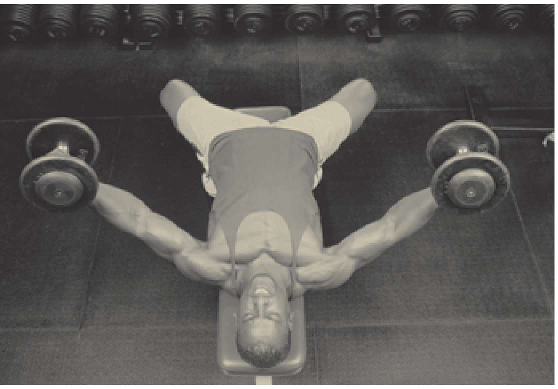
Strength Test

Debunking an Unbalanced Approach to Development



An approach to development that concentrates on identifying and maximizing leaders' strengths, to the exclusion of addressing their weaknesses, has gained enormous popularity in recent years. But amid the hype, are there hidden dangers? Could a more balanced strategy for developing leaders be more likely to raise their effectiveness and enhance organizational performance?

Since the turn of the millennium, something approaching a mass movement has emerged around the idea of *strengths-based development* in the workplace. The central tenets of this movement are that traditional methods of management training and development are wrong and that the most effective way to develop and motivate people is to focus and build on their strengths rather than to identify and correct their weaknesses. Advocates of the strengths-based approach claim that focusing on fixing weaknesses is a misallocation of time and energy and that helping people become the best they can be requires concentrating on the positives by identifying people's natural inclinations and nurturing those talents. One of the favorite arguments of supporters of strengths-based development is that fixing weaknesses might raise a person's performance from a D to a C but will never lift it to an A and that the only way to reach the top grade is to maximize people's innate gifts.

by Robert B. Kaiser and Randall P. White

A Resource for Avoiding the Traps

This article draws on the ideas presented at a recent meeting of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology. To learn more about these ideas, see *The Perils of Accentuating the Positive,* edited by Robert B. Kaiser (Hogan Press, 2008). This book pulls together some of the leadership field's most respected authorities (many of whose views are outlined in this article) to share big ideas with a clear line of sight to practical applications for helping managers avoid the traps and hidden dangers of exclusively strengths-based development.

The idea of strengths-based development was introduced to a wide audience with the publishing of *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (Free Press, 2001), by Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton. Based on research by the Gallup Organization on leaders, managers, and workplaces around the world (Buckingham spent seventeen years as a senior researcher at Gallup before starting his own consulting and training company; Clifton is currently chairman of the Gallup International Research and Education Center), the book describes thirty-four positive talent and aptitude themes and explains how to build what the authors call a "strengths-based organization" by capitalizing on these themes as they already exist among those who work in the organization.

Since the publication of *Now, Discover Your Strengths,* the notion of strengths-based development has taken off, largely through its promotion to the business world by a few companies with a significant commercial interest in the approach. The effectiveness and reach of the promotion campaign are evident from the flood of strengths-based volumes found in bookstores and on management best-seller lists, and from the fact that many managers and development professionals have completely bought into the strengths-based approach, fervently believing that strengths are all managers need. Even the mainstream press has jumped on the bandwagon; a column by Dan Cullen in the Money section of the February 12, 2001, edition of *USA Today,* for instance, stated that "excellence comes from maximizing strengths, never by fixing weaknesses."

It's not difficult to understand the appeal of the strengths-based-development approach. It appears to let managers off the hook for their shortcomings and say, "That's OK, don't worry about those problems." Managers are encouraged to instead focus on what they are best at and most like to do—what comes naturally and is personally enjoyable.

We believe that although it is important to work on strengths in development, a note of caution must be sounded to temper the hype that has arisen around strengths-based development and to call attention to the hidden dangers that are glossed over by some of the approach's proponents. We further believe that a more balanced approach to developing leaders—one that is more practical and, not insignificantly, much more likely to enhance organizational performance—is preferable.

DEFINING STRENGTHS

At first glance, aptitudes that qualify as strengths might seem self-evident, but in fact a deeper look is required to define strengths and how they relate to personal and organizational success.

