Local Elected Officials' Leadership Derailment

By Lauren Dula, Maja Husar Holmes, Willow S. Jacobson, and Kristina Marty

CONTENTS

What Is This Study About, and Why Does It Matter?

Although many studies examine effective leadership in the public sector, including in local government, little is known about behaviors that derail public leaders.[1] Yet understanding this topic is important. When local elected officials are derailed they are not the only ones who pay a price. Trust in government, the legitimacy of the democratic process, and the credibility of public actions may be undermined.[2] Using data from focus groups conducted with local elected officials across North Carolina, this bulletin examines (1) how local elected officials describe leadership derailment and (2) the behaviors they believe contribute to it. We find leadership derailment has negative implications not just for individuals but also for governing bodies. This is particularly relevant in North Carolina local governments, where local elected boards, rather than an elected chief executive, are responsible for making policy and strategic decisions for local governments.[3] Our results suggest that a range of problematic behaviors can derail elected leaders. Identifying these behaviors and tailoring training efforts to help elected officials avoid them may reduce the incidence of derailment and associated personal, institutional, and community costs.

What Is Leadership Derailment, and What Does Past Research Say About It?

Someone can be an ineffective leader without necessarily being derailed.[4] Adapting Lombardo, Ruderman, and McCauley's private-sector definition of leadership derailment to the public sector,[5] we define a derailed elected leader as someone who has failed unexpectedly (after officially taking office) due to intervening actions or events that have interrupted the anticipated trajectory of the leader's political career.

Existing research on derailment has primarily focused on the private sector. Research on private-sector career derailment suggests that it can result in individual costs, such as when a leader (1) voluntarily leaves a position; (2) is fired, forced to retire or resign, or demoted; or (3) misses an opportunity for promotion.[6] Organizations also suffer when employees do not reach their full potential.[7] For example, several studies report that organizations may fail to meet profit goals or programmatic objectives.[8] In addition, derailment often involves turnover, with its attendant sunk costs of training, mentoring, and hiring new employees.[9]

Research in the private sector has linked several broad categories of behaviors to career derailment. One example is dysfunctional interpersonal behavior, which includes treating others poorly, overlooking others' good work and input, ineffectively handling disagreements with one's supervisor, lacking composure under pressure, having emotional outbursts,

---

1. See, for example, Dula et al., "What She Said, What He Said"; Vogel and Masal, "Public Leadership"; and Vogelsang-Coombs and Miller, "Developing the Governance Capacity."

2. Downe et al., "Determinants of Public Trust."

3. Stenberg, *County and City Managers.*

4. Pendleton and Furnham, *Leadership: All You Need to Know,* 192–93.

5. Lombardo, Ruderman, and McCauley, "Explanations of Success and Derailment," 199.

6. Carson et al., "Dysfunctional Interpersonal Tendencies"; Kruse-Smith, "Managers' Political Skill."

7. DeVries and Kaiser, "Going Sour in the Suite"; Hogan, Hogan, and Kaiser, "Management Derailment**;** Lombardo, Ruderman, and Cynthia, "Explanations of Success and Derailment," 212.

8. Carson et al., "Interpersonal Tendencies, Derailment Potential, and Turnover"; Phillip W. Braddy et al., "Leader Behaviors"; Gentry et al., "Displaying Empathic Concern."

9. Hogan and Hogan, "Assessing Leadership."

bullying, intimidating, and acting arrogantly.[10] Betraying trust—by saying one thing but doing another; making excuses or blaming others for mistakes; or hiding, managing, or withholding information in a self-serving manner—can also derail a person's career.[11] Career derailment has been linked to inflexibility, manifestations of which include having trouble adapting to new plans, programs, or priorities;[12] being resistant to feedback; failing to learn from mistakes;[13] and not adjusting to the culture of the organization.[14] Being disconnected from key organizational tasks, such as by being removed from day-to-day organizational operations or by lacking follow-through or attention to details, can lead to career challenges as well.[15] Finally, career derailment has been linked to a lack of empathy[16] and an absence of political skills, such as social astuteness, networking ability, interpersonal influence, and sincerity.[17]

Study Overview

This study is based on data from eighteen focus groups with elected members of municipal and county boards from across North Carolina, conducted from August 2018 to January 2019. Reflecting a geographic cross-section of North Carolina, participants included local leaders from fifteen of the sixteen regional councils of governments in the state.[18] Of North Carolina's 100 counties, sixty-seven had at least one of their elected officials participate in the focus groups. A total of 132 local elected officials participated in the eighteen focus groups (forty-one identified as women; ninety-one identified as men). The number of participants in the focus groups ranged from two to sixteen. Participants were 38–87 years old (median age 64.5). Their experience in elected office ranged from less than six months to 37 years of service (median 6 years). Almost all participants reported they were white (88 percent), and slightly over two-thirds represented rural counties.

