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Careers

What to Do If Your Career Is Stalled and You Don't Know Why

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Summary. The careers of talented executives are often derailed by seemingly trivial issues, many of which are utterly fixable. Think of these types of issues as “pandas.” Pandas look innocent, but their powerful jaws deliver a bite stronger than a jaguars’. Pandas can be painfully costly to individuals whose careers stall for reasons unbeknownst to them and to organizations and managers unable to develop talented leaders to their full potential. [close](#)

A CEO whom we’ll call Melissa was exasperated. Having delivered seven years of breakthrough performance and nearing retirement, she was eager to select and prepare her successor. Members of her executive team were strong in their current roles but none was quite right for the top job.

As we considered a broader group of potential candidates, the CHRO chimed in with an idea: “What about Tom? He is very strategic and his teams would take the hill for him. He might be worth looking at as an option.” Then the CHRO paused for a moment and added, “Of course there is this issue of his executive presence. Tom often hogs the spotlight in meetings unaware of how that alienates his peers. And...well...I don’t know how to put this, but he has noticeable body odor that’s a real turnoff.” Melissa agreed: “Tom is a brilliant business mind, but I just can’t see him representing our company.” As it turns out, for eighteen years Tom had received stellar performance reviews and top bonuses on the strength of his performance. “Executive presence” was

mentioned in several reviews as an improvement area, but without any specifics, Tom had no idea what the real issue was and how damaging it could be to his career.

Having assessed over 2,000 CEOs and over 18,000 C-suite leaders since 1995, we are struck by how often careers of talented executives stall or even derail because of seemingly trivial issues, many of which are utterly fixable. We call these types of issues “pandas.” Pandas look innocent, but their powerful jaws deliver a bite stronger than a jaguars’. Pandas can be painfully costly to individuals whose careers stall for reasons unbeknownst to them and to organizations and managers unable to develop talented leaders to their full potential.

To better understand this phenomenon, we analyzed a sample of 113 strong performers who were finalists for C-suite roles but got turned down in the final decision round. In reviewing detailed assessments of their capabilities, we uncovered that 62% had at least one “panda” issue and 10% had more than one. Furthermore, for 35% of these executives, “pandas” were considered among the top three risks identified with respect to this individual’s fit to a role. Often these pandas live on for years, seemingly innocent, but ultimately gnaw at the career trajectory of otherwise talented leaders.

Our analysis uncovered the most common types of “pandas”:

- 36% of pandas related to executive presence
- 28% related to communication style
- 29% related to peer-level relationships
- The remaining 7% included excessive optimism and perfectionism

We'll now examine each.

Executive presence. This is an ill-defined catchall for a multitude of issues from the seemingly trivial but career damaging body odor, to deeper challenges, such as when someone doesn't carry herself/himself in a way consistent with company culture. Often executives who fail to appear confident get comments about lackluster executive presence. Dismiss this panda at your peril: Our research shows highly confident executives were 2.5 times more likely to be hired. This reminds us of Brian, a brilliant investment professional at a top firm who was passed over for promotion to partner due to his poor executive presence. Asked to coach Brian, we gathered extensive feedback from his colleagues and external parties. It turns out that while respected for his intellect, Brian showed up as meek and understated, leaving others with a perception that he was junior and not ready to represent the firm as a partner. We helped Brian identify and address the specific behaviors that created this perception and today he is a highly profitable partner at the firm.

Communication style. Complaints about communication style usually concern how one speaks up (or doesn't) in various forums. One's communication style shapes first impressions and can have a significant impact on career trajectory. Lagging on communication effectiveness showed up as a risk area for 28% of executives we analyzed. Take Jim, a front-runner CFO candidate for a leading medical device manufacturer on the verge of an IPO. Jim's resume checked all of the boxes (and then some), but his Achilles' heel was a long-winded, almost philosophical communication style — more befitting a cerebral academic than a bottom-line-oriented CFO who can drive performance and credibly represent the company with the investment community.

