

**SAMPLE**

**HOW HIGHER-ED  
LEADERS DERAIL:  
A SURVIVAL GUIDE  
FOR LEADERS**

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*with*

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# FOREWORD

*by Pat Sanaghan, Amit Mrig, and Daniel Fusch*

Leadership matters; rarely has it mattered more. Facing enrollment, financial, and other challenges, institutions need creative, courageous, and effective people throughout their middle management and executive roles. In many ways, the challenges facing institutional leaders are similar to the challenges famed explorers Lewis and Clark encountered during their expedition across the Western half of the United States. Today's leaders are traversing unknown territory without a map and are racing against the clock.

When we lead in the absence of a map, often we rely too heavily on what we already know or think we know well. We fall back on tradition, losing sight of the creativity and the risks we need to take now. We rely more heavily on “smartship” than leadership. This is a tendency we see in organizations across all industries, but we are especially prone to it in higher education because of the unique weight we assign to hierarchy and tradition.

## The Peril of Smartship

In higher ed, there is a widely-held myth that the smartest person in the room should lead. Therefore, we often take for granted that someone who is smart *can* lead, and we don't take steps to develop or prepare our people for leadership positions. Many mid-career leaders in academia are placed in leadership positions too quickly and without adequate support. They may rely too heavily on a mentor, or freeze in the face of difficult decisions, finding

themselves in over their heads, and find themselves isolated and derailing.

All leaders are smart, but not all smart people are leaders. Too much focus on IQ and not enough on EQ (emotional intelligence) creates the conditions for toxic leadership. Things are moving too fast and are too complex for one person to figure it out, no matter how smart. Effective leaders trust their people, convene appropriate stakeholders to help make sense of the path ahead, and seek regular and open feedback. There is a humility and creativity needed in leadership, especially in an industry changing as rapidly as higher education.

The emphasis on how smart someone is vs. how effective they are as a *leader* is especially pervasive in higher education, which as an industry is:

1. characterized by formality and hierarchy
2. highly focused on credentials
3. not good at asking for help
4. risk averse

These characteristics of higher-ed institutions make leadership in this sector both different and difficult, fostering four leadership dynamics that are especially hard to identify, address, and resolve in an academic setting: *derailment*, *seduction of the leader*, *arrogant leadership*, and *micromanagement*.

## The Formality of Higher Ed

Higher education's emphasis on position, formality, and hierarchy can create an organizational culture in a college

or university where those with less power and influence often have great difficulty communicating anything but positive or benign information to those who have more power and influence. The hierarchies in postsecondary institutions prevent information from flowing up swiftly from the front lines to the leader. And the concern with titles, ceremony, and proper decorum creates barriers between different levels in the institution. “Madame President, “Mr. President,” “Madame Provost” ... The expectations around respectful and formal communication and the difficulty in approaching leaders with open and candid feedback can foster a “seduction of the leader” dynamic, in which leaders do not receive accurate and timely intel about how matters actually are. This in turn stalls quick action and decisive decision making.

Junior faculty and staff especially may have difficulty sharing honest feedback or contrary views to those voiced by more senior staff or tenured faculty. But as these junior employees are often those interacting most often with students, they have critical and necessary intel to share. Yet the formality of higher education means that their opinion carries little weight and leaders rarely include them in departmental meetings or proactively seek their input.

Leaders in the higher education environment often lack the awareness of this dynamic that they need in order to subvert it. As a result, *the seduction of the leader* occurs: leaders swiftly get surrounded by either sycophants or by competent employees who believe their opinions to be unwelcome and consequently do not share them. Seduced into believing matters are going much more smoothly than they actually are, leaders often learn about and have the opportunity to respond to issues and new challenges far too late.

## Emphasis on Credentials

The very elements that make academia strong also make it vulnerable. In higher education, enormous emphasis is placed on individual intellectual achievement, credentials, and skeptical thinking. Academics are incentivized to publish, to be declarative in their assertions, and to approach change or alternate views with skepticism. “Being right” matters—a lot.

An academic with impressive credentials and publications can move up the ranks quickly in one area of the institution, but this career path doesn’t provide a “view from the balcony” or a holistic perspective on the institution and its efforts. This makes it difficult both to develop a coherent vision of the future for their department, division, or college—and to organize and lead efforts across units.

The qualities that make for a distinguished researcher or scholar don’t often translate to being a good leader. Higher ed prioritizes and incentivizes individual achievement over team achievement. But leadership is a team sport, not an individual one. The emphasis on individual, intellectual achievement in higher ed creates an environment in which arrogant (or seemingly arrogant) leaders can thrive for a time.

