



5 Leadership Derailers That Sabotage High Performers

Why Capable Leaders Get in Their Own Way – and How to Stop

Most leadership development focuses on building new skills. But the leaders I work with don't usually have a skills problem. They have a self-awareness problem. They're smart, capable, and driven – and they're also doing things under pressure that undermine their effectiveness without realizing it.

In the Hogan Development Survey (HDS), these behaviors are called derailers. They're the tendencies that emerge when you're stressed, tired, or not paying attention to how you're showing up. Everyone has them. The leaders who perform at the highest level aren't the ones without derailers – they're the ones who know what their derailers are and manage them proactively.

1. Moving Too Fast to Listen

Related HDS themes: **Excitable / Bold**

Strength: **Decisiveness**

Overused: **Steamrolling**

Leaders with high energy and ambition often process quickly and make decisions before others have finished thinking. They interpret this as decisiveness. Their teams experience it as being steamrolled. The pattern looks like this: the leader walks into a meeting with a clear point of view, asks for input, and then moves forward with their original plan regardless of what was said. They believe they listened. Their team believes they didn't.

Try this: Before your next leadership meeting, commit to not stating your position until you've heard from everyone else. Not as a technique – as a genuine practice of letting other perspectives shape your thinking before you anchor the room.

2. Avoiding Conflict Until It Explodes

Related HDS themes: Dutiful / Diligent

Strength: Kindness

Overused: Conflict avoidance

Some of the most well-liked leaders are also the most conflict-avoidant. They value harmony, they want to be seen as fair and supportive, and they will tolerate underperformance or misalignment for months rather than have an uncomfortable conversation. The problem isn't that they're kind. It's that the unaddressed issues build pressure until they either surface in a crisis or the leader finally snaps and delivers feedback that's disproportionate to the moment.

Try this: Identify the one conversation you've been avoiding the longest. Schedule it within the next week. Prepare by writing down the specific behavior, its impact, and what you need to change. Keep it factual and forward-looking.

3. Perfectionism That Paralyzes the Team

Related HDS themes: Diligent

Strength: High standards

Overused: Perfectionism

Meticulous leaders who hold high standards often create environments where nothing is ever good enough. They review every deliverable in detail. They catch errors others miss. They're rarely satisfied. This produces excellent work – and exhausted, disempowered teams. The derailer isn't the high standard. It's the inability to distinguish between situations that require their standard and situations where 'good enough' is genuinely good enough.

Try this: For one week, track every time you provide feedback on someone's work. Categorize each instance as 'critical quality issue' or 'preference.' You may find that most of your corrections are preferences, not quality issues.

4. Being the Smartest Person in the Room

Related HDS themes: Bold / Mischievous



Strength: Intelligence

Overused: Intellectual dominance

Leaders who built their careers on technical expertise or intellectual horsepower often struggle to shift from being the person with the best answer to being the person who draws the best answer out of others. They interrupt. They correct. They solve problems that their team should be solving. They believe they're being helpful. Their teams experience it as being told they're not smart enough.

Try this: In your next three meetings, count how many times you provide an answer versus ask a question. If the ratio is higher than 1:3, you're likely over-functioning. Your role at the senior level is to develop thinking in others, not to demonstrate your own.

5. Mistaking Activity for Progress

Related HDS themes: Excitable / Diligent



Strength: Productivity

Overused: Busyness

High-performing leaders are often highly productive. They move fast, manage large workloads, and check things off the list. The derailer emerges when activity becomes a substitute for strategic thinking. The leader fills every hour with meetings, decisions, and deliverables – and never creates the space to step back and ask whether they're working on the right things.

Try this: Block 90 minutes on your calendar this week with no agenda other than thinking. No email, no Slack, no deliverables. Ask yourself: what are the three most important things I should be focused on this quarter, and how much of my actual time is going to them?

THE PATTERN BEHIND THE PATTERNS

All five of these derailers share something in common: they're strengths that have been overused. Decisiveness becomes steamrolling. Kindness becomes conflict avoidance. High standards become perfectionism. Intelligence becomes intellectual dominance. Productivity becomes busyness.

The work isn't about eliminating these tendencies – they're part of what made you successful. The work is about recognizing when a strength has crossed the line into a liability, and developing the self-awareness to pull it back before it damages your relationships and results.

If you recognized yourself in any of these patterns, that's not a problem. That's the beginning of the most important leadership development work you'll do.

About the Author: Jamie O'Brien is the founder of J. O'Brien Coaching and a certified Hogan practitioner. With 19+ years of experience in organizational development, talent strategy, and executive coaching, he helps leaders close the gap between intention and impact.