CHAPTER 5

WHEN STRENGTHS RUN AMOK

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John was known as a “fix-it” manager. His career consisted of one turnaround after another. He had a string of early successes improving non-performing teams then fixing troubled manufacturing plants. Later in his career he turned around a business drowning in red ink. When John was promoted to executive vice president of a profitable division, he was widely admired for his masterful problem solving, deep technical knowledge, and thorough understanding of operations.

But John’s tremendous depth came at a tremendous cost: he lacked breadth. John didn’t have a broad view of the division and how the different parts fit together. In particular, he did not appreciate staff functions or grasp how to use them to support the business. His network of contacts across the organization was limited. He also did not understand how taking over a profitable business called for him to lead differently from leading a turnaround. It was nine months into his new job and he still felt like a fish out of water, struggling to articulate a strategy for keeping pace as new technologies emerged and fickle customer demand began to change.

John’s story is not a corporate anomaly. Everywhere we look, we find managers whose impressive strengths, ironically, contain the seeds of their undoing. In the previous chapter, Morgan McCall provided a conceptual account of the many ways in which “strengths become weaknesses.” In this chapter, we elaborate on that idea by providing statistical data on strengths, how few managers know their strengths, how not knowing their strengths makes them liable to overuse them, and how overusing a strength often comes at the expense of opposing but complementary leadership skills and approaches. We also show how these neglected problems with strengths hamper a manager’s effectiveness as well as the performance of his or her team. The chapter concludes with solutions for correcting blind spots in the practice of management assessment and development that leave the problems associated with overused strengths undiagnosed.

**Most Managers Don’t Know their Strengths**

The late Peter Drucker constantly advised managers to build on their strengths. However, this seemingly straightforward advice is complicated by his observation that, “Most people think they know what they are good at; they are usually wrong.” Recent research in social psychology and on 360-degree feedback shows just how perceptive was this philosopher of modern management.

**Competence and Self-Awareness**

A 1999 study of competence and self-awareness by two social psychologists at Cornell University, Justin Kruger and David Dunning, caught the attention of the popular press with its clever title, “Unskilled and Unaware.” The study compared objective ability to perceived ability in the diverse areas of humor, grammar, and logical reasoning. What the media focused on was the finding that the least skilled individuals grossly over-estimated their abilities. The least skilled estimated their abilities to be well above average despite scoring in the bottom 25% on objective measures. While perhaps humorous to those who have spent time with people who are “too big for their britches,” the surprising finding was at the high end of the skill continuum: the people who were most skilled according to objective
measures actually rated their own performance closer to average. Follow-up research determined that the most talented individuals held the misguided belief that other people are as capable, or more capable, than they are and that their own ability is not extraordinary.

This general finding that the most talented people tend to underestimate their strengths is consistent with research on 360-degree feedback. Studies comparing self-ratings to coworker ratings find that the most effective managers underrate themselves compared to coworkers. The strongest performers do not see what they do well as clearly as their coworkers see it. More than a curiosity, these distorted self-perceptions have consequences. Eichinger and Lombardo tracked a cohort of middle managers over time. They found that many of the over-raters’ careers had stalled or even derailed, while the under-raters were more likely to get promoted. The researchers concluded that the under-raters were eager learners, open to feedback, set higher standards for themselves, and were never satisfied, constantly seeking self-improvement.

Talented and Unaware

In our work with executives, we find a similar trend. For instance, we compared the self-ratings of over 400 upper-level managers to their coworkers’ ratings on the question, “Overall, how effective is this person as a leader on a ten-point scale, where 5 is adequate and 10 is outstanding?” (See Sidebar 1 for a description of the sample.)

Sidebar 1.
Research Sample and Measures

Sample. The research reported in this chapter is based on data for 421 upper-level managers who received 360-degree feedback in either a leadership development program or for executive coaching. One hundred and sixty four of the managers described their organizational level as “Executive,” while 257 indicated “General Management.” The sample represents over fifteen different companies based in North America and spans several industries (e.g., high-tech, consumer products, financial services, manufacturing, construction, energy). The majority of managers are male (79%).