These focus group discussions were the initial proceedings in a wider, more comprehensive training needs assessment study of local elected officials conducted by the Center for Public Leadership and Governance at the University of North Carolina School of Government. Outside facilitators and scribes conducted the focus groups to minimize the possibility that respondents' answers would be biased by the research team or the School's affiliation. The research team analyzed the focus-group transcripts and grouped the data by different themes.

---

10. Furnham and Taylor, *The Dark Side of Behavior at Work*; Leslie and Van Velsor, *A Look at Derailment Today,* 16–23; Lombardo and Eichinger, "Rescuing Derailed Executives"; Van Velsor and Leslie, "Why Executives Derail."

11. Carson et al., "Dysfunctional Interpersonal Tendencies," 293.

12. Braddy et al., "Leader Behaviors"; Carson et al., "Dysfunctional Interpersonal Tendencies," 293.

13. Van Velsor and Leslie, "Why Executives Derail."

14. Van Velsor and Leslie, "Why Executives Derail."

15. Carson et al., "Dysfunctional Interpersonal Tendencies," 293; Lombardo and Eichinger, "Rescuing Derailed Executives."

16. Gentry et al., "Displaying Empathic Concern."

17. Kruse-Smith, "Managers' Political Skill."

18. The focus group originally planned in the sixteenth council of governments could not be held because of challenges resulting from Hurricane Florence.

In the focus groups, respondents were asked to provide examples of elected leaders who were derailed, including descriptions of what, according to the respondents, the officials did or did not do that led to their derailment. Peer evaluations of an individual's behaviors are better predictors of career derailment than self-evaluation.[19] Therefore, questions for the focus groups were designed to encourage participants to reflect on other elected officials who had been derailed rather than on personal challenges that the participants themselves might have faced. Across all focus groups, participants provided a total of ninety-seven examples of derailment. In slightly more than three-quarters of the examples, participants claimed first-hand knowledge of the derailment.

Findings

Costs of Leadership Derailment

Consistent with past research, the focus group participants distinguished between derailed leaders and ones who were simply ineffective. They also identified several costs of leadership derailment. We list the most common.

Loss of Elected Office

Derailed officials were no longer in elected office, either because they resigned from elected office, did not run for reelection, or sought reelection but lost. Respondents noted, "They voted him [a derailed leader] out!" and "He [another derailed leader] resigned and his career was ruined."

Legal Action

The most serious personal cost of leader derailment for elected officials was facing legal consequences for unethical or even criminal behavior. According to one respondent, "when a man is elected, sometimes he needs to read the ethics to start off with. Someone will want to give you a free lunch, and it grows into more. And after a while you're pleading guilty of a felony. You've got temptations you didn't have before you were elected."

Damaged Relationships with Constituents or Other Board Members

For local leaders elected to serve and represent citizens, damaged relationships can be detrimental, especially to those hoping to get reelected. Several respondents described elected officials who had lost others' trust or had damaged their public image with their derailing behaviors.

Board Inaction

Board inaction is a potential collective cost of leadership derailment. The circumstances of the derailment can hinder the board's ability to make policy or legislative decisions. In some cases, the board or individual board members are simply unable to focus on the legislative agenda. Describing such a case, one respondent said, "It got to the point where it was all disagreements [with this situation] and nothing got done, and in the end, all of the issues were left open with no explanations to the town."

---

19. Braddy et al., "A Multi-Analytic Method."

Behaviors That Contribute to Leadership Derailment

Respondents discussed a variety of behaviors they had observed to contribute to leadership derailment. We describe the most common in detail.

Lack of Integrity

Numerous participants believed that acting without integrity could lead to derailment, although the specific types of behavior respondents used to illustrate a leader's lack of integrity varied. For instance, many mentioned elected officials who used their offices to advance their own interests rather than those of their communities, though these leaders had not actually done anything illegal. As one participant succinctly described, "[This leader made] decisions that are not best for the town, but for personal gain."

