those experienced by U.S. companies. In fact, recent research has shown that both the accountability hierarchies and organizational cultures are more alike across organizations than they are different.<sup>18</sup>

For the most part, national cultural value differences don't derail managers. Rather, derailment has to do with the fact that an individual is unable to "fit" with the evolving demands of the job over time and at successively higher organizational levels.

***Derailment is a  
development issue,  
not a values issue.***

Derailment is a *development* issue, not a *values* issue. All organizations are made up of jobs that successively demand more and different skills and perspectives. Because these organizations face similar environments and markets, the requisite interpersonal skills, ability to adapt, and the ability to lead teams to high performance are similar. Thus, the dynamics of derailment will not differ dramatically.

This does not mean that an American manager would have an easy time of it if he or she took a position in a large German or French manufacturing firm, for example. The risk of derailment for that manager stems from the demand to adapt to the new country or organizational culture and norms. The important point is that interpersonal skills and the ability to adapt would still be the critical factors, not the specific features—the norms, values, ways of being—posed by that environment.

### **Can Derailment Be Prevented?**

Derailment is a fact of life in organizations. Only a relatively few managers will get beyond general management ranks, either because of a lack of fit for more senior level jobs or the lack of open positions in increasingly leaner organizations. Downsizing has added to the likelihood that even generally competent people will derail.

Derailment can be prevented, but only if managers and those around them are willing to work on some relatively tough developmental issues. Improvement in any of the four areas represented by the derailment themes described in this article requires that managers take an in-depth look at personal issues such as self-efficacy, self-esteem and need for control. Understanding why it may be difficult to relate comfortably to others, to learn in the face of change or to let go of personal achievement in favor of team-building may involve facing issues around trust, security, self-confidence or power.<sup>19</sup> The learning that is involved can be highly emotional, demanding an elevated level of readiness or maturity on the part of managers.<sup>20</sup>

Managers who are trying to improve their behavior and/or develop new skills must also balance their energy between the developmental efforts themselves and the management of others' perceptions about the changes. The fact is that a manager's reputation often lags behind whatever the reality of that individual's behavior might be. A senior executive interviewed described this challenge as it related to one potential derailer:

He seems to be relaxed, laid-back, seems not to work hard. Actually he is capable of working very hard, when pushed. He built up a negative reputation by having this relaxed attitude, nobody would believe it if he tried to change. The built-up reputation dominated actual behavior. He does work harder and better than he used to, but there is no perception of it in the organization. I know what he does and how he's improved because I am close enough to see it. But the internal perception of him remains the same.

Derailment remains a useful lens which can be used to examine the leadership function in today's organizations. Focusing on what derails managers can be a tool for bringing to the surface the collective beliefs and values executives hold about what is important in the selection and development of future leaders. This awareness can lead to a greater emphasis on leadership development. In the context of globalization, new employment relationships and fast-paced change, such an emphasis on development is more critical than ever before. Given the enduring nature of derailment themes and the developmental pathways they imply, there is merit in increasing such organizational attention.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> M. McCall and M. Lombardo, *Off the Track: Why and How Successful Executives Get Derailed*, Center for Creative Leadership Technical Report #21, (Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership, 1983); A. Morrison, R. White, and E. Van Velsor, *Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Can Women Make it to the Top of America's Largest Corporations?* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1987); M. Lombardo and C. McCauley, *The Dynamics of Management Derailment*, Center for Creative Leadership Technical Report #34, (Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> McCall and Lombardo, *op.cit.*

<sup>3</sup> Morrison, White, and Van Velsor, *op.cit.*

<sup>4</sup> Lombardo and McCauley, *op.cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Although we recognize that differences do exist among the value orientations of the different European cultures, it was not practical for us to separate the six European countries for purposes of these analyses. First, we did not have a large enough sample of interviews to make the number of interviews significant in any one country. Second, many of the organizations in which we conducted interviews were located in more than one country. Given the fact that organizational culture may be as strong an influence in some situations as is national culture, it would not seem legitimate to split company data along national culture lines. In order to allow differences to emerge from the European data, we chose not to use classification schemes developed from previous research (such as McCall and Lombardo, 1983), but instead examined the European data for common themes across the interviews, without reference to the categories produced by earlier U.S.-based research. We then compared the American data to both the European and the early (U.S.) research categories, looking for differences and themes that may exist across countries and over time. One source of possible bias in this study could be the absence of European researchers on the data analysis team. Although we did use European interviewers, the interpretations and conclusions in this paper are drawn from the experience and frameworks of a core research team comprised of Americans.

