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Applying Derailment Advice: How Educational Leaders Can Use Job Loss Lessons to Navigate the COVID-19 Crisis

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended life and work for people around the globe. This upheaval has created new challenges for those serving in or studying at higher education. College administrators have been forced to adapt, and many have used wisdom gained from past crises as proxies for the current crisis. After many months in a pandemic, however, many leaders are still searching for effective frameworks and mental models to guide their efforts. In this article, we offer the concept of *derailment* as a proxy for leaders in challenging times. We examined interview data from a recent in-depth study of 25 derailed leaders (Strietzel, 2020) and explored similarities between experiencing derailment and leading through a pandemic. Using the lessons learned from derailed administrators, we provide a three-layered approach to navigate the current crisis. Findings and implications encourage higher education leaders to focus on their purpose, growth, and environment.

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The current COVID-19 pandemic has affected organizations and leaders in all industry sectors (Dalton, 2020). Higher education institutions and their top administrators are not exempt from such disruptions to normal operation (Vasquez, 2020). In turn, these leaders have been under extraordinary pressure to respond effectively to the pandemic from an organizational perspective (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020). Technology overhauls to accommodate virtual learning, faculty and staff furloughs or layoffs, and trying to create an incoming class are a few major concerns (Hoover, 2020). Logistical and financial challenges coupled with public outcries to address systemic racial injustice amidst a tumultuous presidential election cycle created a need for leaders to manage multiple momentous changes and lead through them well (Flowers, 2020).

Regarding the pandemic, we agree with D'Auria and De Smet (2020) who stated, "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). Given the unprecedented circumstances, there is a need for shared wisdom; for mental models and ways of understanding that will help higher education leaders, and their respective institutions, persevere in difficult times.

Literature Review

Crises shape how leaders develop and grow. Koehn (2020) emphasized that leaders are forged in crisis situations. In turbulent times, leaders are expected to reduce loss and maintain predictable operation (Klann, 2003). Habecker (2018) said that at all times, but particularly during crises, leaders "should absorb chaos, give back calm, and provide hope" (p. 17). During tough times, people do not necessarily need a visionary leader in terms of ethereal organizational

progress; a crisis requires a *holding* leader who acknowledges their emotions and gives followers

a sense of context and reality (Petriglieri, 2020). Klann (2003) said it is crucial to distinguish

crisis management from crisis leadership. The former emphasizes planning, organizing, staffing,

or budgeting that might minimize a humane element that people desire during a crisis. The

COVID-19 virus has had pervasive effects on college and university campuses. The wellbeing of

people at all levels of an organization should not be neglected in service to plans made prior to

the COVID-19 pandemic. People need responsive leadership during uncertain times.

The Current Crises

Kelderman (2020) posited that the coronavirus pandemic has caused a set of historic

challenges for college leaders. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a global crisis. By June 2021,

there have been 175 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and more 3.5 million associated deaths

worldwide (Johns Hopkins University [JHU] Medicine, 2021). In September 2021, there were

220 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and more than 4.55 million associated deaths worldwide

(Johns Hopkins University [JHU] Medicine, 2021). This far-reaching crisis has affected billions

of individuals, and the threat of COVID-19 is felt in our neighborhoods, communities, and

immediate families. Furthermore, our country is painfully processing systemic racism manifest

in the killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Brianna Taylor, and many others. This series of

injustices is what Williams and Youmans (2020) and others have called a second relentless

pandemic gripping the U.S.

Although Al Saidi et al. (2020) emphasized that decisive leadership is absolutely

necessary in such situations, educational cultures and systems tend to change slowly (Birnbaum,

1988). Yet, the pandemic has led to swift changes in education. Netolicky (2020) noted that

sudden reforms are the result of necessity rather than deliberate and thoughtful planning.