For example, Robert W. Eichinger and his colleagues at leadership development consulting and research firm Lominger International, Guangrong Dai and King Yii Tang, considered different ways to define a strength. They identified several types of strengths, including

- What one does best (a personal best strength)
- What one does better than other people (a competitive strength)
- What one does better than other people and few people are good at (a distinctly competitive strength)
- What one does better than others, few people are good at, *and* is aligned with what organizations most need from their managers (a distinctly competitive and aligned strength)

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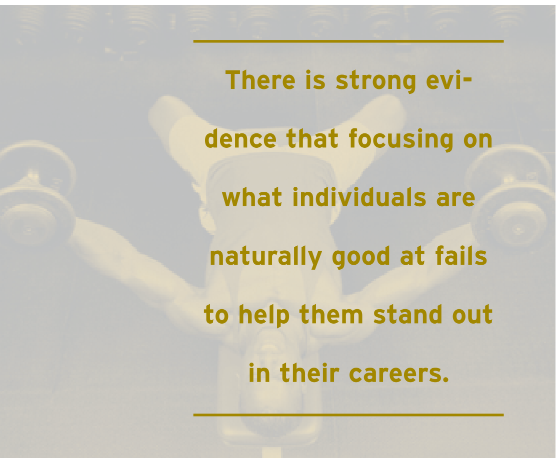
With these definitions in place, the researchers conducted a study to determine how many managers had the various types of strengths. They analyzed competency ratings for more than two thousand managers and executives and found that very few had five or more competencies at which they were stronger than most other managers. Even fewer—a mere one manager in thirty—had five or more strengths aligned with what organizations need from their managers to be competitive. The researchers concluded, therefore, that an exclusive reliance on strengths is a weak career strategy and that the best bet for driving organizational effectiveness through leadership development is to help leaders become ongoing learners who can regularly sharpen their current strengths and continue to acquire new capabilities to meet changing business demands and job requirements.



There is strong evidence that focusing on what individuals are naturally good at fails to help them stand out in their careers.

CCL researchers Jean Leslie and Anand Chandrasekar have also looked at the relationship between strengths and organizational needs. They analyzed the results of a survey that compared the skills and competencies that organizations need to be successful with the level of skills that the organizations' managers possessed in those areas. Across three distinctly different cultures—in the United States, Singapore, and India—they found remarkable similarity in the competencies organizations need most—for instance, leading people, strategic planning, managing change, and resourcefulness—and the competencies at which managers are most skilled—for example, respecting individual differences, doing whatever it takes, and cultural adaptability. More important, in all three countries there were major gaps between what organizations needed and the strengths their managers brought to the table. For instance, the skill of leading people was the most important competency for organizational success but was in the lower half of the current skill levels possessed by managers. The researchers concluded that encouraging managers to maximize their current strengths, to the neglect of developing areas of relative weakness, inevitably works to the detriment of organizational performance.

Thus there is strong evidence that focusing on what individuals are naturally good at fails to help them stand out in their careers. Worse still, a focus on what managers are good at may turn attention away from what organizations need from their leaders to be competitive in the global economy.

OVERDOING IT

Another problem with the notion that leaders can simply play to their strengths is that strengths and weaknesses are not easy to disentangle. For instance, CCL research has shown that strengths can become weaknesses through overuse and misapplication. And Morgan W. McCall Jr., a professor of management and organization at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business and an expert on development and derailment (when the rise of a talented manager comes to an abrupt and unexpected end), has described how many CEOs have failed because they continued to rely on strengths beyond the point of diminishing returns. Consider Scott McNealy, former CEO of Sun Microsystems. He was celebrated as an underdog maverick when he took on Microsoft before Congress, alleging antitrust violations. However, at the time of his ouster, McNealy's single-minded resolve had come to be viewed as simple-minded obstinacy.

Robert E. Kaplan and a co-author of this article, Robert B. Kaiser, partners with executive development consulting and research firm Kaplan DeVries, have explained the dynamics that can turn strengths into weaknesses. First, most managers don't know their strengths. Second, not knowing their strengths, managers are likely to overuse and overrely on them. Third, in addition to corrupting their strengths, overuse leads managers to avoid complementary approaches. For instance, assertive, take-charge executives often rely on a forceful approach while disregarding a more inclusive and enabling people-oriented approach. This results in a lopsided leadership style. In their consulting and statistical research, Kaplan and Kaiser have found that the twin problems of overusing a strength and avoiding complementary approaches are associated with diminished leadership effectiveness and lower performance from the team for which a leader is responsible.