In addition to self-assessments, ratings were also collected from a total of 4,202 coworkers—621 superiors, 1,680 peers, and 1,901 subordinates. Typically, each manager was rated by one or two superiors, four peers, and four or five subordinates.

To simplify interpretation of the results, all analyses were based on either self-ratings or the average rating computed across all coworkers for a given individual.

Measures. Three survey-based measures of leadership effectiveness were used. Each measure was rated by the focal manager as well as his or her coworkers.

1. Overall effectiveness was measured with the question, “Please rate this person’s overall effectiveness as a leader on a ten-point scale where 5 is adequate and 10 is outstanding.” Prior research has demonstrated that this single-item rating is reliable and correlates highly with multi-item scales that measure the perceived effectiveness of individual leaders.

(Sidebar Continues)
When Strengths Run Amok

Using coworker ratings to classify the managers by quartiles ranging from least effective to most effective, the average self- and coworker rating of overall effectiveness for each quartile is presented in Figure 1. In the bottom quartile, the least effective managers tended to overrate their effectiveness. But in the top quartile, the most effective managers underrated their effectiveness, and by a wide margin. Despite being regarded by others as highly effective, they viewed their own performance as about average.

Through assessment-and-development consulting to individual executives, we have found that they often do not know the extent of their own strengths—especially the outstanding ones—and, ironically, they are uncomfortable with feedback about their strengths. When confronted with information that highlights the discrepancy between their self-view and coworker views (and even objective data), they are at no loss for discounting the praise. There are many reasons why executives resist positive feedback. For one, there is the common discomfort with compliments. Most people find it mildly embarrassing to receive praise. Some worry about becoming complacent. Others fear becoming arrogant by letting the positives go to their heads. Strong norms against bragging are also at play. So is the well-documented “negativity bias”—the evolutionary-based tendency to place greater attention on threats than on rewards because threats were more central to the survival of our ancestors.

Sidebar 1. (cont.)

2. Team vitality reflects the favorability of the attitudes collectively held by the subordinates of each manager. This scale contains three items concerning morale, engagement, and cohesiveness that are rated on a five-point scale where higher ratings indicate more favorable attitudes. The internal consistency reliability (coefficient alpha) of this scale in the present sample was .83.

3. Team productivity reflects the productivity level of the team that reports to each manager. This scale contains three items concerning quantity, quality, and overall output that are rated on a 5-point scale where higher ratings indicate more of the attribute in question. The internal consistency reliability (coefficient alpha) of this scale was .84.

Measures of effectiveness were not available for all managers in the sample. Overall effectiveness ratings were available for 411 of the 421 total managers. Team vitality and team productivity ratings were only available for 152 managers (all of whom were self-identified as at the “Executive” level).

Leader behavior was measured with the Leadership Versatility Index® (LVI) 360-degree feedback instrument, which is described in the text under the heading, Measuring Overused Strengths. All 421 managers in the sample were rated on the LVI.
The Perils of Accentuating the Positive

Strengths Overused

When managers underestimate their strengths, it can have a corrupting effect on their performance. Not knowing their strengths, managers are liable to overuse them. This is one way in which strengths become weaknesses.

McCall and Lombardo’s original interview studies at the Center for Creative Leadership of derailed executives introduced the phrase “strengths can become weaknesses.” However, little quantitative research has examined this problem. One reason is because hardly any measures of leadership behavior are designed to pick up when managers go overboard; most measures are based on rating scales with response options ranging from 1 to 5 with the underlying assumption that “more is better.” However, one exception is the Leadership Versatility Index® (LVI) 360-degree feedback instrument.

