

Lessons in International Leadership: Why some Executive Careers Derail

Q: How easy is it for your organization to take a €1 Million Bet?

A: Simple. Just hire or promote a General Manager to an overseas role!

In 1985, 2 Fortune 500 organizations asked the Center for Creative Leadership in Carolina, USA for advice on preventing leadership failure¹. These organizations estimated the cost of a failed executive at \$500,000. Adjusted for inflation, that figure today runs to just over €1 million, a number which may be on the low side.

Several academics have tried to put a financial number on the cost of derailment; the estimates range between \$1 and \$6 million, depending on what's counted. When a General Manager fails, it costs time and resources to recruit, select, and train a replacement. Add in the hidden costs associated with 'golden parachutes', lost intellectual and social capital, missed objectives and the destruction of employee morale.

Pretty soon you begin to clock up a big number. What's abundantly clear is that selection and internal promotion of a General Manager is a BIG bet for an organization and it's critically important to make the right call. While this applies to all senior appointments, an overseas posting is even trickier. So, a Roadmap to help organizations and General Managers with this decision is particularly useful and this is our objectives in this article.

Leadership Focus

A lot of stuff written about leadership is framed in the positive. Setting a clear future vision, bringing people on the journey, establishing interim targets and so on. These 'to do' lists are useful guides to behavior and have been elaborated in countless books². However, the reasons key executives are asked to 'walk the plank' seldom appear in the literature on best leadership practices. Why? Partly because it's easier to talk about success rather than failure. In part, because organizations want to 'bury the bodies deeply' when an appointment does not work out. However, the question of derailment has been studied by a small number of researchers. The good news is that the data converges quite nicely; the pitfalls associated with managerial derailment are broadly agreed.



¹ Lombardo, Ruderman, & McCauley, 1988, p. 201.

² Including my own book on this topic: *Accidental Leadership*, The Liffey Press, 2010.

The Answer

So, what causes senior executives to derail? Studies using different methodologies, in different organizations and across national cultures, illustrate a number of common points. Failed managers exercise bad judgment, have troubled relationships, don't build teams and can't manage themselves or learn from their mistakes. The examples given in this paper are based on actual events where I have been directly involved – either in an executive or a consulting role. While this is a somewhat personal list, the 7 'tripwires' outlined – and the cases used to illustrate the points – will be relevant to most organizations. Some names and organization details have been changed to 'protect the guilty'. Before we begin, let's be clear on exactly what we mean by the term 'derailed'.

Defining 'Derailed'

A derailed executive is a person who, having reached General Manager level, finds that there is little chance of future advancement due to a misfit between job requirements and their personal skills. The executive unintentionally fails and gets demoted, plateaued e.g. ignored in a 'dead end' job or forced into early retirement. In some cases they are terminated; in extreme cases they are arrested and prosecuted³.

Different Demands @ Different Levels

As they become more senior and job demands change (e.g. the need for strategic thinking ability), early strengths like single mindedness can become weaknesses. Sometimes, early weaknesses e.g. an inability to network began to matter. A key point is that these executives have been successful up to a point in their careers. Executives who become derailed typically run up a string of successes early on and can even be viewed as technical experts or high potential candidates until – they 'derail' (the metaphor = a train coming off the tracks). While this can apply to executives in their 'home country', there are specific factors at play for those who accept an overseas posting. Here's how it all goes wrong.

TRIPWIRE # 1: RULES ONLY APPLY TO 'LITTLE PEOPLE'

You've finally made it. You've been posted to an overseas location. A maid is looking after your kids and a driver is negotiating the traffic, bringing you to/from work. You live on 'Embassy Row' in the country where you now work and get invited to all the smart parties. Did you ever really believe that you could be this successful? But, hey, perhaps you deserve even a little bit more. And, it's relatively easy to arrange. Some of the local distributors have intimated that if you gave them a higher percentage of business and by-pass the competition, there could be a little something in it for you. You control everything locally – with the Financial Director acting like he works for you personally rather than being employed by the organization. Or perhaps it's not as directly personal. There is some graft in the local culture and you need to pay cash, discreetly, to key clients to keep the order book full. STOP THE PRESS!

