

# How Change Fatigue Derails Teams

Derailers, in Hogan terms, are everyday personality strengths that can become overused—particularly during times of increased stress, pressure, or complacency. When we stop monitoring our strengths, our behaviors can become detrimental. Someone who tends to be supportive and loyal to authority, for example, could begin to seem excessively deferential and ingratiating. Derailment in the individual sense could hold a person back from performing well or achieving occupational goals. But what happens when the whole team derails?

Team derailment can take various forms, depending on the composition of the team’s derailers. Team members might seem apathetic or disengaged. They might stall or miss deadlines. They might produce low-quality work. They might show indifference or resistance to innovation. They might lack alignment on goals or exhibit internal mistrust. However team derailment may manifest, it can damage trust and destroy efficiency.

One common cause of team derailment is change fatigue, which can be described as “emotional fatigue from the recent avalanche of change.”<sup>1</sup> Global, cultural, social, and local change has been so widespread in recent years that teams now struggle to tolerate organizational change—even minor changes that they used to adapt to with ease.

In other words, experiencing too much change within a short timeframe has affected our collective stress tolerance. This article explores change fatigue, two types of team derailment, and how versatile leaders can restore team balance.

## What Is Change Fatigue?

Change fatigue can occur when people experience a volatile, unpredictable, complex, and uncertain (VUCA) environment. It can emerge when nothing seems constant or reliable and when individuals are required to flex and adapt too often over a long period of time. The effects of change fatigue can include increased stress, decreased flexibility, and difficulty navigating change.

Teams can become susceptible to change fatigue when their overall versatility is naturally low or has been weakened in a VUCA environment. Leadership consultant Rob Kaiser defines versatility as “the ability to read and respond to change with a wide repertoire of complementary perspectives, skills, and behaviors.”<sup>2</sup> This characteristic is an essential socioemotional skill in the modern workplace. It’s also a key aspect of successful leadership, which we define as the ability to build and maintain high-performing teams. Versatility is tied to these four leadership competencies: (1) Dealing with Ambiguity, (2) Anticipating Problems, (3) Flexibility, and (4) Driving Change.

On an individual level, people navigate change differently according to their personality characteristics. The Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI) scale Adjustment concerns composure and how we manage stress. The Hogan Development Survey (HDS) scale Excitability measures behaviors ranging from emotional calmness to emotional explosiveness.



Other Hogan scales may also indicate how likely we are to resist or embrace change. The HPI scale Prudence measures flexibility and tolerance of ambiguity. The HDS scales Skeptical and Cautious regard trust and risk tolerance respectively. The Motives, Values, Preferences Inventory (MVPI) scale Tradition relates to attitudes toward progress and principles, and the MVPI scale Security relates to attitudes toward structure and predictability.

A team's ability to tolerate change can impact its collective success. How can a team mitigate the risk of change fatigue? And what can leaders do if the team has already derailed?

## How Do Teams Derail?

Hogan Director of Solution Delivery and Learning Jennifer Lowe, MA, describes team derailment as derailleurs "going haywire." An expert in team development sessions, Lowe emphasizes the role of the HDS and MVPI in understanding what divides teams and what can bring them together again.

### ► Two Types of Team Derailment

The 11 HDS scales measure strengths that can become overused when change fatigue or other factors lessen people's ability to monitor their behavior. There are two types of team derailment, which often occur at the same time:

- **Shared derailment** – Many team members may share an elevation on an HDS scale. This shared derailer can impact the team's reputation. A Reserved team in derailment may be seen as siloed, unavailable, or uninvolved. A Bold team in derailment will likely appear arrogant, ambitious, entitled, and limit-testing.
- **Individual derailment** – When a team operates in derailer mode, its team members' unique elevated HDS scales may all be in derailment. The various individual derailleurs tend to intensify each other. When a high Bold team member arrogantly tests limits, a high Reserved team member responds with withdrawal and isolation. All these simultaneously out-of-control derailleurs usually result in underperformance, misalignment, and poor communication.

When a team is overwhelmed by change, team members probably won't manage their derailleurs as effectively as they might during times of stability. So what can help? The solutions to addressing team derailment and change fatigue can be found in shared values—and versatile leadership.

### ► The Role of Shared Values

While the HDS can identify how the team is derailing, using the MVPI to explore shared values can help identify why. When Lowe addresses change fatigue in a team development session, she usually starts with the HDS and ends with the MVPI. "Teams tend to perform better if there are a couple of things that pull them together," Lowe explained.

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The 10 values measured on the MVPI can reveal what grounds a team. They can also indicate what shared values might improve communication. Shared values help team members recognize how everyone works together so that change doesn't feel so challenging.

Lowe has a story about a team development session that illustrates how values affect team alignment. Once, she conducted a team session for the chief information officer of a US financial company. Personality data from the team members showed that about 70% of them scored high on the MVPI Security scale and about 30% scored low. Furthermore, the team leader had the overall lowest score on Security. The Security scale is associated with valuing certainty and predictability and minimizing risk and criticism.

During the session, the team created a metaphor to describe their team dynamics. The team compared themselves to a soccer team full of players who couldn't admit to the coach that they needed some time on the bench. The low-scoring leader tended to take chances, test limits, and make quick changes, while the high-scoring team valued caution and consistency. Using these insights, Lowe challenged the leader and team to have a frank conversation about how each perceived and valued change.

It's incumbent on leaders to set the example for how the team navigates change. Leaders who understand derailers and values can empower team members to feel secure and confident in themselves, their teammates, and their leader.

## What Can Leaders Do About Change Fatigue?

Leadership isn't a job title—it's accomplishing goals by means of team performance. The responsibility for team efficiency, communication, and coherence ultimately belongs to the leader.

Leaders of teams who are derailing from change fatigue can implement these four action steps to help restore team unity:

**Build Self-Awareness** – A leader's unchecked derailers tend to set off a chain reaction of derailers in team members. Take steps to exercise strategic self-awareness and learn to manage your derailers. Develop a repertoire of behavioral strategies to rely on for building relationships and communication.

**Show Transparency** – A leader who is transparent about their own vulnerabilities and derailing tendencies contributes to the team's sense of connection and belonging. When team cohesion is strong, individual employees have nearly twice the capacity to handle change than those in teams with lower team cohesion.<sup>3</sup>

**Be Consistent** – Limit unnecessary changes to avoid inundating an overwhelmed team with constantly or suddenly changing priorities. When change is necessary, set expectations by introducing change with the right tone.<sup>4</sup> It's important to frame the plan as an adaptable blueprint that is expected to flex.

**Pace Yourself** – “Know when to set strategy on hold to create space for well-being,” Lowe says. Sometimes you need to slow down now to speed back up later.

Ready to learn more about how Hogan can help your organization avoid change fatigue?

Contact Us



## References

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