But the traits exhibited by arrogant leaders are exactly the traits we *don’t* need if institutions are going to confront the complex challenges facing them and both survive and thrive in the years ahead. Highly credentialed but ineffective leaders often fail to listen to their colleagues and to seek fresh perspectives; they may believe they already understand the landscape fully and have all the answers. In turn, colleagues stop participating in meetings

and discussions, believing their contributions will not be valued or received well.

This creates a toxic dynamic. We need leaders instead who can set their ego aside and seek input from others—leaders who recognize that they have only one perspective and that by themselves, they have only limited access to information. Ron Heifetz writes that most leaders “die with their mouths open,” meaning that we talk too much and listen too little, forgetting that we are each equipped with two ears and only one mouth.

## Not Good at Asking for Help

Leaders frequently derail in higher education, crashing mid-career and failing to live up to the potential they were assumed to have. Even college presidencies frequently crash; the turnover at the top can be daunting to read about or experience. And one of the ten leading reasons why presidents and leaders at all levels of the organization derail is that they fail to ask for help.

There is a myth pervasive in higher education that asking for help shows indecision, incompetence, or weakness—that a leader should already know everything they need to know to move forward and navigate the complexities of their position. When leaders, especially new leaders, finally reach out for help and advice, it is often too late.

The irony is that in higher education, perhaps more than any other industry, help is readily available. The collegial nature of most college campuses means that most leaders have access to colleagues or staff who would gladly provide support and assistance—if asked.

Additionally, when a leader *does* ask questions in this collegial environment, this builds trust and shared investment in the work ahead. Asking questions conveys

curiosity and interest, and—counterintuitively—conveys to others that you are smart, that you are engaged in learning and in seeking the best possible answers. Conversely, when a leader doesn't ask questions, others begin to resent the apparent arrogance of the leader (who, they suspect, thinks he/she knows all the answers) and to doubt their discernment and judgment. Losing faith in the leader, they become less likely to offer help and more likely to doubt the leader's decisions.

## Risk Aversion

Academia and the promise of tenure often attracts individuals who are risk averse, and the cultures of academic departments rarely reward risk taking. The Ph.D. program, the dissertation, the “publish or perish” drive toward tenure—these are all endeavors that place enormous pressures on young academics, and the processes by which they advance in their field and career are unforgiving of mistakes or failures. It often appears better to play it safe, knowing your one particular area very deeply and well, rather than attempting genuinely novel research. As a consequence, mid-level academic leaders who progress up the ranks from the faculty often lack a history of failing and learning from failure. Rather than being encouraged to take productive risks and learn from the results, academic leaders are trained to not make mistakes.

Yet risk taking is critical to effective leadership, especially in times when complex challenges require complex and innovative solutions. Risk-averse leaders focus on preventing things from going wrong and are less likely to pursue things that might go right, especially if the path there is uncharted and ambiguous, and the outcome is not yet certain. This type of organizational culture fosters inaction and creates the conditions in which micro-management—one of the most damaging leadership dynamics—surfaces and thrives.

Motivated by fear of failure or public embarrassment, or of being left out of the information loop, micromanagers strive to control their people and processes. They value order rather than innovation and predictability rather than risk. This is a leadership dynamic that not only creates toxic work environments but holds departments back from trying new things and improving. When you're moving quickly, you have to empower your people to be creative, to pilot and iterate and learn quickly, and to risk failure in the service of finding the best available paths forward. People have to be trusted and incentivized to push in their own direction. In this environment, the leader is not "in control," and the leader doesn't have all the answers; they have to rely on the autonomy, perspective, and improvisation of their colleagues.

The risk aversion that is endemic in many institutions of higher education throttles this kind of entrepreneurial, learning culture, choking it before it can really grow. Micromanaging leaders often thrive and retain their positions because they operate as guardians of the status quo.

## Conclusion

Drawing on decades of experience working closely and consulting with leaders at every level of higher education, this book will explore these four dynamics in depth: *derailment*, *seduction of the leader*, *arrogant leadership*, and *micromanagement*. These dynamics are persistent and pervasive in higher education; yet they are rarely discussed or addressed. They need to be; that is why we believe this book is necessary and timely.

Each chapter will unpack the causes and challenges unique to one of these four dynamics—and will offer practical strategies and real solutions to these difficult problems.

The appendix at the end of the book will present a model for conducting a healthy supervisory dialogue. When adopted within a department, unit, or institution, this kind of dialogue builds healthy and empowering partnerships between leaders and their teams, and helps prevent many of the dysfunctional leadership dynamics we will discuss in this book.

