

LEADERSHIP Excellence

Warren Bennis



THE MAGAZINE OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT, MANAGERIAL EFFECTIVENESS, AND ORGANIZATIONAL PRODUCTIVITY

May 2013



Robert E. Kaplan
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Co-authors of
Fear Your Strengths

**Aiming
Higher**

**Servant
Leaders**

**Fear Your Strengths
They Can Become Weakness**

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"LEADERSHIP EXCELLENCE IS AN EXCEPTIONAL WAY TO LEARN AND THEN APPLY THE BEST AND LATEST IDEAS IN THE FIELD OF LEADERSHIP."

—WARREN BENNIS, AUTHOR AND USC PROFESSOR OF MANAGEMENT

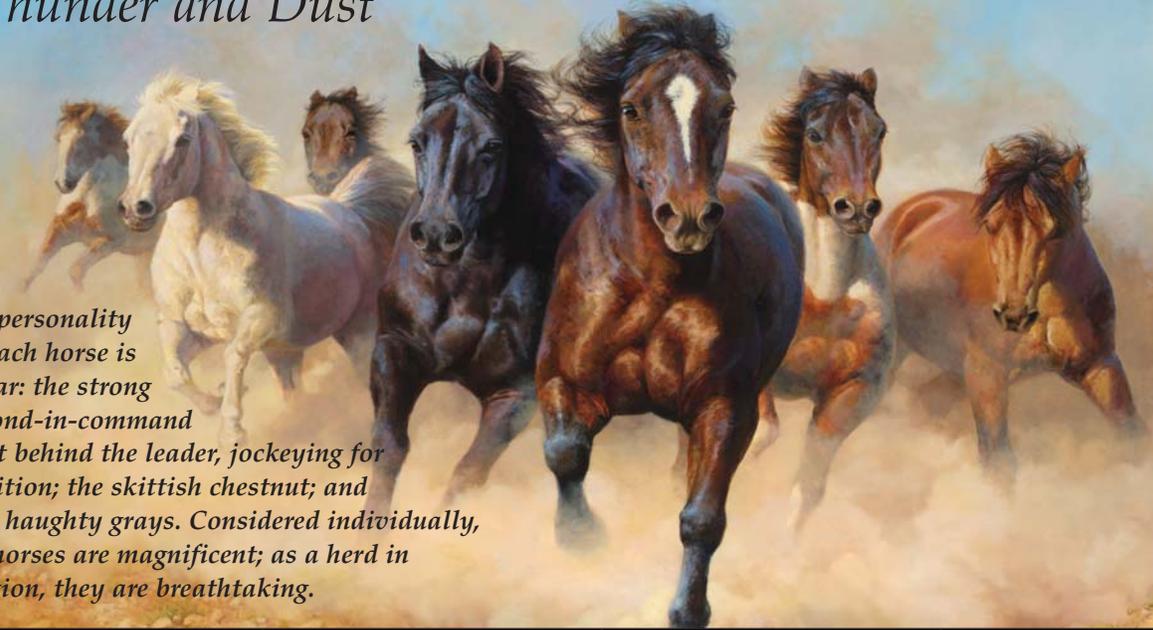
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Thunder and Dust



The personality of each horse is clear: the strong second-in-command just behind the leader, jockeying for position; the skittish chestnut; and the haughty grays. Considered individually, the horses are magnificent; as a herd in motion, they are breathtaking.

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What Is Lost in Finding Your Strengths



by Robert E. Kaplan and Robert B. Kaiser

THE CENTRAL IDEA OF THE STRENGTHS movement is that it's wrong to focus on trying to fix an executive's weaknesses, because greatness comes only from building on natural talent to maximize strengths. This approach is associated with the book *Now, Discover Your Strengths* and its self-diagnostic tool, the *StrengthsFinder*. Like any successful movement, however, the strengths movement drove a single issue and inevitably left out a lot.

Missing from the strengths movement's conception is that *a strength can be overused* and become *dangerous and debilitating*. It is neglectful, if not irresponsible, to assess executives for their strengths without warning them of the risk of taking that strength too far. Ergo, our dictum: *Fear Your Strengths*. Managers who ignore the danger in overused strengths do so at their peril.

No one, even the otherwise very balanced leader, is immune to taking one or another strength too far. In fact, *the stronger the strength the greater the risk of taking it too far*—and greater the likelihood of being oblivious to the possibility that it could be taken too far. We've encountered, for example, highly principled leaders, admirably dedicated to doing the right thing, who can't conceive of being too principled. They have trouble believing there could be anything wrong with a strong sense of right and wrong and are blind to their habit of being judgmental, righteous, rigid and preachy.

In one study, we compared results from our *Leadership Versatility Index*—a diagnostic that uses coworkers' ratings to measure an executive's strengths overuse—to those of the *Clifton StrengthsFinder*, a self-rating questionnaire distributed by Gallup to identify executives' key areas of talent. There was a clear correlation between the talents identified by *StrengthsFinder* and the overuse of behaviors related to that talent as identified by the LVI.

For instance, leaders identified by

the *StrengthsFinder* as *achievers, activators*, or having *command* skills were more often rated by the LVI as displaying *too much* in the area of *forceful* leadership. Similarly, leaders described as *developers, includers* or *builders of harmony* were more likely to be rated *too much* when it comes to *enabling* leadership. *Leaders are five times more likely to overdo behaviors related to their areas of natural talent* than areas in which they are less gifted.

The greater a leader's strength, the less he or she will display the opposing, or complementary, behavior. The more *Yang*, the less *Yin*—which is detrimental to effectiveness on both counts. The brilliant strategist is not only at risk of having his head in clouds, but often neglects implementation; the superior implementer, already at risk of being too narrowly focused, also usually avoids strategy.

Leaders categorized by the Gallup *StrengthsFinder* as *achievers, activators* or having *command* skills, tend to be rated with the LVI by coworkers as not being empowering or participative enough. Conversely, those who identify themselves as *developers, includers* or *builders of harmony* were rated by others as not forceful enough.

In that sense, the strengths movement is simplistic. It invites people to imagine that they can accentuate their strengths and compartmentalize their weaknesses. However, you can't just set aside weaknesses, because they're often inextricably tied to strengths. The hard truth is that weaknesses are often by-products of strengths, side-effects that can easily go unrecognized.

Also, leaders find it very difficult to accept positive input. In helping leaders internalize feedback, we've learned that most leaders are often unaware of their strengths, and *they resist acknowledging them even when presented with evidence*. Most executives gravitate to the *criticism* in an assessment, if not fixate on it, and downplay and deflect the feedback about their strengths.

There is power in focusing on your strengths, but it derives from acknowledging them in their totality, from having a keen, finely-tuned awareness of both the good and the harm they can do. Becoming a better leader, then, is not a matter of indiscriminately playing to your strengths, but of continually adjusting their volume to just the right setting for every situation. **LE**

Rob Kaiser is President of Kaiser Leadership Solutions and Bob Kaplan is President of Kaplan DeVries Inc. They are co-authors of *Fear Your Strengths*. Visit www.fearyourstrengths.com.

ACTION: Know your strengths and audience.