Ethical issues will get you fired quicker than anything else. Don't sleep with your PA. Don't mess with your expenses. Don't seek personal gain on the company's ticket – because you 'deserve it' (as some sort of payback for all those extra hours or weekends you're working or travelling). Do it and you are dead. It's just a matter of time until someone arranges the funeral. Unethical and/or fraudulent behavior accounts for over 40% of the incidences when senior players derail (that's why it's number 1 on the list). Just like playing golf, business is a game of ethics. You keep your own score. And when you are playing the game 6,000 miles away from HQ, the organization has to trust you to do the right thing.

³ Derailment in one company, does not permanently end a manager's career. Those who leave their organizations because they resign, are fired, or take early retirement often go on to either start their own companies or join other firms where they can be successful if they learn from the experience.

Case Example:

The Regional Manager of a Technology Company was based in Hong Kong. The company picked up most of his legitimate expenses (e.g. school fees for kids) and he was well paid vis a vis his peers in the marketplace (at the 90th percentile). But, he wanted to save a bit more for a 'rainy day'. So, trips home for his kids to France were booked through the company and put down as 'marketing expenses'. His wife's visits to the hairdresser were tagged as coinciding with 'key meetings with distributors and their partners'. Computers for personal use were bought through the company and so on. The amounts of money involved were small. The principle was big. The information leaked out through a whistleblower (it always does), an internal audit was conducted and the Regional Manager was unceremoniously fired. I've lost touch with that guy now, but he was out of work for several years and his career never really regained momentum.

TRIPWIRE # 2: MISSING A KEY PERFORMANCE TARGET

Some executives never tire in telling people how 'busy' they are. *"I'm on a flight to Zurich on Sunday. 2 days. Then it's on to Holland and road trips throughout the Netherlands. After that it's annual Hell Week with the budget stuff in Washington. It's all go."* The inner tape in their head plays the following track on a continuous loop. **I know that I'm really busy. Therefore, I must be really productive.** The logic is flawed.

Executives are paid to get things done, not to do things themselves. There is an upper ceiling to the hours you can work, 50, 60, 70, 80? But, during that time you are in charge of perhaps 000's of hours of outputs. So, you need to (a) know what you personally should be focused on (and not get distracted with 'shiny' stuff) & (b) spend a huge % of your time encouraging others to deliver their key outputs. Now, unless you are an airline pilot, I'm guessing that 'miles flown' is not a strategic measure of your success. Stop telling people how busy you are and get focused on what you need to produce (telling people how busy you are is based on an underling need for approval: *"Look at me. I'm really important, just in case you don't notice"*). Don't get caught up in the classic confusion between inputs and outputs. At this point in our lives, everyone should understand the fundamental point that **Results Pay the Bills**. You'd be surprised by how many executives still don't get it. Don't just 'go home tired'. Focus on what you are trying to accomplish.

Technical 'Details'

Some executives see managing as a sport played above 35,000 feet. They avoid details and technical stuff like the plague, believing that these issues should be left to 'propeller heads' – minions who work for them. But normally, it's important for a leader to understand the detail/technical issues, particularly where a problem occurs on an important issue. Even if you are not an expert, your expertise must be in communicating the technical elements to people with a wide range of backgrounds without 'dumbing down the complexity'. Be careful: the second big tripwire is to miss a strategically important target that you had written off as a 'detail'.

Case Example

An Irish Manager, let's call him Patrick, worked in the airlines business. Now Patrick was a legendary hard worker and I liked him a lot. He started work at 6am (unusual in Ireland) and worked late every evening. He was clever, hardworking and paid huge attention to tracking down and resolving all of the 'technical' issues (internal) in the business. He just forgot a couple of key things (1) not all of the BIG issues faced were technical (the space he was happiest in, given his engineering background) (2) He had a senior team who needed to be clicked into 5th gear,

rather than success being dependant on him doing all the work himself (3) he was so busy internally, that he missed a trend towards outsourcing that swept the industry and led to the development of a low cost model against which they could not compete. His level of busyness got in the way of sensing/understanding what was really important. Executives who work this hard risk 'running on empty' and miss important clues (which don't normally come with a label attached saying: '**This is Important: Pay Attention Now**'). It was an unhappy time for the Executive and he moved on 'by mutual agreement' with the Board.