Measuring Overused Strengths

We designed the Leadership Versatility Index® on the premise that there are two types of performance problems: shortcomings—when managers display too little of an important leadership behavior—and strengths overused—when managers apply a particular behavior too much or with too much intensity. The new rating scale we developed for the LVI ranges from -4 to +4, where values between -4 and -1 represent degrees of doing too little, 0

Figure 1.
Talented and Unaware: Comparing Self-Ratings and Coworker Ratings of Overall Effectiveness

Note: Based on ratings for 411 upper-level managers to the item, “Please rate this leader’s overall effectiveness on a scale from 1 to 10, where 5 is adequate and 10 is outstanding.” The figure shows how managers rated by coworkers in the bottom quartile on overall effectiveness tend to overrate their effectiveness, while managers rated by coworkers in the top quartile tend to underrate their effectiveness.
represents doing the right amount, and values from +1 to +4 represent degrees of doing too much (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2.**

*The Too Little/Too Much Rating Scale*

Note that this rating scale is probably different from scales that you are accustomed to using. On this scale the best score is “0,” in the middle of the scale. The premise is that performance problems arise when managers either do too little or do too much of something.

**WARNING:** Some people misread this scale. Please do not mistake it for one where higher scores are better.


The too little/too much rating scale is applied to 48 specific behavioral items that measure four aspects of leadership with 12 items each. The four dimensions are labeled Forceful, Enabling, Strategic, and Operational. Forceful leadership is defined as exercising power and authority to push for performance and includes taking charge, being decisive, and holding people accountable. Enabling leadership is defined as creating conditions for other people to contribute and includes empowerment, participation, and providing support. Strategic leadership is defined as positioning the organization to be competitive in the future and includes setting direction, growing capability, and supporting innovation. Finally, Operational leadership is defined as focusing the organization to get results in the near term and includes managing the day-to-day details of implementation, conserving resources, and establishing an orderly flow of work.

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and the percentages of managers in the present sample rated as doing too little, the right amount, and too much on the Forceful, Enabling, Strategic, and Operational dimensions.

**Overkill is Everywhere**

As shown in Table 1, managers do in fact overdo each of the four broad dimensions of leadership. Specifically, 38% of managers in the present sample were rated as doing too much Forceful leadership, 12% as doing too much Enabling leadership, only 4% as doing too much Strategic leadership, and 11% as doing too much operational leadership. Our analysis of the results for individual managers found that over half (55%) were rated as doing too much on at least one of the four dimensions.
The Perils of Accentuating the Positive

Table 1.
Means, Standard Deviations, and Proportion of Managers Rated As Doing Too Little, the Right Amount, and Too Much on the LVI Scales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Too little</th>
<th>The right amount</th>
<th>Too much</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forceful</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enabling</td>
<td>-.36</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic</td>
<td>-.44</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Based on ratings averaged across all coworkers. N = 421 upper-level managers.*

Moving from the four broad dimensions to the 48 specific behavioral items, the incidence of overdoing appears even more widespread. Every single manager in the sample was rated as doing too much of at least one specific behavior. Ninety-four percent of the sample was rated as doing too much of five or more specific behaviors. Over half of the sample was rated as doing too much of 10 or more specific behaviors. In other words, the problem of overused strengths is real and pervasive, applying to all managers to some degree and to most managers to a large degree.

Overdoing and Unaware

We next examined the extent to which managers prone to overdoing Forceful, Enabling, Strategic, and Operational leadership recognized this tendency. Of the managers rated by coworkers as doing too much Forceful or Strategic leadership, nearly two-thirds also rated themselves as doing too much (64% for Forceful and 65% for Strategic). However, a minority of the managers rated by coworkers as doing too much Enabling or Operational leadership also rated themselves as doing too much (40% on Enabling, 28% on Operational).

Less than half (47%) of the individuals rated as overdoing it by coworkers on one or more of the four dimensions also rated themselves as overdoing those dimensions. The majority of managers who overuse their strengths evidently do not recognize their tendency to go overboard.