Moreover, in these unprecedented times, extant research does not directly address the historic challenges of the current environment. To endure such challenges, leaders need to make informed decisions by drawing on relevant wisdom wherever it might be found. Because the world and its leaders are, in a sense, operating in a state of derailment, the lived experiences of leaders who have weathered career derailment (job loss) can offer valuable insight for the current environment and any challenging time.

Derailment Research

Personnel transitions are commonplace, often initiated for pragmatic reasons (Shaw & Chayes, 2011). Such transitions can be viewed positively or negatively, depending on the peculiarities of a case and one's relation to them (Furnham, 2016). Unlike discussing the *federal* employment rate or employee turnover, which operate at the national and organizational levels, respectively (Hausknecht & Holwerda, 2012), derailment discussions operate at the individual level. By derailment we mean "an unexpected and involuntary stall during a leader's career ascent" (Korn Ferry Institute, 2014, p. 1). The term captures the perceived qualitative experience and negative professional implications without distinguishing between whom to blame for the event (Furnham, 2016; Irwin, 2012; Trachtenberg et al., 2013). Derailment is a career crisis, but it is also a particular catalyst for leadership development and growth (Strietzel, 2020).

Derailment research arguably began when Bentz (1967) identified negative behaviors of failed executives (Bentz, 1985). Generally speaking, Bentz's research set a trajectory for future derailment research agenda characterized by seeking to identify the mistakes of derailed leaders and extrapolating those missteps to identify how to avoid derailment. The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) conducted additional in-depth derailment research during the 1980s and 1990s (Lombardo & McCauley, 1988; Lombardo et al., 1988; McCall & Lombardo, 1983; Morrison et

al., 1987). In an influential study, Leslie and Van Velsor (1996) studied business leaders in the

United States and Europe who derailed and offered four inclusive 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. Leslie and Van Velsor's (1996)

four themes remain relevant to derailment research.

Limited derailment research has considered college and university administrators

(Trachtenberg et al., 2013; Strietzel, 2020). Based on data gathered from those familiar with a

dozen presidential derailments, Trachtenberg et al. (2013) offered six themes for college and

university president derailment. Namely, they found that presidents tend to derail when they (a)

make ethically questionable choices, (b) lack interpersonal skills, or (c) fail to lead their

constituents, (d) fail adapt to institutional culture, or (e) do not meet objectives. And some

president derail as a result of (f) board shortcomings. As is illustrated by Leslie and Van Velsor

(1996) and Trachtenberg et al. (2013), most derailment research attributes the lion's share of

blame to leaders for their own derailment. However, Strietzel (2020) found that derailed

administrators generally emphasized external derailment factors, such as a supervisor's decision,

organizational restructuring, or layoffs due to shrinking finances. Although one might argue that

self-interest drives derailed leaders' external attributions, it might be equally true that some

derailed leaders are victims of circumstance.

Recently, researchers have begun to consider the lived experiences of derailed persons

and the lessons they learned. Jasinski (2018) found that the difficulty of a sudden change in

professional status is complicated by the confluence of corresponding thoughts and emotions of

shifting responsibilities, identities, and daily work rhythms. Strietzel (2020) found that even

when derailed leaders rebound by finding another job in the same profession, they experience

feelings of vulnerability and shame and engage questions of identity or purpose. Derailment is an

upheaval that demands critical evaluation of one's worth, function, purpose, and professional

aims (Frawley, 2013; Garrison, 2013; Strietzel, 2020). Importantly, based on the testimonies of

derailed leaders, navigating job loss is a tremendous learning opportunity (Sloan, 2018).

Based on our literature review and analysis of 25 derailed leaders' testimonies, we argue

that the disarray of derailment is analogous to the type of upheaval experienced by leaders,

especially those serving in colleges and universities, who have seen immense change in almost

all parts of higher education in recent a matter of months. 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: *What

can higher education leaders navigating the COVID-19 era learn from derailment experiences*?