TRIPWIRE # 3: FAILURE TO BUILD A TOP-CLASS TEAM

The essence of the General Manager role is to build an organization, which can 'outlive' the leader. You understand the need to be future focused, overcoming today's problems while building for the future. You don't just work **in** the business, but also **on** the business. Right?

Now, in some organizations, you may not get 'called' on this – because the culture is relatively short-term focused and the institutional memory is on par with a Hamster. But the best-managed organizations look to their General Managers to build solid leadership teams, which represent future capacity and growth potential. An inability to build and lead a team is an important derailment factor, mentioned in about 1 out of 4 of the European and American cases in the literature. One European executive described a manager who derailed as follows: *"When he reached a position where he had to deal with significant numbers of people at different levels, he could not do it. He was very isolated, did not create a team, was over-confident, tough and individualistic"*.

One explanation for this may be that traits like assertiveness and personal initiative get managers onto the fast track in the early part of their careers. The exact same traits, which make you look like a hero when working as a sole contributor, later get in the way as executives face the challenge of employing a more participative approach. The ability to develop what has been termed a relational orientation is critical to success at higher levels. And, arguably, this is becoming even more important.

Changing Democracy

Do you remember negotiating what clothes you would wear to school? How about mealtimes? Do you remember your mother operating an 'a la carte' meal system? Yet, in a single generation that's what my kids have come to expect and, someone (God help them), will have to try and manage them at a future point. Generation X and Generation Y staff want to know *"what's in it for me"* and if the person leading them knows and cares about them as individuals. One executive commented: *"Today, if you're going to spill your blood for the organization, it will be because of personal loyalty to your team, not to some abstract organization"*. This stands in stark contrast to the mechanistic leadership style preferred in the bureaucratic organizational model followed by many companies. One American executive described a derailed manager's early success as follows:

"...at one time these things (e.g. building a team) were not important. But the culture has changed. It used to be hard-nosed and authoritarian. In that context a manager could make decisions on his own, implement those, and be seen as successful. He just hasn't been able to make the transition."

Case Example:

I worked with one female manager in a Large Financial Services institution. She was attractive, a terrific presenter and razor sharp. But, somehow, she had a view of the world that everyone wanted to push her off the pedestal – an inner lack of confidence that was difficult to understand. She was determined to show them that it wasn't going to

be easy to move her from the spot. She reminded me of the Sergeant in the TV series, Hill Street Blues, who told the cops at the start of each shift: *"Let's do it to them, before they do it to us"*. She built a barrier of self-preservation which disallowed anyone getting close and seemed to delight when people on her wider team (across Europe) stated to bitch and moan about each other – almost as if this 'proved' her theory that the only thing really interesting in the world was self interest.

I worked with her when we jointly ran a 3-day workshop in the UK. She was meeting most of her team for the 1st time, people from a number of European countries. The timetable was detailed, the video and U-Tube clips sorted, the social agenda figured out. Then she opened up the meeting with the line: *"We have to face that fact that there is a performance issue here. Not everyone in this room, will still be in a room like this in a years time. I'm estimating that up to 25% of people will no longer work for the company. Now let's get on with reviewing the agenda"*. It was, perhaps, the most socially inept opening to a session that I've ever witnessed. You don't build a top-class team with the message: *'I'm really smart, the rest of you are idiots. Now, smarten yourself up'*. One year later the key person 'not in the room' was herself.

TRIPWIRE # 4: CONFUSING INTELLIGENCE WITH LEADERSHIP

This tripwire revolves around the issue of personal arrogance. It translates as follows: **I'm Clever, Therefore I Lead**. Usually, to get into senior roles, a person is smart, sometimes incredibly smart. They demonstrate competence in earlier roles and get promoted on the back of this. Often they have a 'bit of form', a history of being the smartest boy or girl in the family, class or college dorm. But 'smartness' (measured by a high IQ) is a very different characteristic than the ability to lead people (usually measured by a high IQ coupled with a high EQ). For example, it is possible for people on the Autism scale to have high functioning, side by side with very poor ability to 'connect' with other people. In short, being smart (in an IQ sense) and leadership ability are two completely different competencies. Yes, you need to be smart to lead (a manager who is clearly out of his depth is not inspiring). But being smart, as a stand-alone competence, is not enough, particularly if that raw intelligence is packaged in arrogance and lack of self-insight. Of course, some General Managers know themselves really well and pursue a strategy which can be labeled as: **'Get yourself a terrific number 2'** in the areas where they are personally weak. Having a brilliant #2 in Finance to meet the information requirements of Head office, or someone who runs interference with the distributors in South America, can be a marriage made in heaven. The problem is that some General Managers don't believe they have 'any' weak points. When I asked one guy about his development needs he replied (100% in earnest) that: *"It's impossible to improve on perfection"*. This high self-belief takes a hit when they get shot from behind, by someone senior from HQ, but even then the problem can be rationalized as being: 'All down to politics' or something similar. They just don't get it.