<sup>6</sup> There also are great similarities, over time and across U.S. and E.U. companies, in why derailed managers were seen as successful in the first place. As in the early research reported by McCall and Lombardo, recently derailed executives in Europe were seen as having strong business or technical expertise early on, as being exceptionally intelligent and strong communicators and problem solvers. Derailed managers in the U.S. in the 1994 sample were seen as successful early on because of their intelligence, polished self-presentation, business and technical expertise, hard work and ability to motivate others.

<sup>7</sup> Small differences in percentages are not discussed in this paper because of the small sampled sizes in most of the interview studies.

<sup>8</sup> Geert Hofstede and M. Sami Kassem,

*European Contributions to Organization Theory* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1976); G. Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE Publications, 1984); G. Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations* (Berkshire, England: McGraw-Hill, 1991);

<sup>9</sup> In the questionnaire-based study done by Lombardo and McCauley, problems with interpersonal relationships were correlated with the likelihood of derailment in some organizations, but not in others.

<sup>10</sup> McCall and Lombardo, *op.cit.*; Lombardo and McCauley, *op.cit.*

<sup>11</sup> B. Kovach, "The Derailment of Fast-Track Managers," *Organizational Dynamics*, Autumn 1986; McCall and Lombardo, *op.cit.*

<sup>12</sup> R. Kaplan, W. Drath, and J. Kofodimos, *Beyond Ambition* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> McCall and Lombardo, *op.cit.*

<sup>14</sup> Lombardo and McCauley, *op.cit.*

<sup>15</sup> Although senior managers in the earliest research did not directly attribute derailment to having a narrow functional orientation, McCall & Lombardo's comparison of the career histories of successful and derailed managers showed that deraillers were far more likely to have had the same set of experiences over and over and that managers who continued to be seen as successful had been in a wide variety of jobs.

<sup>16</sup> In this, our research confirms the results reported by G. Ekvall and J. Arvonen, "Leadership Profiles, Situation and Effectiveness," *Creativity and Innovation Management*, 3, 1994, 139-161. Using large samples of managers from different countries, industries, functions and levels, these researchers found unequivocal support for a three factor model of leadership effectiveness, incorporating the well-known task and relationship oriented behaviors and adding a third factor, related to change orientation.

<sup>17</sup> Hofstede and Kassem, *op.cit.*; Hofstede, *op.cit.*, 1984; Hofstede, *op.cit.*, 1991; Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture*, (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1981); M.H. Hoppe, *A Comparative Study of Country Elites: International Differences in Work-related Values and Learning and Their Implications for Management Training and Development*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1990; Fons Trompenaars, *Riding the Waves of Culture* (Great Britain: The Economist Books, 1993); H.C. Triandis and R. Bontempo, "The Measurement of the Etic Aspects of Individualism and Collectivism across Cultures," *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 3(3) 1986, 257-267; H.C. Triandis, C. McCusker, and C.H. Hui, "Multimethod Probes of Individualism and Collectivism," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 59(5), 1993, 1006-1020.

<sup>18</sup> E. Jaques, *A General Theory of Bureaucracy* (London: Halsted Press, 1976); E. Jaques and S. Clement, *Executive Leadership* (New York, NY: Blackwell, 1991); Hofstede, *op.cit.*, 1991.

<sup>19</sup> W. Drath, *Why Managers Have Trouble*

*Empowering: A Theoretical Perspective Based on Concepts of Adult Development*, Technical Report No. 155 (Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> Kaplan, et al., op.cit.; J. Conger, *Learning to Lead: The Art of Transforming Managers into*

*Leaders* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1992); C.J. Palus and W.H. Drath, *Evolving Leaders: A Model for Promoting Leadership in Programs*, Report No. 165 (Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership, 1995).

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