Carried Away by What Comes Easily

Many professionals who use the LVI in executive coaching or as the feedback component in leadership development programs also use a strengths inventory, such as Values in Action (VIA) or the Clifton StrengthsFinder. Managers complete a strengths inventory to identify their areas of natural-born talent, ability, and interest, and their coworkers provide feedback on the LVI to identify how they use those talents, abilities, and interests.

A common finding is that managers tend to overdo behaviors related to their areas of talent—the bigger their hammer, the more every thing looks like a nail. Consider a senior
manager who received his “top five signature themes” or greatest areas of talent on the *Clifton StrengthsFinder*. His top five were “Self-assurance” (confidence and poise), “Activator” (urgency about results), “Achiever” (stamina and hard work), “Focus” (staying on task), and “Command” (controlling and decisive). The coworker feedback on the *LVI* revealed a tendency to be too forceful in his approach and too operational in his focus. This is not surprising: managers tend to engage in behaviors that come easily to them because of innate talent; however, not being aware of these talents, they are likely to overuse them.

**The Costs of Strengths Overused**

It is one thing to document the tendency for managers to overdo behaviors related to their areas of natural-born talent and inclination. It is another matter to determine the impact of going overboard. Using the present sample, we studied the relationship between overdoing Forceful, Enabling, Strategic, and Operational leadership and ratings of the individual’s overall effectiveness as a leader, as well as the performance of his or her team. In all cases, the direct cost of overkill is diminished effectiveness. The *hidden* costs of overkill are equally detrimental, if less immediately obvious.

*Overdoing is Ineffective*

Figure 3 shows the curvilinear relationships between ratings on the four dimensions of leadership behavior and overall effectiveness. For each dimension of behavior the relationship is an inverted-U function, with the highest levels of effectiveness associated with behaviors rated near 0 (*the right amount*). The more a manager is rated as doing *too much* of each dimension, the lower that manager’s rating of overall effectiveness. Moreover, doing *too much* of each dimension is just as deleterious to effectiveness as is doing *too little*.

A similar pattern is evident in the relationships between Forceful, Enabling, Strategic, and Operational leadership and the two measures of the performance of the manager’s team, team vitality and team productivity. Team vitality refers to how team members feel about the work and each other and is measured by morale, engagement, and cohesion. Team productivity represents the results-oriented aspect of team performance and is measured in terms of quality, quantity, and overall output.

Figure 4 shows the curvilinear relationships between ratings on the four dimensions of leadership and team vitality and productivity. Again, the figures show how doing too much of each leadership dimension is associated with lower team performance, just as is doing too little of each dimension. It is interesting to note that overdoing Forceful leadership has a stronger depressing effect on team vitality while overdoing Enabling leadership has a stronger depressing effect on team productivity. Managers who are too tough and aggressive make employees feel worse about the work and each other while managers who are too inclusive and concerned about people have teams that get softer results.

Strengths overused clearly have negative consequences: doing too much of essential leadership behaviors diminishes a manager’s perceived effectiveness and degrades the performance of his or her team.
These findings call into question some applications derived from positive psychology and strengths-based development. Proponents of strengths-based development often hold a “more is better” assumption about strengths; some even deny that one could overdo a strength. One popular intervention has people identify their strengths and then find new ways to apply those strengths. The problem is that this advice can encourage managers to indiscriminately apply their strengths. But when applied at the wrong time and to the wrong degree, overused strengths can cause serious problems for individual careers and the performance of teams and organizations. Furthermore, focusing on the strengths that come naturally begs questions about what doesn’t come so naturally.

As if the direct costs of strengths overused were not harmful enough, there are also hidden costs. In particular, overused strengths crowd out the other side. For instance, managers prone to deciding too quickly often neglect to involve people in the decision-making process. This results in what we refer to as “lopsided leadership.”