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited through referrals via professional networks (listservs, e-

newsletters, e-mail, etc.) in a blending of convenience sampling and purposive sampling (Hesse-

Biber & Leavy, 2010). We studied a sub-sample of participants and the corresponding data from

a recently completed dissertation (Strietzel, 2020) for this study. The participants were 25 senior-

level higher education administrators (presidents, provosts, vice presidents, deans, etc.) at

various institutions across North America. The median age of the sample was 57 and consisted of

13 male and 12 female participants who had an average of 26 years of professional experience.

Table 1 provides a summary of demographic information.

Table 1. Summary of Participant Demographics

Race	Gender	Derailed From	Institution Type	US Region	Years of Relevant Experience
White	Female	Associate Provost	Private	Midwest	41 or more
White	Male	Associate Provost	Public	Midwest	41 or more
White	Female	Provost	Private	Midwest	31-35
White	Male	President	Private	West	31-35
White	Male	Provost	Private	South	31-35
White	Female	Executive Director	Public	South	31-35
White	Male	President	Public	South	26-30
White	Male	Chief of Staff	Public	Northeast	26-30
White	Male	Dean	Public	Midwest	26-30
White	Female	Vice President	Public	North	26-30
White	Male	Provost	Private	Midwest	21-25
White	Male	Provost	Private	Midwest	21-25
White	Female	Vice President	Public	South	21-25
Black	Female	Vice President	Private	South	21-25
White	Female	Dean	Public	West	21-25
White	Male	President	Private	Midwest	21-25
White	Female	Dean	Private	South	21-25
Black	Male	Vice President	Public	South	21-25
White	Female	Provost	Private	South	21-25
White	Male	Dean	Private	Northeast	21-25
White	Female	Associate Provost	Private	Midwest	16-20
Latinx	Female	Vice President	Public	South	11-15
Black	Female	Vice President	Public	West	11-15
White	Male	President	Private	Midwest	--
White	Male	Dean	Private	West	--

Procedure

A semi-structured interview protocol allowed participants to explore their derailed careers in detail, with a focus on their lived experience, meaning making throughout the process, transformations of thought and behavior, and suggestions or lessons from their derailment for

other leaders. Interviews were conducted via telephone and averaged 104 minutes in duration.

The interviews were recorded; verbatim transcriptions of each interview served as the primary

data for the study. Although participants were considered 'executive' in relation to their scope of

leadership, interviews were characterized by their willingness to speak openly about their

derailment experiences.

We approached this study and its data from a constructivist paradigm (Lincoln & Guba,

1985), positioning each participants' lived experiences as valid retrospective reconstructions

(Geertz, 1973; Kuhn, 1962). This approach allowed us to explore multiple derailment

experiences and construct thick descriptions of participant accounts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Throughout the research process, we followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four guidelines of

trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Reflection journals

and positionality statements assisted us in being thoughtful and forthright in our sensitivity to

biases (Seidman, 2013).

Analysis

Interview transcription data were analyzed using NVivo software to conduct open coding.

Words or short phrases were symbolically assigned summative, salient, essence-capturing labels

(Saldaña, 2015). Coding is the critical link between collecting data and articulating their meaning

(Charmaz, 2001), and we explored numerous codes as we sought to honor participants'

experiences. Related words, phrases, and ideas were then synthesized into various themes

through a pattern coding process (Silverman, 2006). The themes were conceptual convergences

of distinct derailment stories by diverse people.

(De)Limitations

Although interviews and participant responses were robust, this study was delimited by focusing on executive higher education administrators, specifically those who had found leadership roles again in higher education. The perspectives of those who regained their professional footing in similar roles in higher education administration is useful and valid, but it necessarily excludes the voices of those who were forced to retire or find employment in a different profession. By the nature of social science research, findings were limited to those who voluntarily participated and thus findings might be influenced by self-selection bias and participants' choices (conscious or otherwise) to share openly or limit their responses. Nonetheless, we believe the analysis and the findings of this study are trustworthy.