We hope you will find this book useful, and use it to grow your own capacity as a leader in your higher-ed career.



# CHAPTER 1

## STEPS TO IDENTIFYING & PREVENTING DERAILMENT

### Overview

Across sectors, it is estimated that upwards of 50% of all leaders and managers fail. The costs of leadership derailment are high, especially when this happens to a senior leader: financial costs, as well as the intangibles of the negative impact on organizational culture, morale, and effectiveness.

With so much at stake, why is it that so many leaders fail? And why aren't more people talking about it? Derailment often remains a taboo topic, discussed behind closed doors.

While the Center for Creative Leadership (C.C.L.) has been one of the research pioneers in the field of leadership derailment for several decades, much of the current research on derailment focuses on the corporate sector—although derailment is also alive and well in higher education. Just as in the corporate world, leadership derailment in higher education occurs when a “youngish” (30-40 years), high-performing, and promising leader unravels and their career becomes undone due to inappropriate and ineffective behaviors. They are either

fired outright or demoted, or their career fizzles out slowly as they hit a leadership plateau that they never recover from. The promise and potential hit a wall.

The good news is that derailment leaves clues; it doesn't just happen overnight. There are distinct behavioral signs that can predict derailment, even if they are often ignored. Often, it's hoped that the ineffective behaviors will magically disappear or that the leader will simply get better over time, perhaps due to maturity or experience.

However, the reality is that leaders tend to get worse without intervention. While the odds of improvement are small, the opportunity exists.

While the dynamics of *presidential* derailment are separate (and addressed specifically in “Preventing Presidential Derailment,” available at [www.academicimpressions.com/preventing-presidential-derailment](http://www.academicimpressions.com/preventing-presidential-derailment)), derailment can affect the entirety of campus leadership. Avoiding it starts with a conversation among campus leaders to understand the complexities embedded in this leadership dynamic. It involves looking directly into the issues and behaviors at the heart of derailment.

## **How to Identify Derailment**

### **“The Mythology of High Potentials”**

High potential employees or “HI Po’s” are a term that human resources and talent management professionals use to describe the top 5% or so of performers who have the talent and skills to move up the career ladder and make a powerful contribution to an organization’s success. The corporate sector uses this term rampantly, and has

mechanisms in place to develop their skill sets and grow their leadership skills, including job rotations, “stretch” assignments, mentor programs, and high profile leadership programs. They invest resources in Hi-Po’s with the hope that it will pay off sometime in the future.

While higher education may not use the same term or processes, Hi-Po’s certainly exist on many campuses, and Hi-Po’s are especially susceptible to the derailment syndrome. The Hi-Po identification and selection process is very predictable and many of these high potentials look and act the same. It can be described as, “I am not sure what it is, but they just look like leaders to me.”

- They have a fair amount of “charisma,” which is what gets them noticed.
- They are ambitious and make it known. They reach out for assignments, “volunteer” to lead a group, team or task force, etc.
- They are quick on their feet, able to articulately answer questions in the moment. What impresses people is not the quality of the answer, but the speed in which they respond.
- They tend to be attractive physically or they have a physical “presence,” which helps them stand out from the crowd.

Hi-Po’s also have many positive traits, such as a strong work ethic, persistence, resilience, and a “can do” attitude. Higher education needs as many high performers as possible, but should be careful in the selection process. The “*they just look like a leader to me*” approach can lead to selecting folks that look good but cannot lead. Their leadership deficiencies can be difficult to catch in time, ending in derailment.

## The Telltale Signs of Derailers: Failure Leaves Clues

### *Over-Reliance on a Sponsor or Patron*

Often a senior leader takes a shine to an assertive, task-focused young leader who produces results fast. This initial appeal can become a protective cocoon which insulates the emerging leader when they start to hit some bumps. The young leader doesn't develop their skills simply because they don't have to. Unfortunately, such protection does not last forever, and when the senior leader moves on, the young leader, and their limitations, are exposed. They do not have the skills to lead others when their guardian leaves.

#### CASE STUDY: THE SHADOW OF THE SPONSOR

Several years ago, I worked with a President and his senior team, who had a derailing leader. The young leader was the newly appointed CFO, named "Paul," who wanted to make a splash early and fast. He'd had some early career success regarding finances, and saw himself as a change agent. He was also a favorite of the president—which everyone knew, including Paul.

