

# Develop Leadership Strength Over Weakness

Jack Zenger - 10/3/12

Instead of focusing on correcting one's weaknesses, research shows that building one's strengths makes leaders more effective.

Like a giant pendulum swinging, there has been a dramatic shift in the world of leadership development. The traditional approach has been to help people discover their weaknesses and then relentlessly chip away at the gravest of the bunch. The logic here is seemingly impeccable. Weaknesses tend to be responsible for pulling managers down, and if someone corrected their weakness, they would be likely to rise upward.

In the past few years, however, a different approach to helping a leader succeed has emerged. Instead of focusing on the negative side of a leader's behavior, the focus has swung to analyzing what they do well and how they can improve.

While the idea has been addressed by Peter Drucker, who some might call the father of modern management, it did not take hold. Only recently has this thinking started to have broader acceptance.

Following Drucker, a number of other researchers and practitioners have supported such thinking; many have published their ideas on the subject in books, such as *Flow* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and *Soar With Your Strengths* by Don Clifton, one of the founders of the Gallup organization. Of late, researchers such as Martin Seligman have reinforced these ideas in books such as *Authentic Happiness* and *Flourish*.

The supporting evidence and logic behind the development of strengths is based on several factors. Research by Joe Folkman on 24,657 leaders who had participated in 360-degree feedback assessments and who each had at least seven respondents showed that regardless of how much effort they spent on correcting weaknesses, their efforts would only bring them to the midpoint on the overall measure of effectiveness.

Correcting weaknesses would bring those at the lower end of the bell-shaped curve upwards to the middle, but never propelled them to the upper half of the curve. Similarly, being generally good on many competencies did not place someone in the top half of the distribution. But when someone excelled at three to five competencies — defined as being at the 90th percentile or above — they were highly likely to be one of any organization's top-tier leaders.

Folkman's research in particular also confirmed that those working on strengths had roughly twice the gain as those working on weaknesses. Moreover, such gains extended to other competencies, while those working on weaknesses showed nothing to the effect. In other words, when individuals focus on building a strength they tended to increase their effectiveness in other areas as well.

Logic would argue that leaders would rather put efforts into expanding a strength in favor of working on a weakness. The reason why something was a weakness to start with is probably because it was not something the individual enjoyed doing or did not do well. Strengths, on the other hand, are usually more fun to pursue, therefore the motivation is increased.

In the last decade, as more organizations have shifted their development to this approach, there has been one potential misunderstanding. There is a time when leaders should work on a weakness.

This occurs when the weakness is so apparent that it has a devastatingly negative impact on a person's overall effectiveness. The good news is that because the individual is starting from such a low base, he or she can show dramatic gains in overcoming a fatal flaw. The problem is overcoming this weakness still gets the individual to ground zero.

Despite the encouragement to work on strengths, many organizations have observed that leaders still gravitate back to working on a weakness — this impedes leaders from improving as much as those who have worked on strengths. The same Zenger Folkman research found that 70 percent of participants will drift back to working on a weakness, when less than 30 percent have any that could be defined as a “fatal flaw.”

It is difficult for people to even carefully read through the comments made to them about their strengths. They immediately want to pass these by and move on to read comments that describe whether others perceive them having any potential fatal flaws.

Those responsible for leadership development can anticipate that it will take diligence and persistence to change this somewhat ingrained habit. Maybe this can be explained by our cultural norm of acting with modesty and humility.

There may be other explanations. However, the math suggests, based on the Zenger Folkman analysis, that only 28 percent of leaders have a fatal flaw, arguing that the remaining 72 percent of leaders should be focused on building their strengths.

By not doing that, this large group is failing to benefit from the advantages of the building-on-strengths approach. Their leadership development efforts may still have an impact, but their effort will be sub-optimized.

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