Steven Berglas, a prominent executive coach and management consultant, reminds us that most people who make it to the top have an impressive track record complete with a trove of accolades and accomplishments. Ironically, a career's worth of success can actually work against these leaders when they reach the top, where much is at stake and their leadership matters most. They often insist on clinging to formerly tried-and-true problem-solving strategies (a behavior that Berglas calls *perseveration*) even when these strategies are clearly not working. This is yet another way that leaders turn their strengths into weaknesses.

WEAKNESSES MATTER

Another difficulty arising from a focus on strengths is that there is a great deal of evidence that weaknesses simply can't be ignored. Consider, for example, the research on derailment. Experts have estimated that about half of executives ultimately derail. CCL has studied derailment for more than two decades and has found that the most common causes of derailment can often be traced back to a weakness of one kind or another. These fatal flaws are usually evident early in a career but can be compensated for by strengths and left to fester. As CCL's William A. Gentry and Craig Chappelow have pointed out, managers can prevent derailment by coming to terms with their weaknesses and learning how to manage or reduce them—before it's too late.

Another way to look at leadership and how it is affected by strengths and weaknesses is through the lens of personality—and here, too, weaknesses matter. Robert Hogan, an authority on personality in the workplace, and Michael Benson, manager of leadership assessment and development at Johnson & Johnson, have argued that personality is at the heart of understanding leadership. They note that there are two big problems in life: learning to live with oneself and learning to live with others. Strengths-based development is, they contend, primarily concerned with living with oneself. However, leadership is a public act, and foibles, flaws, and idiosyncrasies can be terribly disruptive in relationships with other people. Moreover, as CCL research has shown, relationship problems are the number one cause of failed leadership and career derailment. Hogan and Benson conclude that even though it may be an easy sell to tell managers not to worry about their weaknesses, it does those managers a disservice because their weaknesses, left unchecked, can limit their careers. The solution that Hogan and Benson offer begins with strategic self-awareness—an understanding of how other people experience you, including what they find troubling.

A difficult irony is that many extraordinarily talented managers often have personality flaws and private demons. Malcolm Davies, founder and former CEO of Power Brewing Company and now a consultant based in Australia, has explained how to unlock the value from the strengths bound up with the dark sides of these managers' personalities. He argues that so-called toxic leaders are a small subset of a large percentage of gifted but imperfect leaders who share exceptional personality characteristics that can alternatively be framed as situational strengths. Davies says that recasting dark-side characteristics as situational strengths can facilitate the development of talented and driven managers by minimizing the inevitable risks associated with their exceptional personalities.

MIXED BLESSING

In the workplace today, people constantly bend and flex in new directions as a response to changing technologies, merging businesses, stiff competition, and an uncertain economy. It is difficult to play to one's strengths in such an environment because a strength can be a mixed blessing. A strength in one situation (for instance, a no-nonsense approach to cost cutting in a mature market with eroding margins) isn't necessarily a strength in another (a start-up venture selling a new product in an emerging market). Leaders routinely flex the wrong strengths; not knowing their strengths, they are prone to rely on them at the wrong time and to the wrong degree, at the expense of complementary skills that also have their time and place.

Numerous researchers have found that continuous learning and dealing with the unknown, untested, and untried can be the secret to success. But this process can be undermined by playing to an individual's strengths. Exploiting strengths by repeatedly assigning the person to one type of job (for instance, as a "fix-it" person for turnaround situations) robs the individual of the opportunity to develop a wider repertoire and broader perspective, which play a decisive role in succeeding at the executive level. Playing to strengths may have a short-term advantage—people capitalize on their extensive knowledge and well-honed skills, which increases stakeholder confidence that the job will be done right. But this strategy also has a long-term disadvantage that is easily overlooked: the opportunity lost from not providing the diversity of job experiences needed to develop a seasoned and well-rounded leader for the future

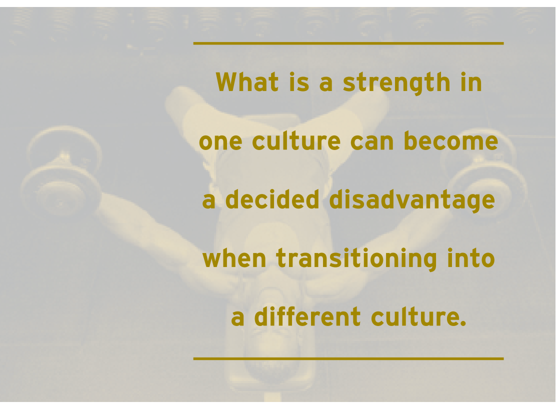
Managers can prevent derailment by coming to terms with their weaknesses and learning how to manage or improve them—before it's too late.

