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## Career road hazards

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**By Dora Vell**

Underemployment and just plain unemployment has been a hard reality for many C-level executives during the past four years. An unscheduled career disruption for many top-tier players, it's a situation that leaves both potential employers and stalled executives wondering what caused the professional slowdown.

In many cases, blind spots — areas requiring improvement that an executive is unaware of — are responsible for this stagnation. Unfortunately for executives pursuing coveted jobs, potential employers aren't so blind. That's because due diligence reveals the cause behind the career blockage during screening. The result: A derailed job candidacy and a frustrated executive.

Ironically, career success makes executives especially vulnerable to blind spots. While executive stars know their strengths and weaknesses, career progress and the self confidence it naturally creates distracts them from the important task of re-calibrating their skills and leadership style.

Fine tuning expertise is essential because the higher position the more precisely the candidate and job need to fit. As well, their value to the corporation makes it difficult for others to give constructive feedback. Extremely hazardous, especially in a rebounding economy when great jobs aren't publicized and competition has increased, these blind spots can stop cold an otherwise talented executive's career progress.

While finding one's blind spot is challenging, it can be uncovered through periodic investigations where skills, expertise and leadership

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style are veraciously assessed. When an issue is uncovered, it needs to be addressed and defused immediately.

To uncover your blind spots while sustaining career momentum, you must balance your goals and credentials with your targeted organization's needs, temperament and culture. Without this dual focus, discovering the reasons behind a career stall is unlikely. There are six steps to uncovering blind spots.

1. Verbalize your interest in, and strategically pursue, constructive feedback: Feedback from hiring professionals is a critical part of the discovery process but confidentiality issues coupled with concerns about damaging a relationship makes them hesitant to provide detailed information. Be open-minded and effectively convey your interest in an honest assessment. Also, cultivate rapport with these contacts to maximize potential feedback. Send an article or in some way assist with business goals and you may receive a more honest and productive assessment.
2. Identify winning candidates' key attributes: Review news releases detailing winning candidates' history and strengths. Compare them to yours. You may find their experience offered something yours doesn't. If not, direct your attention to your leadership style and executive presence. Understanding their distinguishing attributes helps determine how you differ.
3. Survey objectively your career history: Find a non-invested adviser with relevant industry and hiring experience — a career coach or industry friend with more seniority — to review your experience, highlighting strengths, outlining areas for improvement and, if possible, suggesting strategies to enhance your situation.
4. Inspect and refine your interview performance: Executive presence such as poise, confidence, self-awareness and manners are critical to making a strong and positive impression. Make sure yours is effective. If not, devise strategies to improve it. Be polite to everyone, from the receptionist to board members. Expect tough questions about your background and be ready with honest, confident responses. Avoid blaming external factors for professional mistakes since — whether miscalculations were your fault — having an external locus of control is a red flag for most interviewers. Find another way to explain failures or accept responsibility in a forthright manner, articulating what was learned and move on.
5. Obtain help and hire a professional: If you're not sure how to improve your interview performance, hire an executive assessment firm. Let them know you're looking for real time qualitative feedback and confirm they've assessed individuals at your level and the level you're shooting for. It can be a relatively small investment that yields significant dividends in the form of a new job or promotion.

These experts can help you to effectively position yourself and your experience as well as assess your subconscious messaging. The “hidden” communications from body language, attitudes, biases and preferences conveyed in your responses are very informative to interviewers. Yet, most people are oblivious to these cues and what they’re conveying to others. Written reports are very effective tools, helping to ensure feedback is both understood and remembered. Ask for one.

6. Note and address negative references and/or background checks: Determine whether your references’ are providing strong recommendations — positive and balanced assessments that aren’t excessively glowing. Make sure your references aren’t speaking negatively about you; a minefield that can be avoided by first asking people to be a reference. Most people will decline if they’re unable to offer a positive assessment.

While they’re harder to manage, blind references — professional contacts called without your knowledge — can create significant roadblocks. Try to determine if negative ones exist and, if they do, work to diminish their impact, avoid them or, if all else fails, use a third party to tell the individual it’s blocking your progress. This last step may be difficult only because it requires determining the source, a challenging task made more so by confidentiality issues.

From credit reviews to substance abuse testing, today’s formalized background checks are exhaustive and can eliminate front-runners. If you have concerns, spend a few thousands dollars and determine yourself what’s being uncovered. If there is a transgression, the best strategy is to tell the company ahead of time.

Typically it’s not the offense but the lack of candor that eliminates the candidate.

Uncovering blind spots delivers great rewards. Not only can it restart a stalled career but it provides renewed confidence in your abilities. Always remember, periodic soft and hard skill assessments are critical to maintaining perfect vision.

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