Other respondents provided examples of leaders who were derailed because they lacked transparency. Still others discussed instances in which elected officials were derailed after they had acted dishonestly in their political roles, in some cases even breaking the law. One participant's example involved "an elected official who abused the office and embezzled. He thought he was above the law and could do what he wanted. He misused property and thought he could justify it. But he was charged and [voted] out of office." A few participants described elected officials who behaved in illegal or other questionable ways unrelated to their jobs, including elected officials who had extramarital affairs or struggled with substance abuse. As a result of these problematic behaviors, leaders lost the trust of their fellow board members and constituents, ultimately undermining their ability to govern.

Decision-Making without Adequate Knowledge or Preparation

Several participants shared stories of elected leaders who were derailed because they made a decision without a sufficient understanding of a topic: "Most of the time what causes someone to be derailed is not being present, something they didn't prepare for or they did not do their homework for." When discussing leaders like this, respondents provided examples of elected officials who planned poorly, had unrealistic expectations, or lacked a comprehensive understanding of local government laws, policy issues, processes, or structures. These oversights ultimately compromised their effectiveness as leaders.

Failure to Sufficiently Consider Stakeholder Opinions

Elected officials also were derailed because they failed to sufficiently consider or even actively ignored the viewpoints of key stakeholders when making policy or legislative decisions. Similar to acting without integrity, the specific behaviors respondents cited when describing this general problem varied. Some respondents talked about the challenges that arise when a leader does not take others' perspectives into account. According to one participant, "these leaders do not listen to others and may be characterized as being dismissive of others' ideas." Other respondents described officials who were derailed when they made decisions that were contrary to what the majority of their constituents explicitly wanted or needed. In providing an example of one of these leaders, one participant commented, "They weren't listening to the people. They were listening to themselves more than the public."

A final group of respondents felt that leaders who primarily consider the opinions of special interest groups when making decisions risk derailment. In the words of one of these participants, "we need to get special interests to stop filling the pockets of our [local] elected officials."

Dissemination of Problematic, Untrue, or Unfair Information
Several respondents focused on the ways in which information dissemination can derail elected officials. While the content may be shared through social media or traditional news sources, many participants commented that the rise of social media had made this issue more challenging. Sometimes leaders had been derailed by their own words. As an example, one respondent reported: "It's our mayor [who was derailed] that attacks citizens. . . . [On Facebook,] he was asking for someone to spit on another person's face. He is very toxic." In other cases, respondents were concerned about the accuracy of the information that others were disseminating. Reflecting these sentiments, one participant commented, "I have no doubt that when I get an article written about me, I will be misquoted."

Lack of Media Savvy
Another related factor contributing to derailment was some leaders' general lack of sophistication when using media. These leaders were derailed because they did not manage their social media presence effectively or failed to recognize the importance of media relations. As one respondent explained: "I would like to add media management, messaging, and marketing, that the whole world has changed. That's just not at the national level but at the local as well."

Other Problematic Behaviors
Other behaviors that respondents mentioned included reacting emotionally or without thinking; behaving in a highly political way; being arrogant, rude, or egotistical; lacking focus; resisting change; failing to cultivate allies; acting rigidly; engaging in power struggles; being inaccessible to constituents; and lacking long-term vision or commitment to long-term planning.

Lessons from This Study

Local elected officials play critical roles designing policies and implementing public programs across the country. Our study offers several important lessons for these leaders as well as those who work with them.

Lesson 1: Derailment of an elected leader affects more than the derailed individual. The entire community can suffer when a governing body's progress is stalled due to an individual's derailing behaviors. A board's inability to focus on important public policy issues can result in negative outcomes such as missed economic development opportunities, among others, and it can diminish citizens' trust in government.

Lesson 2: While elected public officials can be derailed for violating widely accepted professional norms across sectors, their political careers may suffer, too, if they ignore public-service values like ensuring transparency and inclusion in decision-making processes. In addition, politicians can get into trouble for their missteps outside of their elected offices, which suggests that people often hold public officials to a different standard than leaders in the private sector.

Lesson 3: Elected officials need to be deliberate with media, especially social media. In the public sector, leaders' social media posts are often scrutinized. Constituents may have a difficult time differentiating an elected official's personal views from the official stances of governing bodies, potentially leading to problems not only for the individual disseminating the information but also for the government as a whole.

Lesson 4: Governing bodies need to ensure that training and orientation programs for local elected officials cover behaviors that can lead to derailment in addition to strategies for effective leadership. Raising awareness about problematic behaviors may help individuals avoid derailment and the personal and collective costs associated with it.