Trends in areas as distinct as executive turnover and evolutionary neuroscience highlight the centrality of learning to sustainable success. The short-lived tenures of today's CEOs—somewhere in the neighborhood of two years on average—and the plasticity of the brain converge to underscore how learning is critical for career success.

COMPLEX CHALLENGES

Becoming an effective senior leader involves transitioning through a series of increasingly difficult and complex skills. The Canadian organizational psychologist Elliott Jaques explained how increases in organizational complexity demand a greater ability to mentally track several variables and imagine further into the future. Hence, as managers deal with greater complexity at each stage in their careers, they need to be armed with a more widely developed skill set and a broader perspective for viewing complex problems and anticipating the consequences of various solutions.

The strengths-based approach, by downplaying weaknesses, excuses individual leaders from the hard work of development. And it overlooks what the organization needs from their role. In effect, it says: "Management wants you to be something you are not. They are telling you that you need to fix your weakness in math and working with numbers and financial reports. They don't recognize that you are an artist; instead of giving you a hard time about math, they should give you paint, brushes, and a canvas." But what if the person's job is to be an accounting manager?



This scenario exposes a serious problem with the strengths-focused approach to developing leaders. The requirements of managerial jobs are not elective, and if managers can't or won't perform them adequately, organizational performance will suffer.

THE GLOBAL ASPECT

In their book *Developing Global Executives* (Harvard Business School Press, 2002), Morgan W. McCall Jr. and George P. Hollenbeck, a former human resource executive and director of executive education at Harvard Business School and currently a leadership selection and development consultant based in Houston, describe their study of executives living and working in foreign cultures. They found that what is a strength in one culture can become a decided disadvantage when transitioning into a different culture. Global leadership requires that executives change and adapt to fit the customs and the cultures of the country they're in. "What worked splendidly in one culture could bring disaster in the next," the authors state. "Global transitions required reassessing, sometimes letting go, sometimes adding to, sometimes both, but rarely staying the course." These requirements will trip global executives trying to heed the advice offered in *Now, Discover Your Strengths*: "Don't waste time trying to put in what was left out. Try to draw out what was left in."

The reality is that people do have both strengths and weaknesses, even if they don't necessarily know what they are. This problem may be particularly acute for U.S. executives. In the United States, people seem to have an inflated sense of abilities in general. A bias toward positivity is clearly evident: most Americans rating others or themselves on a five-point scale lean heavily toward giving fours and fives. People outside the United States rarely give fives—they are more likely to give threes and reserve the fives for truly outstanding performance. But in the United States there appears to be a cultural halo around everyone's head. As in Garrison Keillor's fictional hometown, Lake Wobegon, everyone is "above average."

PAYING THE PRICE

To be sure, getting stuck in a rut of dwelling on your weaknesses will not make you a great leader. At the same time, when practiced with a single-minded focus, the strengths approach can become a seductive exercise in self-indulgence. It emphasizes what comes easy for you, what you enjoy doing, and what will bring you fulfillment. However, what the organization needs from the position your job is designed to provide is ignored. It is a case of putting the needs of the individual above the needs of the greater good.

In this light, it is no surprise that the strengths-based approach made its meteoric rise amid the self-serving decadence and delusional optimism that have spun the global economy out of control. A key lesson we are all grappling with now is what happens when self-interest is allowed to reign supreme while wishful thinking obscures hard-nosed reality. At some point a price must be paid for living the lie that excessive compensation is justified, that hyperleveraged assets are smart, that toxic securities are risk-free, and that we can afford a mortgage that is well beyond our means. In the same way, a Pollyannaish devotion to accentuating the positive will eventually reveal itself as a costly mistake.

The fact is that replacing a one-sided perspective—an obsession with what is wrong—with another one-sided perspective—an exclusive focus on what is right—is not a move forward. Beyond the swinging pendulum of fads and fashion, a better approach to individual growth recognizes that both strengths and weaknesses have an appropriate place in learning and development.