Through the Fire: Using Derailment Research to Lead Change in the COVID-19 Era

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ABSTRACT

The current coronavirus pandemic has created an undeniable crisis in the United States and in virtually all parts of the world. Leaders in all sectors need effective modes of thinking to lead change in this COVID-19 era. In this article, we utilize the concept of derailment to offer perspectives for such leaders. Using relevant interview data from a recent in-depth study (Strietzel, 2020a), we apply the stories and lessons from 25 "derailed" leaders to provide a three-layered approach to leading change while navigating the current crisis. Implications and recommendations for leaders are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The current health crisis has impacted organizations in every industry (Dalton, 2020). In turn, leaders are experiencing extraordinary demands on their time and energy (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020). These challenges, coupled with public outcries to address systemic racial injustice in the midst of a tumultuous presidential election cycle, have created a need for leaders to manage multiple momentous changes and lead through them well (Flowers, 2020). Given the unprecedented circumstances, there is a need for shared wisdom—for mental models and ways of understanding—that will help leaders persevere in such times. D'Auria & De Smet (2020) asserted, "What leaders need during a crisis is not a predefined response plan but behaviors and mindsets that will prevent them from overreacting to yesterday's developments and help them look ahead" (p. 2).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recently, Koehn (2020) reiterated the long-standing notion that leaders are not born, but rather made. She further stressed that leaders are forged in crisis (Koehn, 2020). Although Klann (2003) emphasized that a leader's goal during a crisis should be to reduce loss and maintain predicable operations, such crises can nonetheless shape how leaders develop and grow. This maintenance of operations is echoed by Petriglieri (2020), who stresses that people do not need a visionary leader in tough times, but rather a "holding" leader who acknowledges their emotions and gives followers a sense of context and reality. Yet, as Klann (2003) clarified, leaders must distinguish crisis management from crisis leadership, where the former mistakenly focuses on planning, organizing, staffing, or budgeting and sidesteps the human elements of leadership that play such a large role during a crisis. Given how close to home the virus has come for many, this human element—the needs, emotions, and behaviors of people at all levels of an organization—cannot be sacrificed for a perfect plan to weather this current situation.

The Current Crises

In January 2021, there were over 100 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and more than two million associated deaths worldwide (JHU Medicine, 2021). This far-reaching pandemic is affecting billions of people (even as we are writing this paper). As Americans, the pandemic is not an issue viewed from a distance or experienced secondhand through news media. The threat of a rapidly spreading virus is felt in our neighborhoods, communities, and even our

immediate families. Just as coronavirus concerns have infiltrated nearly every aspect of life and work, the injustices of systemic racism—manifested in the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Brianna Taylor, and many others—are what Williams and Youmans (2020) and others have identified as a second relentless pandemic currently gripping the U.S.

In order to endure such chaos, leaders need an ability to make informed decisions by implementing various patterns of thinking and shared wisdom. Al Saidj et al. (2020) emphasized that decisive leadership is absolutely necessary in such situations. However, the current crises also requires thoughtful and informed—yet timely and intentional—decision making. Existing research does not fully address the chaos of the current environment. And leaders are working hard to draw from any proxy-experiences that might inform their decisions and actions. The world and its leaders are, in a sense, operating in a state of derailment. As such, the lived experiences of leaders who have weathered career derailment can offer valuable insight for the current times.

Derailment Research

Job loss is a familiar topic to most people, but limited research has been conducted on the phenomenon. There are many euphemisms for losing a job, such as "getting fired" or being "laid off." One conceptualization is "derailment," or "an unexpected—and involuntary—stall during a leader's career ascent" (Korn Ferry, 2014, p. 1). Bentz (1985) sought to understand predictive derailment behaviors by mid-managers' with potential to progress to executive leadership at Sears, Roebuck and Company. Subsequent research similarly sought to identify leaders' mistakes or personality flaws that lead to job loss (Lombardo et al., 1988; Lombardo & McCauley, 1988; McCall & Lombardo, 1983; Morrison et al., 1987). Many previous derailment studies listed various factors or behaviors—through commission or omission—that contribute to derailment (Leslie & Van Velsor, 1996).