Building Credits

Don't forget the role that politics plays in all organizations. When things go wrong, as they sometimes will, you need to have '*credits in the bank*' to tide you over. I'm not suggesting that you deliberately go out of your way to keep everyone happy as some sort of 'insurance policy' against mistakes, but there is an element of personal marketing in all successful careers (unless you find oil in your back garden). People with poor interpersonal relationships, don't have 'credits in the bank'. *"I don't do politics"* is often code for: *"I don't have the skills to understand how politics works"*. Consider the following example. The recent real estate market meltdown cost several financial institutions billions of dollars. Merrill Lynch CEO Stanley O'Neal wrote down \$7.9 billion in losses for the third quarter alone. The New York Times noted: *"The loss raised questions about Mr. O'Neal's leadership and most crucially the ability of his top executives*

to manage the risky assets on the firm's balance sheet" ("Merrill's Chief," October 25, 2007). A week later, he was fired. However, a closer analysis reveals that O'Neal's cold, aloof, and vengeful style had strained relationships with several members of the Board⁴. The financial losses gave the Board a reason to fire him. When relationships are strong, people will forgive mistakes. But when relationships erode, tolerance disappears and mistakes get a manager fired.

Company Cultures

Problems with interpersonal relationships is a derailment factor that has endured over time. However, it doesn't mean that all managers who struggle under this heading will derail. This factor is very dependant on the particular organizational culture. In short, some organizations tolerate 'quirkiness' in individual managers (if the CEO has somewhat similar traits, if the local General Manager is contributing great results to the business etc). Of course, the central dilemma, is that it's not easy to change core personality characteristics. So, organizations can feel somewhat 'stuck' with this.

Case Example

I worked with one senior engineering manager (technology company in Ireland). This guy had 'two normal brains' and been central to a couple of product breakthroughs in the business. He was 'sent' to me for coaching. I christened him RC – short for 'Reluctant Client'. He cancelled several sessions (pressures of work) and showed up late to others. He would not read materials that I asked him to read or reflect on key questions surfaced. Overall, he just didn't engage.

Presenting Issue:

In the Technology Company, no one really liked working for him. Some people hated it. He couldn't resist demonstrating how clever he was and how stupid they were. He did the same with me in the coaching sessions, challenging me on which theorist had influenced me most and the specific methods used (it was difficult not to become defensive). Essentially, he wanted me to prove that coaching really worked versus his view that it was a 'bag of smoke'. So, our relationship in the coaching sessions was a mini-version of what his direct staff were reporting about low trust and high challenge. I explained the concept of Leadership Leverage e.g.: "*none of us is as smart as all of us*" and how he needed to tap into the talent on his wider management team. By challenging everyone on everything, he was isolating himself and cutting himself off from some great ideas (no-one has a monopoly on good ideas, no matter how smart they are). He understood the point intellectually, but not emotionally. I was his third (and final) coach. In his view, we were all *dummies*. He was fired.

Twin Tracks

IBM has recognized that some managers are brilliant 'technically' but poor 'managerially'. So, they have set up an 'alternative career system for people who want to continue to progress/grow – but who don't want to get involved in the 'messiness' of managing people. The two career streams (business and technical/scientific) run in parallel and allow the company to maximize staff talent, rather than force people into roles for which they are not suited.

⁴ Hogan & Kaiser, 2008.

Cultural Dimension

There is also a cultural dimension to the question on engaging staff, based on what sociologists label 'power distance'. In different countries, the expectation of involvement by the workforce varies. In countries with 'low' power distance scores (e.g. Holland), there is a high expectation of engagement. In countries with 'high' power distance scores (e.g. China), the expectations of being invited into the inner sanctum is much lower. It follows that in choosing to send particular managers to specific countries, organizations should try to find the best 'fit' for the location. Load the deck in advance to give the organization, and the General Manager chosen, the best chance of success.