Lesson 5: Career public professionals can help reduce the likelihood of elected officials' derailment by orienting their newly elected board members to their jurisdiction's laws, policies, and procedures.

Bibliography

Braddy, Phillip W., Janaki Gooty, John W. Fleenor, and Francis J. Yammarino. "Leader Behaviors and Career Derailment Potential: A Multi-Analytic Method Examination of Rating Source and Self–Other Agreement." *The Leadership Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (April 2014): 373–90. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2013.10.001.

Carson, Marisa Adelman, Linda Rhoades Shanock, Eric D. Heggestad, Ashley M. Andrew, S. Douglas Pugh, and Matthew Walter. "The Relationship between Dysfunctional Interpersonal Tendencies, Derailment Potential Behavior, and Turnover." *Journal of Business and Psychology* 27, no. 3 (September 2012): 291–304. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-011-9239-0.

DeVries, David L., and Robert B. Kaiser. "Going Sour in the Suite: What You Can Do about Executive Derailment." Workshop presented at the Maximizing Executive Effectiveness meeting of the Human Resources Planning Society, Miami, FL, November 2003.

Downe, James, Richard Cowell, Alex Chen, and Karen Morgan. "The Determinants of Public Trust in English Local Government: How Important Is the Ethical Behaviour of Elected Councillors?" *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 79, no. 4 (December 2013): 597–617. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852313501270.

Dula, Lauren, Maja Husar Holmes, Willow S. Jacobson, and Kristina T. Lambright. "What She Said, What He Said: Local Elected Officials' Views of Effective Leadership Behaviors." *International Journal of Public Leadership* 17, no. 2 (January 1, 2021): 133–44. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPL-10-2020-0107.

Furnham, Adrian, and John Taylor. *The Dark Side of Behaviour at Work: Understanding and Avoiding Employees Leaving, Thieving, and Deceiving.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Gentry, William A., Malissa A. Clark, Stephen F. Young, Kristin L. Cullen, and Lauren Zimmerman. "How Displaying Empathic Concern May Differentially Predict Career Derailment Potential for Women and Men Leaders in Australia." In "Leadership and Emotions," edited by Shane Connelly and Janaki Gooty. Special issue, *The Leadership Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (August 2015): 641–53. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2015.05.003.

Hogan, Robert, and Joyce Hogan. "Assessing Leadership: A View from the Dark Side." *International Journal of Selection and Assessment* 9, no. 1–2 (2001): 40–51. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2389.00162.

Hogan, Joyce, Robert Hogan, and Robert B. Kaiser. "Management Derailment: Personality Assessment and Mitigation." In *American Psychological Association Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology,* edited by Sheldon Zedeck. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2010.

Kruse-Smith, Sandra L. "An Investigation of the Relationship between Managers' Political Skill and Their Likelihood of Career Derailment: A Quantitative Analysis." PhD diss., Cappella University, 2015.

Leslie, Jean B., and Ellen Van Velsor. *A Look at Derailment Today: North America and Europe.* Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership, 1996.

Lombardo, Michael M., and Robert W. Eichinger. "Rescuing Derailed Executives." *Leadership in Action* 8, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 1–5.

Lombardo, Michael M., Marian N. Ruderman, and Cynthia D. McCauley. "Explanations of Success and Derailment in Upper-Level Management Positions." *Journal of Business and Psychology* 2, no. 3 (Spring 1988): 199–216.

Pendleton, David, and Adrian Furnham. *Leadership: All You Need to Know.* 2nd ed. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Stenberg, Carl W. *County and City Managers.* Chapel Hill: UNC School of Government, 2014.

Van Velsor, Ellen, and Jean Brittain Leslie. "Why Executives Derail: Perspectives across Time and Cultures." *Academy of Management Perspectives* 9, no. 4 (November 1995): 62–72. https://doi.org/10.5465/AME.1995.9512032194.

Vogel, Rick, and Doris Masal. "Public Leadership: A Review of the Literature and Framework for Future Research." *Public Management Review* 17, no. 8 (September 2015): 1165–89. https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2014.895031.

Vogelsang-Coombs, Vera, and Melissa Miller. "Developing the Governance Capacity of Local Elected Officials." *Public Administration Review* 59, no. 3 (May–June 1999): 199–217. https://doi.org/10.2307/3109949.