**Figure 3.**
Overall Effectiveness as a Function of Forceful, Enabling, Strategic, and Operational Leadership

*Note: Based on average All Coworker ratings for *N* = 411 upper-level managers. Curve functions and multiple correlations (*R* values) are based on quadratic regression analyses. Model statistics are as follows: Forceful *F*(2, 408) = 48.38, *p* < .001; Enabling *F*(2, 408) = 28.63, *p* < .001; Strategic *F*(2, 408) = 61.76, *p* < .001; Operational *F*(2, 408) = 16.19, *p* < .001.*
Figure 4.
*Team Performance as a Function of Forceful, Enabling, Strategic, and Operational Leadership*

![Graphs showing team performance as a function of leadership dimensions](image)

*Note:* Based on average All Coworker ratings for *N* = 152 executives. Curve functions and multiple correlations (R values) are based on quadratic regression analyses. Black dotted lines represent relationships with Team Vitality; solid gray lines represent relationships with Team Productivity. Model statistics are as follows: Forceful and Vitality *F*(2, 149) = 4.53, *p* < .05; Forceful and Productivity *F*(2, 149) = 5.18, *p* < .01; Enabling and Vitality *F*(2, 149) = 13.57, *p* < .001; Enabling and Productivity *F*(2, 149) = 3.99, *p* < .05; Strategic and Vitality *F*(2, 149) = 16.89, *p* < .001; Strategic and Productivity *F*(2, 149) = 6.33, *p* < .01; Operational and Vitality *F*(2, 149) = 5.98, *p* < .01; Operational and Productivity *F*(2, 149) = 5.12, *p* < .01. The curves for the Strategic dimension only extend to the +1 range because no one in the sample was rated higher than that value.

*Lopsided Leadership*

Leadership theorists regularly define the role requirements and behavioral dimensions of leadership in terms of “yin-yang” pairs of opposites—autocratic versus democratic, task-oriented versus people-oriented, initiative versus consideration, internally focused versus externally focused, transactional versus transformational, and so on. These distinctions are represented in the behavioral model covered by the *LVII*. Forceful and Enabling leadership comprise the yin-yang pair of dimensions concerning a leader’s interpersonal style, or how one leads. Strategic and Operational leadership comprise the yin-yang pair of dimensions concerning organizational substance, or what one leads.

Rare is the manager who makes appropriate use of both sides of the Forceful-Enabling pair and the Strategic-Operational pair. Instead, most managers are lopsided—they lean one way by doing too much of one approach while simultaneously doing too little of the opposing,
complementary approach. In the present sample, we found that overdoing one dimension nearly guaranteed that a manager underdoes the opposite dimension. Among the managers who were rated as doing too much Forceful leadership, 97% were also rated as doing too little Enabling. Of those rated as too much Enabling, 86% were rated as too little Forceful. The same pattern is evident for the other duality: among the few managers rated as emphasizing Strategic leadership too much, 67% were also rated as too little Operational. And of those who were rated as too Operational, 94% were rated as not Strategic enough.

Lopsided leadership is the second way in which strengths become weaknesses. By overemphasizing one approach, managers neglect the complementary approach. Interestingly, this tendency was discovered in the early research on derailment, but did not seem to register in the collective mentality of the leadership development field. For instance, McCall and Lombardo reported accounts of derailed managers who were brilliant technical problem solvers but were short on people skills, micro-managers who got so bogged down in operational detail that they couldn’t think strategically, and so forth. Lopsided leadership is a rampant, if under-appreciated, problem, rooted in the all-too-human tendency to over-idealize what comes naturally and to devalue what doesn’t come so naturally. By identifying so powerfully with one side, lopsided leaders turn their backs on the other side, and it becomes their blind side.