TRIPWIRE # 5: CULTURAL ARROGANCE: MY COUNTRY IS BETTER THAN YOURS!

Here's a simple recipe for 'screwing up' under this heading. Take a big, successful economy e.g. America. Take an executive from this '1st world' economy and send them to a 'developing' country e.g. Indonesia. Then watch carefully as the USA manager begins to 'compare' (that's code for 'rate as inferior') every single thing in the developing country versus everything in her/his home country. People from some cultures seem to 'transplant' better than others. Some are almost Chameleon like and take on the identity and the cultural mores of the place they move to. Others don't. They rail against difference. They compare everything negatively. They play a stupid game called '*I wish that it was more like home*'. And they ultimately fail in their quest to '*change the culture of the place they are now living, into the culture of the place where they have come from*'.

Case Example

Thérese was the Financial Controller of a Pharmaceutical company, headquartered in Singapore, looking after 9 countries across South East Asia. She hated it. Her husband hated it. Her kids (no doubt listening to the parents) hated it. The weather was 'shit' (too humid), the food was awful (too spicy), the staff, acknowledged as hardworking, were not 'creative' (and there I was, thinking that the world market for 'creative accounting' was saturated!). Using this analysis, allowed Thérese to outsource the blame. Not 89%. Not 92%. A full 100%. 'They're wrong, I'm right'. After 18 months in the job, she was moved back to her home country and replaced with a local national.

TRIPWIRE # 6: STOPPING LEARNING: EVERYTHING I NEED TO KNOW, I ALREADY KNOW

You have a wall plastered with degrees and certificates, some from prestigious institutions. You have a track record of success. You've made a lot of money. You are the most successful person in your family. People LISTEN when you speak. It's all good. Then you get a new job. In a different country. With a new, weird language that's hard to pronounce. You are managing products and services that you broadly understand but the way of doing business out here seems really weird. What's a General Manager to do?

Psychological Dissonance

There's a concept in psychology called dissonance. Most people experience this when they come up against contradictory information or stuff that they just don't understand. It's a form of confusion, even mental pain. One way to overcome dissonance is to make a quick decision to get rid of the confusion: Example: "*Ok, things are a bit different, but it's all surface stuff. Fundamentally, everything is the same. The best way to manage in the NEW environment*

is to continue to manage the way I did in the OLD environment". Voila. The dissonance will disappear. You have a strategy. That's the good news. The bad news is that you might be headed 180° in the wrong direction. Oops!

Location Example

Japanese executives work legendary long hours and find it hard to keep up with their social network. Coupled with the heavy attendance requirement, they often have a long commute to work, sometimes staying over in the city during the workweek. So, it can be difficult for them to keep up with family contacts. A couple of years back a new service was launched in Japan to address this. Japanese executives would hire 'out of work' actors (90% of actors are out of work at any one moment in time).

The actors would 'visit' their parents on their behalf. The parents, of course, were able to distinguish between the actors and their real offspring, but nevertheless paraded them around the local village – as a visible sign of their children's success (the ability to pay the actors) and their thoughtfulness! Could you see this service catching on in Ireland? Maybe it's the next big thing, a way to relaunch the Celtic Tiger. I don't think so.

Local Knowledge

Now, do you still believe that you have nothing to learn about local culture? New executives must understand the local market, culture and the company's relationship with existing customers. It's not that you have to jettison everything you already know; you just layer new stuff as an overlay. And you have to be comfortable with 'not knowing' and see learning as an adventure. Go slow at the front end. Soak it up. Enjoy learning about the differences.