Leslie and Van Velsor (1996) offered four derailment themes that helped to consolidate the types of behaviors that tend to lead to career derailment: (a) problems with interpersonal relationships, (b) failure to meet business objectives, (c) failure to build and lead a team, and (d) inability to change or adapt during a transition. Although most research attributes blame to leaders for their own derailment, Strietzel (2020b) found that derailed leaders tend to attribute their derailments in part or in whole to external factors, such as a supervisor's decision, organizational restructuring, or layoffs due to shrinking finances.

Researchers have only recently considered derailed persons' lived experiences and "lessons learned." Jasinski (2018) found that a fundamental challenge of transitioning through a sudden change in professional status is the confluence of corresponding thoughts and emotions of shifting responsibilities, identities, and daily work rhythms. Further, Strietzel (2020a) found that even when derailed leaders "rebound" by finding another role in the same sector, they experience feelings of vulnerability, shame, and stigma, and engage questions of identity and purpose. Derailment is an upheaval that demands critical evaluation of one's worth, purpose, and professional decisions (Frawley, 2013; Garrison, 2013). Notably but not surprisingly, derailed leaders consistently frame their experiences as tremendous learning opportunities (Sloan, 2018). Said differently, derailment is a career crisis and a catalyst for leadership development and growth.

The disarray of leader derailment is analogous to the type of upheaval experienced by people, especially leaders, across sectors and around the world. As a novel virus and specific situations of racialization, discrimination, and violence have burgeoned into global crises, so has the need for leaders who can manage themselves in crises. Based on recent research, we wondered: *How can derailed leaders' experiences inform the actions of other leaders as they navigate their work amidst a pandemic and beyond*? Or more simply: *What can leaders navigating the COVID-19 era learn from derailment experiences*?

METHODS

We utilized a sub-sample of interview data collected for a recently completed dissertation (Strietzel, 2020a) for our analysis in this study. These interviews were with 25 senior-level higher education administrators (presidents, provosts, vice presidents, deans, etc.) at various institution types across North America.

Participants were recruited through email referrals and invitations in a blend of convenience and purposive sampling (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). We approached the data with a constructivist paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), positioning each participants' lived experiences as valid retrospective reconstructions (Geertz, 1973; Kuhn, 1962). Interviews were conducted and transcribed in 2019. Data were analyzed via open coding, and organized using INVIVO software (Saldaña, 2015). Related words, phrases, and ideas were synthesized into themes, and we sought to collect and analyze data in a trustworthy manner (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

At the time of their interviews, participants' median age was 57, self-reported genders were 13 male and 12 female, with a mean average of 26 years of professional experience. Twenty-one participants self-identified as White/Caucasian and four self-identified as persons of color. Participants held diverse roles, but all were in senior-level positions, defined as serving as—or directly reporting to—a university president or provost. Participants offered forthright and robust descriptions of their derailment experiences. As a secondary analysis for this particular study, the qualitative data offered powerful stories of what it means to traverse and lead through a crisis-laden landscape. Although this study was limited to higher education administrators, specifically those who found leadership roles again, the findings and resulting implications are transferrable to leadership roles regardless of industry, sector, or organization.

FINDINGS

This study centers on our synthesis of participants' perspectives and advice to current and aspiring leaders. We identified three salient themes that leaders can integrate into their leadership strategies in these unprecedented times. We assert that leadership requires novel ways of thinking; the stories and "lessons learned" from these data can help in this regard, specifically when leading change.

Your Purpose: Expectations and Potential

A few participants emphasized the importance of self-awareness while navigating crises. They identified the need for leaders to challenge their expectations and discover their potential when confronted with adversity. Drawing from their experience as a university executive, one participant noted that leadership is:

> *No longer a job for the faint of heart… [because] each and every day you really have to be ready for the unexpected. And while that's always been the case, it is just flying at you now at incredible speed.*

Similarly, another participant advised leaders to, "[B]e mindful. When you are in administration, these jobs are fragile. Things can go wrong, even beyond your control." One participant said that leaders "should be under no delusions that safety is a part of the job…. You don't always have control." Some participants dispelled the notion that leaders ought to expect predictability and control in their work.

Other participants emphasized that understanding their potential for perseverance and success was linked to a sense of purpose. For example, one individual said a "grounding principle" was necessary for effective and persistent leadership, even in chaotic times:

> *If you don't have [a grounding principle], you are not going to last. Because when the day is long, and you are tired, or when you lose your job, or you didn't get the grant that you thought you were going to get, or you have to call a parent about a kid, those are just the really hard days. And if you don't have something bigger to hang on to, you are going to fall into the hole.*

Without a grounding principle or a grander reason to be in leadership, this participant and others believed the weight of adversity would push leaders past their limits, out of their leadership role. Finding a purpose in their work and leadership roles helped participants see their expectations and potential more clearly.

