



## Your Strengths: An Unseen Enemy?

*An interview with the authors of Fear Your Strengths*

Bob Kaplan and Rob Kaiser are tired of the either/or debate when it comes to leadership development. Paying attention to either your strengths or your weaknesses leaves you open to performance gaps, lopsided leadership and career derailment.

Kaplan and Kaiser say:

Yes — own and leverage your strengths.

Yes — know and mitigate your weaknesses.

And — be very clear that your greatest strengths may become your greatest weakness.

The duo's new book — *Fear Your Strengths: What You Are Best At Could Be Your Biggest Problem* — pulls together decades of research and work with executives to understand how over-played strengths impact leaders' success. They recently spoke with CCL.

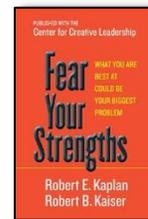
**CCL: Your big message is that strengths overplayed become liabilities. This seems simple enough, but it isn't what most leaders or leadership development efforts focus on. Why not? And why is this message so important?**

**Kaplan:** It's a collective blind spot in the leadership field.

**Kaiser:** Right, that blind spot is tied to an underlying mindset of either/or. We like to create simple dichotomies to organize our world. And one of those, in the field of leadership, is *strengths* versus *weaknesses*.

**Kaplan:** And where in that *strengths* and *weaknesses* conception is strengths overused? It's not there. So even if people do know intuitively that strengths become weaknesses, we don't talk about it or measure it or build it into our leadership development tools and processes.

Premium subscribers of *Leading Effectively* have access to interviews with a variety of thought leaders who offer different perspectives on topics related to leadership. Featured in the April 2013 issue was Bob Kaplan and Rob Kaiser — co-authors of *Fear Your Strengths*.



**Kaiser:** The big reason to pay attention to strengths overused is that it's a huge problem in performance and in careers — maybe even bigger than shortcomings or areas where you lack skill. It's one of the key reasons people get fired.

**CCL: How hard is it for managers to see that they are overdoing their strengths?**

**Kaiser:** Most of the time people will have a hard time relating to the idea of too much of a good thing in *their own case* — which is ironic because if we ask about *other people* taking strengths to extremes they have no shortage of examples!

**CCL: Give us an example of "too much of a good thing."**

**Kaplan:** In our experience, chief financial officers are good at questioning, challenging, probing. They have no problem saying, directly, "I disagree." That's good. It's what their job calls for. But they get into trouble if they are too free with their confrontational behavior. They can be intimidating. People on the receiving end, especially if they're at all junior, can get tongue-tied for being challenged too aggressively. Important information isn't shared or discussed because people are shut down by the CFO overdoing "directness."

**CCL: For that CFO, being direct is part of his self-identity, his personality and style — what made him successful, right? It's part of what defines him as a leader.**

**Kaiser:** Right. We categorize behaviors into "me" and "not me" ... a most basic identity construction. Bob and I see this all the time working one-on-one with very accomplished people. When they are made aware of strengths they take too far, it can raise an existential crisis. We often hear something along the lines of: "But this is who I am! I can't not be me!" We try to ground those existential concerns in very behavioral terms, and help leaders recognize options that they may not realize they have. It's actually quite liberating to realize you don't have to be a prisoner of your personality.

**Kaplan:** Here's an example. One executive said to me, "I'm too transparent." And I asked, what drives that? He said, "I want to be trusted." When I asked him what the opposite of transparent is, he couldn't tell me! This is a super-bright person and he groped for an answer. I suggested that the opposite of transparent is to be discrete — which is also a good thing. To your point, when something is so core to our identity, we can't even imagine the opposing good thing to do.

**Kaiser:** Sometimes when we ask the question, "What's the opposite?", we hear a caricature of the opposite — not a complementary behavior. For instance, if I ask about prize attributes of a great leader, I might get "hard charging, drive for results." What's the opposite? "That soft, namby-pamby, trying to please everybody stuff."

**CCL: Once someone has some recognition of an over-used strength, what next? You write about both behaviors and mindsets — help us understand why both are important and how to proceed.**

**Kaplan:** What we find with leaders seeking to improve is that they latch on to the behavior approach. And the mindset aspect gets subordinated or lost completely. If you go overboard on a strength, chances are it has something to do with your beliefs or fears. So to stop going overboard as much, you need to have a development plan that includes change in both mindset and behavior. What Rob and I

have done is to say that mindset change and behavior change are on par with each other - the two things go hand in hand.

**Kaiser:** Right. The outer work of behavior change and the inner work of mindset change are mutually reinforcing and complementary. If you want to sustain behavior change you do have to work at both levels to keep it going. One without the other has a marginal chance of working.

**CCL:** Explain more about the process of mindset change. Is it basically about finding an insight that gets a person over a mental block or an assumption they've been working from?

**Kaiser:** Exactly. The things we worry about — our fears and irrational assumptions — usually have a power over us until we can name them and talk about them. Then we can recognize and go, "Whoa, I'm kind of blowing things out of proportion. I can pull back on this."

**Kaplan:** But we're not talking about psychotherapy. Often the thing that throws the person overboard is right behind their forehead. Take this guy who believes strongly in being good to people. He always got a lot of recognition and feedback for that. He mentioned to me that his dad was like that and he followed in his footsteps. The problem was that he didn't hold people accountable enough. What came out of an exchange — and not a long exchange — was, "I see that being nice is not incompatible with holding people accountable." Then he went off and was firmer with people while still being his nice self.

**Kaiser:** And the truth is, this guy is really so nice he couldn't be a jerk if he tried. But he's so concerned or uptight about it, that it warps the way he looks at things. So he goes overboard, lets people off the hook for really poor performance, and is not taken seriously as a supervisor or authority figure.

**Kaplan:** Bottom line: You do need to worry about the tendency to take something good too far and undermining that virtue. All the more so because it easily be a blind spot. Leaders aren't nearly as alert to the danger of strengths overused as they are to weaknesses.