Case Example

Terry was a Canadian executive who came to work in Ireland. He was a lawyer in the Oil Business. The first thing that he complained about was the Irish roads ("*Absolutely F*****g Awful!*") and the road signage (he might have a point there). Then the house that had been rented for him was 'dirty' (it wasn't). His office space was too small and he "just couldn't believe how grey the weather is" (somehow confusing Ireland with Bermuda). Terry was a clever guy, if a bit humorless, but this assignment didn't get off to a good start. Or get much better. He continued to harangue the local staff with the core message: 'This is definitely not Canada'. Terry was eventually fired and then had loads of time to spend in Toronto. If I seem somewhat less than sympathetic, that's because I am. He was given a lot of support and empathy when he arrived. When things were not going well, he was supported by the local company and by his direct line manager in the USA. And he was given very direct feedback on 'easing off' on the message that things were not up to his expectations. Terry seemed to be on a 'mission to leave' from the time he set foot on the island. And, inevitably, he got what he wished. He stopped learning at the gates of law school and at the borders of Canada. And anyone who has stopped learning is dead, and his or her career has already begun to rot.

TRIPWIRE # 7: INABILITY TO CHANGE DESPITE FEEDBACK

The final tripwire revolves around an executives' ability to adapt to changes required during personal and organizational transitions. It can have several dimensions, including a failure to adapt to a new boss with a different style, overdependence on a single skill or an inability to adapt to the demands of a changing market.

Clear Feedback

In my consulting role, I have been involved in many cases which had reached this point i.e. organizations ask an outsider to 'intervene', sometimes as a last ditch effort to underscore the importance/consequences of 'not changing' (when I worked in General Electric, a phrase in common usage was: 'If you can't change the people, change the people'). I have occasionally given very blunt feedback to executives on areas where they needed to improve, when softer approaches were just not delivering. Do they realize how they are seen? Are they really hearing what their boss is saying? How does their 360 results stack up against their peer group? For a variety of reasons, soon-to-become derailed managers are often unable or unwilling to learn from feedback.

They say: *"Yes, that's true but..."* (and go on to show they believe it's not true).

They say: *"That's really useful, the most direct feedback I've ever received"* (and subsequently do nothing to indicate that it was actually useful).

They say: *"It's a lot to take on board. Can you give me a bit of time"* (as a way to end an uncomfortable session and then simply ignore the feedback).

Case Example

I was coaching a senior player in France. We had a couple of sessions together where the problems were identified and we tried to come up with an action plan. The problem was his new boss, a US executive who was 'hard charging' (but seemed to me to be OK). The French manager kept giving me lists of all the things his boss was doing wrong, the 5 Sorrowful Mysteries. *"Let me tell you another thing that he did last week"*. And so on. I told him: *"There is only one way that this game can end. It's going to be 1-0 in favour of your boss"*. He really didn't change because he didn't believe he needed to. In fact, his view of the world was that his boss should change. I reminded him of the old line: *"I might not always be right, but I'm always the boss"*. He didn't buy it (there was a cultural arrogance in the mix here i.e. the 'French way' of doing things was seen to be superior – like a Louis Vitton handbag compared to a cheap Asian knock off). He was eventually fired. He must have forgotten (or perhaps never learned) that old lesson: Do you let your behavior reflect your feelings or your objectives?

PREVENTING DERAILMENT: HOW CAN YOU OVERCOME THE TRIPWIRES?

While there is no panacea, there are some things that organizations and individual managers can do in advance to lesson the risk of stumbling on one of the tripwires identified. There are 4 'choice options', measured according to the depth of interventions. For ease of communications, I've labeled these 'do nothing', 'shallow end', 'mid point' and 'deep dive' interventions.

Do Nothing

In some organizations, the default style, is to do nothing. The need for preparation for an international assignment is simply not recognized. The underpinning philosophy is 'sink or swim' (sometimes the result of throwing a manager in at the deep end is a condition called DROWNING!). Even where the inherent risks are recognized, the cost of prevention is not seen to be 'worth it' versus simply firing managers who don't make the cut. Several US based multi-nationals have a philosophy around promotions, rooted in the military ideal 'up or out' (good talent, like cream, rises to the top without any active intervention). They know that it produces some winners. And some losers. And they accept that as the price of being in the game (albeit, I suspect that a lot of these organizations have never fully debated this and massively underestimate the cost of derailment).

Shallow End

At the 'lighter end' of the spectrum, organizations should at least have 'forced conversations' with the executive and his/her family to ensure this is the right decision for them. Questions like: Do you feel that you are ready for this appointment now? How does your partner feel about potentially moving & living overseas? Do the kids think this is a good idea? From a career perspective, is the gain worth the pain? Do you feel that if you came home, it would be tantamount to an admission of failure? What do you need to do now, to get ready for this? And so on.