Unfortunately, he couldn't connect with any of the cabinet members and constantly complained about the "old boys" network. In his effort to lobby for the areas he was in charge of, he failed to develop a systemic view of the campus. He wanted to make things happen, but they just weren't, and in his frustration became aggressive in meetings, discourteous to others, and couldn't keep commitments.

THE SHADOW OF THE SPONSOR, CONTINUED

The president offered excuses for his behavior by saying, “He is trying to create a sense of excellence” or “He has very high standards for himself and others,” but lots of people got bruised along the way. Paul’s colleagues all agreed that he was quite smart and had a great work ethic, but they found it very difficult to work with him for a host of reasons. It boiled down to the fact that they didn’t trust him, his intentions, or his aspirations. They did not like the way he treated people, and it seemed that he was “allowed” to behave in ways that were inappropriate given the campus’s collegial culture. A yearly employee engagement survey conducted by the VP of Human Resources showed the scores for most divisions were quite positive, but unfortunately, Paul’s division’s scores were abysmal. This validated survey created a plain, data-based picture of a division in deep trouble.

I wanted to understand his perspective about the situation and went into the conversation both eager and curious. I was struck by several things: Paul was a terrible listener and talked at me most of the time; he took no ownership for the data at all and communicated that a few disgruntled employees had “poisoned the well.” I mentioned that this divisional survey included almost 100 people, so I found it difficult to see how a handful of people could produce such dismal results with a validated instrument. He simply ignored my comment. He had an astonishingly positive perception of himself and belittled those who didn’t “get it.”

I then met with the President to share my findings. He insisted that Paul could be successful, if people would just move forward and start supporting him. I strongly disagreed with his perspective.

## THE SHADOW OF THE SPONSOR, CONTINUED

I shared some information that I received from the Vice President of Human Resources: Paul's division had almost 90% turnover in the first year. Good people fled and sought other positions throughout the campus, or left the institution for other campuses. The president argued that there was a lot of dead wood in that division and Paul was doing the tough work needed to achieve excellence. However, what he didn't know was that Paul was now on his second cadre of people, all selected by Paul, who were beginning to leave the division. It was a toxic environment, and everyone on campus knew this.

Paul lasted one more year, during which time two Vice Presidents resigned, and the Board got involved in the situation. It took over a year to find an appropriate replacement for him, because the word on the street was the division was dysfunctional and damaged.

The campus learned valuable lessons about the price that people pay for the little that derailers contribute. If the President had better listened to the information he received, and communicated in strong and clear terms that Paul's kind of leadership was not effective or wanted, the situation might have been salvageable. But his fondness for Paul got in the way of doing the right thing and communicated to everyone on campus that certain people could get away with that kind of negative leadership.

### ***Arrogance: The Mother of all Derailers***

Tim Irwin explains this in his excellent book *Derailed: Five Lessons Learned from Catastrophic Failures of Leadership*, accurately identifying one of the pervasive flaws that derailers possess. Other researchers, too, have highlighted arrogance as a “fatal flaw.”

As Irwin explains, “Arrogance is a career killer.” Higher education has its fair share of arrogant leaders who believe they are smarter than everyone else. They suck the air out of every conversation they have, seem to know everything, and are closed to other’s perspectives or honest feedback about their own ideas and leadership effectiveness.

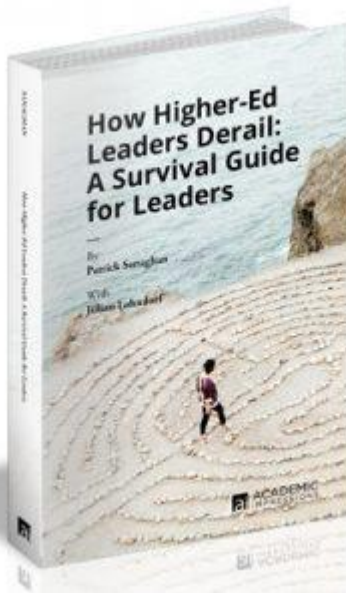
Arrogance isn’t quiet or subtle; it’s as obvious as a cold blast of air and equally distasteful. When interviewing new people, hiring managers need to pay attention to behaviors such as:

- Interrupting.
- Not asking any questions (because arrogant people already know the answers).
- Providing simple and “obvious” solutions to complex and thorny issues.
- Talking way too much for way too long (arrogant people are horrible listeners).
- Talking a lot about themselves, their accomplishments and how they have added value to their organizations.

## READ MORE

We hope you have enjoyed this complimentary sample from *How Higher-Ed Leaders Derail*.

You can purchase the entire book [here](#).



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