Our research shows that candidates who used more esoteric, intellectual, or “ivory tower” vocabulary were, eight times less likely to be hired compared to candidates who used more colloquial language. Down-to-earth storytelling, drawing on memorable results, is vastly more powerful than a cerebral, academic style.

Another common communication pitfall has to do with use of “we” and “I.” The weakest candidates for C-suite roles used “I” at twice the rate of the rest of the sample. The most successful candidates are clear about their individual contributions without overusing “I.” Candidates who go on and on with their own accomplishments impress decision makers less than the ones who

say, “My proudest achievement was the moment the team began to knock it out of the park” — and then clearly explain their role in the group’s achievement.

About the Research

This article is based on research conducted over 10 years in support of our recently published book, *The CEO Next Door* (Currency, 2018). ghSMART has assembled a data set of assessments of over 18,000 C-suite executives across all major industry sectors and company sizes. Each executive assessment includes detailed career and educational histories; performance appraisals; and information on patterns of behavior, decisions, and business results. This data was gathered through structured interviews with every executive.

Finally, we were disappointed to uncover that CEO candidates for United States-based companies who had a significant accent were 12 times less likely to be hired. While in-group bias is a deep and persistent issue in hiring, we found that at least for some of these executives their insufficient language fluency lead them to be perceived as less competent than they were and that as this bias was brought to light and they worked to improve fluency and reduce the accent, their career trajectory improved.

Peer relationships. We often see talented executives hitting home runs in their own division and striking out with their peer group. Take Denise, a talented marketing executive who has helped reinvigorate some of the world's most iconic retail brands. What ultimately cost Denise a coveted CMO job was a pattern of poor peer relationships. Her performance reviews were filled with praise from her bosses and her direct reports for her excellent results and relentless passion, but her peers believed that her own advancement mattered more to her than a team win. Individuals like Denise often do extremely well in the middle management ranks but stall out on the path to the C-suite, because they seem unable or unwilling to think beyond their own division or function. This is easier said than done, especially as powerful corporate incentive systems often reward achievement of individual targets. Furthermore, structural conflicts across functions are common in large complex organizations, leaving peers to fight for finite resources or at odds over projects and issues. Yet, leaders with the highest potential find ways to deliver on their target while also playing for the team.

Our CEO Genome research uncovered that stronger candidates for leadership positions are more effective at persuading others, including their peers. We also found that high-performing CEOs are more likely than lower performers to treat others with respect (73% of the high-performing versus 59% of low-performing). They

may break glass when needed to deliver results but over the longer term they build strong followership and the reputation for doing what's right for the business.

So, why do these dangerous pandas go unaddressed for so long? The problem is both on the giving and receiving side of feedback. For a manager delivering feedback, these issues seem so personal and almost trivial that it's hard to raise them directly, especially with a strong performer. It is easier to skirt the problem, especially when it doesn't hinder current performance. And as a receiver of feedback, we often dismiss pandas as unimportant "nice to haves" or at times contradictory to our values. I should be judged on my performance, not on airtime in a meeting! Unfortunately, as we have seen in our research, avoiding these difficult conversations or not acting on the feedback will damage the careers of talented individuals.

As a manager, your responsibility is to develop your team by delivering candid feedback with caring courage. By dodging it, you are actually doing a disservice to your direct report and to your team as a whole. No matter how uncomfortable, you need to be clear about the feedback. Offer specific examples and describe the impact one's actions — or inactions — have on the individual's ability to reach their goals in the current role as well as on his or her upside potential.

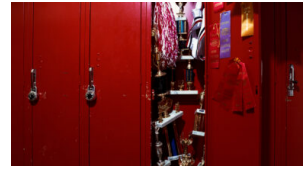
As a feedback recipient, don't be misled by the innocent appearance of a panda. If one appears in your review, ask clarifying questions to get to the root and specifics of what you are doing, as well as how it is impacting your performance and other's perceptions of your performance and potential. If you are still not getting a straight answer from your manager, engage a third party to provide candid expert feedback. Don't let the dangerously innocuous pandas maul your career.

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