Mid Point

Some companies recognize that you move whole 'families' – not just executives – and teenage kids often do not see the full benefit of 'embracing a new culture'. Letting the person and their family have a 'quick look' at the new location can be helpful as is the establishment of a Buddy system e.g. someone to help the family settle and manage the logistics around moving, finding new schools and electric toothbrushes that work on 220 volts. The family also need to understand the 'normal' psychology of international moves (initial high, followed by a depression/low, tapering off into an acceptance phase). A subtle, but important consideration, is choosing the right location for each manager. Without doubt, some countries are hardship posts, where Murphy's Law applies ('Whatever might go wrong, will go wrong'). The ex-patriates who have been on the circuit a long-time tend to choose the plum locations (e.g. Switzerland) where everything works well and avoid places where life can be more difficult (e.g. Nigeria). Perhaps, your organization should consider reversing this, by making the initial overseas stints easier?

Deep Dive

At the deepest level, some companies have very sophisticated systems for managing overseas assignments. Potential 'overseas' managers have to be willing to work on some relatively tough developmental issues. Improvement in the areas described in this paper requires that managers take an in-depth look at self-esteem and their ability to deal with new and ambiguous situations. Understanding how to relate comfortably to others, to learn in the face of change or to let go of personal achievement in favor of team-empowerment. The learning involved can be highly

emotional, and demands an elevated level of maturity by General Managers and a relatively high investment cost for the company to cover off on these issues really well.

Conclusions

Most organizations don't take a benign view of General Manager underperformance. Once a position is accepted, the executive is expected to perform. Very few transfer back to the starting line with the organization taking the 'hit' for a poor judgement call. That would mean someone accepting that they had made a mistake in recruitment; much easier to blame the executive e.g. *"She didn't really work out"*. For derailed managers, moving overseas is usually a 1-way ticket.

While not everyone can be a star, the organization challenge is to find slots where General Managers can perform at their very best. The points outlined in this paper, highlight a number of common 'tripwires' and methods to avoid these and facilitate smooth transitions⁵. The goal is to reduce the failure rate of managers moving overseas and decrease the time needed for them to take charge in a new job. At the heart of this is a partnership between the organization and the individual, taking ongoing responsibility for making the posting work and not 'swimming away' from underperformance or difficult-to-address issues, which from time to time will occur.

Taking an overseas posting can be hugely developmental for an executive and his/her family. It is also a great way for an organization to ensure that their international plans are staffed with the best available talent. It's therefore a potential win:win scenario. You just need to make sure that it works really well. As a final point, I like to believe that most of my coaching clients get promoted, rather than fired. In this particular discussion piece, we've focused on people becoming derailed. Thankfully, that does not happen too often and most international moves can be navigated successfully. Bon Voyage!

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⁵ For a broader discussion, see for examples: Downey et al., 2001; Watkins, 2003; Vollhardt, 2005.

SUMMARY PROFILE

PAUL MOONEY

Paul Mooney holds a Ph.D. and a Post-Graduate Diploma in Industrial Sociology from Trinity College, along with a National Diploma in Industrial Relations (Distinction) from the National College of Ireland. Paul is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and is widely recognised as an expert on organisation and individual change.

Paul began his working life as a butcher in Dublin. After completing a formal apprenticeship, he moved into production management. He subsequently joined General Electric and held a number of human resource positions in manufacturing. After G.E, Paul worked with Sterling Drug in Ireland and the Pacific Rim, with responsibility for all personnel activity across South East Asia.

On his return to Ireland, he established a management consulting company specialising in providing clients with customised Organisation and Management Development solutions. Between 2007 and 2010, Paul held the position of President, National College of Ireland. In February 2010 he moved back into the consulting arena, setting up Tandem Consulting, a team of senior organisation development and change specialists. **He has run consulting assignments in 20+ countries.**

Paul is the author of ten books covering a wide span of issues and topics around organisation performance and personal change. Areas of expertise include:

- Organisational Development/Change & conflict resolution
- Leadership Development/Executive Coaching
- Human Resource Management/employee engagement

Check out the blog 'Confessions of a Consultant'

<http://tandemconsulting.wordpress.com>