Your Growth: Feedback and Development

Although participants advised budding leaders to develop various skills, an emergent theme was the importance of eliciting feedback. For example, one participant said, "[Do not] take a go-it-alone [approach]…. Rely on your mentor…. Even if you are admired for taking things on and going alone and brave and all that good stuff. In

the end, you probably won't survive." Similarly, another participant recommended leaders "find and stay connected to someone who has gone through administrative battles and landed well…. Seek mentors in confidence who can assist through some of these [challenges]." Still another participant underscored, "One person cannot do it alone…. I sure as heck cannot do it alone." Aside from merely gaining knowledge and acquiring skills, some derailed leaders exhorted others to cultivate mentors who could coach them rather than trying to develop themselves in isolation.

Participants also emphasized the value of receiving constructive (particularly negative) feedback. As one example, a participant offered,

Somebody could sit down with me now and rip apart everything I do, and I would take it as 'Wow, that's great feedback but that is something that I need to work on to be better in that.' As opposed to 'That person doesn't know what they are talking about.'

It was common for participants to consciously receive feedback as a resource for growth and improvement. Some participants mentioned they particularly benefitted from feedback provided by subordinates and peers. One participant said,

If you don't have mechanisms for gathering feedback, you need to try to figure out how to get it. Because the main danger in this kind of position is that people are not going to tell you stuff. You have to go and find it out. They are not trying to deceive you. It is that they are not giving you clues to what is actually happening. They are not trying to deceive you. They are just trying to protect themselves. So, you have to have ways to get information about what's happening. Otherwise, you end up in a situation where, literally, you are without clues. You are clueless; you have no clues about what is going on unless you lean into it, and step into it, and risk asking people to tell you what they really think. And you should do that.

Feedback mechanisms are necessary for informed decisions. Some participants said that the hierarchical or political nature of their organizations and the perceived (or real) risk of providing critical feedback caused them to be insulated from important information.

Participants' advice to other leaders was evidence of their self-confidence or professional maturity, characteristics that they identified as important for effective leadership. Participants admitted that critical feedback could create discouragement, at times. But making it a habit to rely on mentors and elicit feedback from coworkers was viewed as critical components to continuous professional development and gathering valuable information for their leadership decisions.

Your Environment: Relationships and Politics

Some participants approached their post-derailment roles with caution. A few participants referred to their former selves as "naïve," and, post derailment, they trusted people differently. Some participants became cynical and skeptical. One participant emphasized:

Not everybody around you is a friend…. Do this job the way that it is supposed to be done, in the best way it can be done, keeping in mind that we are working with humans. [And] if you want to be in a leadership role, you have to presume that somebody else might want…to take you out.

This participant understood that being an effective leader did not exempt them from betrayal. Another participant said, "Don't assume that others are taking care of your professional standing for you. Administration comes with risks." Similarly, one participant advised, "Take care of yourself," and another said, "Nothing is for certain. Be on your tiptoes every day. Always harbor some questions." Healthy skepticism allowed some leaders to more realistically shape the interpersonal connections and accept the organizational politics they encountered.

Some participants upheld that it was important to cultivate and maintain strategic relationships and political alliances within their organization. During a crisis, participants noted that a proactive approach eased the process over a reactive attempt to recoup social and political capital. One participant emphasized the importance of establishing "strong working relationships." The most important relationship within one's place of employment is arguably the direct supervisor. One participant said it this way:

The most important relationship you have [within your work] is with your supervisor, and no matter how much you might talk to him or her, or no matter how crazy it can get, do not lose track of that relationship.

On one hand, this participant said a supervisor is the most important relationship to maintain at work, regardless of "how crazy it can get" or how hectic the workplace environment. On the other hand, a crisis offered participants an opportune time stay meaningfully connected to that most-important relationship with their supervisor. Derailed leaders suggested that the health and strength of coworker relationships should not be assumed, but rather cultivated and navigated with an awareness that crises sometimes elicit darker personality characteristics and behaviors.