Findings

This study centers on an analysis of participants' perspectives and advice to current and aspiring leaders. Leadership requires novel ways of thinking; the stories and lessons learned from these data can be applied to leadership strategies in these unprecedented times, including in higher education administration. Our analysis of participants remarks offers three salient themes around the concepts of purpose, growth, and relational environment.

Your Purpose: Expectations and Potential

Some participants identified the need to challenge their expectations and clarify their purpose after they derailed. Drawing from experience as a university executive, one participant noted that higher education leadership is "no longer a job for the faint of heart," and involves expecting the unexpected: "[E]ach 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." Unexpected challenges are commonplace for campus leaders, but this executive emphasized the

increasing pace of his leadership challenges. Similarly, another participant advised university

leaders to, "be mindful that when you are in administration … things can go wrong, even beyond

your control."

Another participant said, "administrators should be under no delusions that safety is a

part of the job… you don't always have control." These institutional leaders who had

experienced derailment seemed sensitized to a lack of control over their environments. They

dispelled the notion that leaders ought to expect predictability and control in their work.

Some participants emphasized that understanding their ability to persevere and succeed was

linked to a sense of purpose. Participants also emphasized a desire to lead "because it is an

opportunity to serve," but as they served it was important to not "give up on who you are" in the

process. Their sense of purpose was critical to leading others amid crises. By identifying why

they were serving in leadership positions, participants were able to more closely align themselves

with their institution's mission. Many of these participants highlighted how a leader's purpose

contributes to their ability to effectively navigate challenges. One individual defined this as a

"grounding principle" necessary for effective administrative leadership, even in chaotic times.

He further articulated the value of a worthwhile purpose for administrative leadership:

> *If you don't have [a ground 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.

By attending to a grounding principle during a crisis, these higher education leaders challenged the expectations they had of themselves and others. Further, through self-awareness and risk assessment, they more clearly understood how their potential in their respective roles can challenge the expectations others have of them in positive way. Finding a purpose in their work and leadership roles helped participants see their expectations and potential more clearly.

Your Growth: Feedback and Development

A few participants stressed the importance of eliciting feedback from coworkers, recommending leaders avoid developing themselves in isolation. Some participants viewed cultivating mentors and inviting other colleagues to provide feedback as an important means of developing competency, especially during trying times. 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 said, "If you can, 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 things." Another participant said it this way: "one person cannot do it alone… I sure as heck cannot do it alone. "Aside from merely gaining knowledge and acquiring skills, these derailed higher education leaders exhorted others to cultivate mentors who could coach them rather than merely relying on themselves.

Some participants' professional development included what one participant referred to as "a toolbox," or a strategic assemblage of skills and information to navigate challenging situations. Several participants said gaining accurate and clear information was fundamentally important during times of crisis. One participant stressed the need to "learn as much as you can about the big picture of the institution." Some participants framed information gathering in terms

of feedback, which was operationalized. Such feedback often served as a resource for growth and improvement for participants, with some highlighting the value of eliciting feedback from subordinates and peers. One participant stated,

> *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 be discouraging 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 information for participants' leadership decisions.

Your Environment: Relationships and Politics

Many participants said it was important nurture relationships and navigate institutional politics. One suggested approach to relationships and politics mentioned by a few participants

was a posture of caution. They referred to their former selves (before their derailment experience) 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 university leader did not exempt them from betrayal.

One participant said, "Don't assume that others are taking care of your professional standing for you. Administration comes with risks, [such as being] much easier to terminate than faculty members." Another participant agreed, saying he would give anyone the same advice he would give his former self: "Take care of yourself." One participant extended this idea by stating, "Nothing is for certain. Be on your tiptoes every day. Always harbor some questions." Healthy skepticism allowed some university leaders to 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 their efforts to collaborate compared to reactive attempts to recoup social and political capital. One participant emphasized the importance of establishing "strong working relationships." Multiple participants emphasized how the most important relationship within one's place of employment was their direct supervisor. For example, one said it this way:

> *The most important relationship you have [in the workplace] 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.*

This participant said that a supervisor is the most important work relationship regardless of "how crazy it can get" or how hectic the workplace environment, but a crisis was also an opportune time to stay connected to that most-important relationship.