**Neglecting What Doesn’t Come Easily**

Earlier, we described how managers tend to overdo behaviors related to their innate talents. This may not surprise those with experience in management development. However, there is also a less obvious side effect: managers tend to neglect, or underdo, opposing but complementary behaviors. This principal is illustrated by the manager who learned from a strengths inventory that his top five areas of talent were Self-assurance, Activator, Achiever, Focus, and Command. While his LVI feedback indicated a tendency to be too forceful and operational, it also revealed an even stronger tendency to not be enabling and strategic enough.

This example is typical. Overdoing behaviors related to one’s talent is common, and so is avoiding opposing skills and behaviors. In fact, the tendency to underdo what doesn’t come naturally may be stronger than the tendency to overdo what does. It is probably a function of how people form their self-concept and the tendency to disparage what they define as “not me.” As Peter Drucker put it, “Far too many people—especially people with great expertise in one area—are contemptuous of knowledge in other areas.” It is little wonder that many upper-level managers are lopsided.

**The High Value of Versatility**

Lopsided leadership may be the single most important developmental need among upper-level managers. Therefore, our approach to development involves toning down overused strengths and building capability with complementary, but underdeveloped, skills. The ultimate goal for lopsided leaders is versatility, a full range of motion defined by capability with opposing approaches, unlimited by a bias in favor of one and prejudice against the other. We emphasize the idea of versatility as a mastery of opposites because this integrative, higher-order concept distinguishes the best managers from the rest.
We can quantify how versatile managers are in terms of a pair like Forceful and Enabling leadership by calculating how close their ratings are to the right amount on both dimensions. These scores can be expressed as a percentage, where 100% indicates perfect versatility (doing the right amount of every pair of behaviors) and lower percentages indicate doing too much of some and too little of other behaviors. We calculate separate Versatility Scores for Forceful-Enabling leadership and Strategic-Operational leadership, and then take the average of the two to arrive at an Overall Versatility Score.

**Making the Grade**

Figure 5 presents the distribution of Overall Versatility Scores for the present sample of 421 upper-level managers. The distribution looks remarkably like distributions for school grades, with an average of 81% and standard deviation of 7%.

We interpret Versatility Scores like letter grades—90% and up, A; 80-90%, B; 70-80%, C, and so on. By this standard, the majority of managers get “Bs” in terms of versatility (57.1%). Very few managers get lower than a “D” (1%). And just over 1 in 20 managers get “As” (5.7%). Granted, the LVI does not grade on a curve; nonetheless, this low incidence of versatile managers is consistent with other studies based on different measures and different methodologies that also find only a small minority of managers to be agile, balanced, or otherwise well-rounded.22,29

**Versatility and Effective Leadership**

Versatility may be the master competency among the competencies that Eichinger, Dai, and Tang8 referred to as distinctively competitive and aligned. That is, few managers are truly versatile, yet versatility is highly related to effectiveness. Versatility as measured by the LVI is correlated with subordinate job satisfaction, commitment, and desire to quit; with team morale, engagement, and cohesion; with unit productivity; and with ratings of overall leadership effectiveness.13

In the present sample, coworker ratings of overall versatility were correlated with ratings of overall effectiveness \((r = .61)\) among the 411 upper-level managers for whom we had effectiveness ratings. In the subsample of 152 executives for whom we had measures of team performance, coworker ratings of overall versatility were correlated with both team vitality \((r = .65)\) and team productivity \((r = .41)\).

**Lower the Bar?**

Some may argue, as some proponents of strengths-based development do, that it is not reasonable to expect managers to be well-rounded, jacks-of-all-trades. After all, even the current research suggests that only 1 in 20 managers is versatile, capable with opposing skill-sets like Forceful and Enabling or Strategic and Operational. The extreme version of the argument denies that strengths can be overused altogether and suggests that trying to get better in an area of weakness is a misallocation of time, energy, and money because the better return is in maximizing strengths3,4

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*For the details on the computation of Versatility Scores, see the appendix in The Versatile Leader: Make the Most of Your Strengths—Without Overdoing It18 or Leadership Versatility Index® Facilitator’s Guide.13*
The Perils of Accentuating the Positive

Figure 5.
Distribution of Overall Versatility Scores

Note: Based on average All Coworker ratings for \( N = 421 \) upper-level managers. Versatility scores can be interpreted like letter grades in school (90-100\% \( A \), 80-90\% \( B \), 70-80\% \( C \) and so on). The percentages in the top of each color-coded “grade band” indicate the percentage of the managers in the sample who scored in that range.