Derailment prompted participants' reflection and learning. It also prompted some significant changes in their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The advice shared herein was offered from each participants' individual perspective. Additionally, advice borne out of "derailment" experiences has direct and relevant application for other losses, confusion, and stressors that leaders experience in crisis situations, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. To lead amidst pandemic-induced change, leaders might do well to focus on (a) their purpose, (b) their growth, and (c) their environment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERS

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted numerous organizations and industries. This chaos parallels career derailment but at a systematic level. By exploring qualitative findings from 25 "derailed" executives, we provide leaders with recommendations to help navigate the COVID-19 era. Although the following recommendations could be appropriately utilized by leaders at any time, study participants focused on specific themes for navigating and mitigating crisis. As such, we recommend leaders prioritize three to lead effectively.

First, in the midst of a pandemic, leaders need to recalibrate expectations for themselves, their direct reports, and potentially their entire department or organization. Doing this will allow a realistic perspective to positively influence decision making. Toward this end, leaders will necessarily exercise self-awareness during this pandemic. As self-awareness is arguably one of the most critical components of quality leadership (Eurich, 2018), it is crucial for leaders to understand themselves and how their professional identity meshes with the needs of their constituents, the vision of their institution, and the path forward through this crisis. In this way, by reinforcing a sense of purpose, leaders are able to more closely align themselves with their organization's mission (Carton et al., 2014). Further, through self-awareness and risk assessment, leaders can clarify how their potential in their respective role can challenge the expectations others have of them in positive ways.

Second, to continually development and invite feedback during a crisis, leaders would do well to stay closely linked to mentors. Experienced mentors can offer critical insight to leaders, and—perhaps most relevant in unprecedented situations—serve as a sounding board when leaders need to weigh their options before making a difficult decision. Further, the unfamiliarity of the pandemic should drive leaders to continue learning from seasoned mentors, peer mentors, or working groups of others who can offer collective wisdom. In this way, leaders should even consider their coworkers as valuable resources who can provide constructive feedback and guidance, including their subordinates. This information helps leaders better understand their context and environment (Lord & Maher, 2002). Information should "flow" throughout the organization in meaningful ways that cultivate a culture of trust (Koohang et al., 2017). It is incumbent upon leaders in a crisis to actively and regularly elicit feedback from colleagues, and in the process maintain this ethos of information sharing and collaboration.

Finally, leaders would do well to strengthen relational and political connections throughout their organizations and beyond. Relationships with team members, particularly supervisors, are important for leaders. However, principally in times of crisis, these relationships can be lifegiving to a team (especially through encouragement and empathy) or lifedraining to a team. Leaders also need to consider that, during the pandemic, people need a leader with a vision, but might

gravitate more readily to a leader who offers empathy and a realistic perspective (Petriglieri, 2020).

In addition to fostering a strong network of relationships, executives need to think strategically about organizational politics to understand how their network can be leveraged for success during the pandemic, such as through coalitions and collaborations. These prospects, though, should be approached with caution. Koehn (2020) emphasized, "We – all of us – will be remembered for how we manage ourselves and others through this crisis… How will we emerge from this experience collectively stronger?" (p. 6). Rather than naivete or maladaptive distrust, caution can allow leaders to operate effectively in a crisis by keeping opportunities for resources or strategic partnerships nearby. Diminishing resources, which is a common issue amplified by current circumstances, requires leaders to think creatively about moving teams and initiatives forward. As such, they need to seek political capital by focusing intently on their leadership effectiveness and managing others' perceptions of them and their team, division, or organization. Such strategic thinking can add strength to organizational plans that will last through this pandemic and beyond.

CONCLUSION

The participants in this study identified critical areas to keep in mind during a crisis. Pulling from these findings, we suggest leaders keep a persistent focus on their purpose, their growth, and their environment while leading in the pandemic. We suspect scholars and professionals alike will continue adding to the best practice literature for leaders to access during this pandemic. From financial management to organization development to structural changes, there will continue to be suggestions for what is important and what should be done during the COVID-19 era. Although the list of implications from this study is applicable to many leadership contexts and environments, the study's participants identified critical areas to keep in mind during a crisis.

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END NOTE

Jeff Strietzel completed his dissertation (Strietzel, 2020a) in December 2020 using a large data set of derailment experiences collected from college and university leaders across North America. Due to the sensitive nature of this data, co-author Ryan Erck was granted access to anonymized portions of certain transcripts from the original study for the purpose of this secondary analysis.