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. The idea of maintaining positive professional relationships during a crisis was extended to coworkers as well. Two participants advised higher education leaders "don't burn bridges," meaning it is important to avoid unnecessarily severing relationships even with unlikable or hurtful individuals. Participants encouraged institutional leaders to challenge their own positions in a crisis through reflecting on political and relational networks.

Experiencing crisis prompted participants' reflection, learning, and sometimes significant change in their thoughts, feelings, and behavior. When asked, *What advice would you give aspiring leaders pursuing administrative leadership in higher education*?, participants shared diverse, insightful, and sometimes contradictory advice. This advice, borne out of career derailment experiences, is resonant with the loss, confusion, and stress experienced in other crisis situations, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. Participants' responses emerged around three themes significant to leadership through coronavirus-induced change: (a) purpose, (b) growth, and (c) environment. Within these themes, we identified some implications for college and university leaders.

Implications for Leaders

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted numerous organizations and industries, including higher education. The comprehensive upheaval parallels career derailment but at a systematic level. By exploring qualitative findings from 25 derailed academic administrators, we provide leaders with recommendations to help navigate the COVID-19 crisis. 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 college and university leaders prioritize three strategies to lead effectively through the pandemic.

First, amidst crises, leaders need to manage expectations—for themselves, their direct reports, and potentially their entire department or division. Managing expectations allows a realistic perspective to guide decision making. Toward this end, university leaders need to exercise self-awareness during this pandemic and other crisis, as it is a critical component of quality leadership (Eurich, 2018). Leaders must be able to understand and manage what they are thinking and how they are feeling as they seek to mesh address constituents' needs and chart a path forward through each 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, self-awareness will increase clarity and confidence to leaders in their respective roles, two highly prized leadership traits (Northouse, 2018).

Second, to continually develop 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 academic 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 academic 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, higher education leaders would do well to strengthen relational and political

connections throughout their campus and beyond (Birnbaum, 1988). Relationships with team

members, particularly supervisors, are important for leaders, but in times of crisis these

relationships the strengths of these relationships have higher stakes than usual. College and

university leaders also need to consider that, during the pandemic, people do not want or need a

leader singularly focused on a grand vision or executing the minutia of daily work but rather

someone who can offer a realistic perspective with compassion (Petriglieri, 2020).

In addition to fostering a strong network of relationships, academic leaders need to think

strategically about organizational politics. Leaders will need to build political capital by

developing supportive relationships and managing others' perceptions of them and their team,

division, or organization. A leader's network of friendships and coalitions can be the most

important success factor during a crisis (Buller, 2015). Diminishing resources is a commonplace

issue that has been amplified by current circumstances. 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. Finding creative ways to share resources will

contribute to leaders' individual and organizational success during crises. We agree with

Koehn's (2020) charge: "We – all of us – will be remembered for how we manage ourselves and

others through this [COVID-19] crisis… How will we emerge from this experience collectively

stronger?" (p. 6). Strengthening relationships and cultivating political acumen are important

factors to attend to as a leader during and beyond any crisis. Stated more plainly, it matters a lot

how kindly we treat people during stressful times.

     The participants in this study identified critical areas for leaders to keep in mind during a

crisis. Although the strategies from this study are applicable to many contexts and environments,

participants identified critical areas to keep in mind during a crisis. From financial management

to organization development to structural changes, there will continue to be suggestions in the

literature for what is important and what should be done during and after COVID-19. Based on

our analysis of 25 higher education administrators, we believe college and university leaders

should keep a persistent focus on balancing their expectations and potential while pursuing their

purpose, cultivate feedback to continue their development as a leader, and keep their campus

relationships and politics in check. Focusing on purpose, growth, and environment may prove

valuable to higher education administrators on the long road of leadership that lay ahead.

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