It is true that versatile leaders are rare. It may be the case that not every manager can become a truly versatile leader. At the same time, versatility is not an all-or-none proposition; most managers can become more versatile to some degree by toning down what they do too much and ramping up what they do too little. These adjustments increase versatility, which corresponds to increased perceived effectiveness and team performance. Ultimate versatility may be elusive for most, but improvement is possible for all and likely to pay off for the individual and the organization.

A recent *Harvard Business Review* article suggested that it is time to end “the myth of the complete leader (and the attendant fear of appearing incompetent)” and focus instead on maximizing strengths and collaborating with individuals who have complementary strengths. However, little attention was paid to the difficulties of establishing trust and respect despite major differences in skills, perspectives, and values that are so common on diverse terms. Moreover, in the wake of a rash of corporate scandals, public debate over outsized executive compensation, and a meltdown in the global economy due to corporate greed and a lack of prudent oversight, we don’t need to be lowering expectations for senior managers; we need to be raising them.
Implications

Building on the recognition that most managers do not know their strengths, we have demonstrated that most managers overuse their strengths. Strengths overused cause two problems: first, doing too much of key leadership behaviors is just as ineffective as is doing too little of those behaviors. Second, overdoing one approach is linked with underdoing an opposing yet complementary approach, which further diminishes effectiveness. Moreover, versatile managers who demonstrate a mastery of opposing leadership approaches are uncommon. Nonetheless, most managers can become more versatile by doing less of what they overdo and by doing more of what they underdo, and increased versatility is associated with higher levels of leadership effectiveness and team performance.

The practical implications that flow logically from these statistical findings and our point of view on leadership are relevant to how one uses strengths-based development. On the one hand, this chapter indicates that a successful philosophy of strengths-based development must consider the related problems of overused strengths and lopsided leadership. On the other hand, an enlightened approach to strengths-based development requires changes in the standard practice of managerial assessment to detect overused strengths and lopsidedness.

Applications

The cornerstone to leadership development is self-awareness. In particular, two types of self-awareness are needed: one, insight into one’s strengths (and liabilities) and two, an understanding of how one uses those strengths. This distinction suggests two complementary types of assessment to guide development.

Discover your strengths. The first type of assessment needs to help an individual identify her strengths. Those are likely to be in areas of natural-born talent, which can be determined by identifying the types of activities one is drawn to, enjoys doing, and for which one has aptitude. Several “strengths inventories” are available for this purpose, including Values in Action (VIA) and the revamped StrengthsFinder 2.0. These inventories ask respondents to identify the activities they enjoy, prefer, and succeed at to determine a rank-ordering of the most to least prominent areas of talent.

Standard temperament and personality inventories are another method of identifying a manager’s natural inclinations, talents, and areas of strength. One benefit of omnibus personality assessment tools is that they offer comparative feedback to calibrate where one stands relative to an appropriate norm group. Strengths inventories like StrengthsFinder 2.0 only provide a rank order of one’s most prominent areas of talent, or one’s “personal best” strengths. They do not provide comparisons to a normative sample, thus precluding the identification of what Eichinger, Dai, and Tang referred to in chapter 2 as “competitive” strengths, “distinctively competitive” strengths, and “distinctively competitive and aligned” strengths. Further, some personality test batteries—like those discussed in chapter 8 and chapter 9—include assessments of both “bright side” characteristics (strengths) and “dark side” characteristics (weaknesses), thus providing a more balanced picture of the person.
A little-recognized obstacle stands in the way of helping managers embrace their strengths. The resistance starts with, of all things, a bad attitude about good news. Many leaders are impatient with affirmation, which they regard as a feel-good experience. To them it is the criticism that’s truly useful. “Let’s move on to the negatives, that’s what I can do something about,” goes the mentality. A related problem managers face in coming to know their strengths is trouble accepting affirmation once you get them to consider it. For a host of reasons, leaders actually resist changing their minds about their strengths. It is often not enough to review the results of a self-assessment on a strengths inventory for a manager to truly get the message. Therefore, while there is developmental value in the affirmation provided by a strengths assessment, leaders need help paying attention to it and then taking it in, the necessary steps prior to putting their talent to better use. (For strategies for contending with resistance to positive feedback, see Kaplan & Kaiser).

*Discover how you use your strengths.* When debriefed by a skilled facilitator, strengths inventories and personality assessments can raise awareness about strengths. But these assessments do not say anything about how a manager deploys those strengths. This type of assessment requires coworker feedback. However, the typical 360-degree survey is ill-equipped to provide the type of feedback needed to identify strengths overused or lopsided leadership.

Managers rarely get clear feedback about overused strengths. Feedback surveys with a typical 5-point response scale are designed on the tacit assumption that more is better, since high scores are considered better. These types of ratings do not distinguish when managers do something a lot from when they do it too much and therefore confuse activity and effectiveness. And rating scales that ask the respondent to evaluate how effective a manager is with a given behavior do not separate doing too little and doing too much as distinct sources of ineffectiveness. In both cases, managers are deprived of clear feedback about strengths overused.

There are two solutions for helping managers gain awareness about overused strengths. First, recipients of feedback in the form of ratings on 1-to-5 “more is better” scales can clarify if high scores may mask a tendency to overdo it by following up with coworkers and explicitly asking if they tend to overdo those behaviors. The ensuing conversation can be beneficial for both parties. The second, more involved, solution is to replace assessment scoring systems built on the conception of “strengths and weaknesses” with scoring systems designed on the tripartite view of “shortcomings, strengths, and strengths overused.” For instance, global assessments of a manager’s performance can ask respondents to indicate which behaviors, skills, and competencies fit into each of the three categories. This type of assessment is similar to Peter Drucker’s advice to ask coworkers, “What should I start doing (shortcomings), keep doing (strengths), and stop doing (strengths overused) to be more effective?”

But the expanded view of assessment in terms of shortcomings, strengths, and strengths overused is not enough to identify lopsided leadership. This is because most competency models and 360-degree feedback tools are based on conceptual models of leadership that simply lay out the dimensions and behaviors one at a time. They have the design elegance of a shopping list. What is missing in these models is the dynamic relationship among the various dimensions, the tensions and trade-offs that make management a balancing act.
Lopsidedness is by definition a two-sided concept—too much of this, too little of that. For 360-degree feedback tools to reveal lopsidedness, they need to be based on a model of leadership constructed in terms of pairs of opposites, like yin and yang. Two major pairs of opposites that any competent leadership assessment must cover concern interpersonal style (e.g., Forceful versus Enabling) and organizational substance (e.g., Strategic versus Operational).

*Measured Enthusiasm*

Prescriptions like “play to your strengths” and “build on the positives” are often offered as a simple solution to the complex problem of management development. But we should be leery of the slippery slope leading from simple to simplistic. There is a grain of truth to these prescriptions, but there is also more to the story.

Emphasizing a focus on strengths without recognition of the problem of strengths overused can encourage managers to go overboard, become lopsided, and hamper performance. Further, a focus on strengths to the neglect of addressing weaknesses misses a key point: leadership roles are not elective, and if a manager does not perform some roles because they do not play to his strengths, then both the manager’s effectiveness and the performance of his team will suffer.
References


23. McCall, M. W., Jr. (this volume). Every strength a weakness and other caveats.


