

An Excerpt From

Fear Your Strengths
What You Are Best at Could Be Your Biggest Problem

by Robert E. Kaplan and Robert B. Kaiser
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**What You Are Best at
Could Be Your Biggest Problem**

**Robert E. Kaplan
Robert B. Kaiser**



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235 Montgomery Street, Suite 650
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Tel: (415) 288-0260, Fax: (415) 362-2512

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Introduction

THIS BOOK IS THE CULMINATION of the surprising epiphanies and serendipitous insights we have garnered over a lifetime of working with senior leaders, including the CEOs of major corporations, to help them increase their effectiveness. We did not set out to discover what the leadership field has overlooked, but over the years, as we helped these leaders look in the mirror, each little revelation was like a curtain lifting on a neglected part of the drama of leadership. Most of what we have observed is in plain view yet its significance has been missed or it hasn't been put into practice.

Fifteen years ago, a routine executive assessment provided us with just such a seminal moment. We were working with an executive whose 360-degree evaluation characterized him, as one coworker had put it,

as “an elemental force in nature.” Yet his effectiveness as a leader was less than optimal. “Look,” we offered, “you are clearly a force to be reckoned with.” Then we took it a step further. “The problem is that at times you’re *overly* forceful.” There it was. In a way we had never quite realized or articulated before, we acknowledged that too much strength can be a weakness. It dawned on us that doing too much of something was as much of a problem as doing too little of it.

Put differently, your strengths can work against you. Many leaders know this on some intuitive level, but they tend not to accept it in practice. It’s not even in most managers’ vocabulary. Mainly, they think of leadership development as working on their weaknesses. No wonder. The tools used to assess managers are not equipped to pick up on strengths overplayed. In performance appraisals, managers are typically rated as not meeting expectations, meeting expectations, or exceeding expectations. In coworker feedback questionnaires, popularly known as 360s, managers are typically rated as ineffective, effective, or very effective. Nowhere in most assessments is there language or diagnostics that can reveal when someone is overdoing it—when more is *not* better.

The lack of attention paid to strengths overplayed has persisted despite the glut of books—most notably, Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton’s *Now, Discover Your Strengths*—exhorting managers to focus

on their strengths. Remarkably, in their enthusiasm to accentuate the positive, Buckingham and other strengths advocates fail to point out to their managerial audience the ever-present danger of taking their strengths too far.

In our consulting work, we have increasingly focused on making leaders aware of that danger and enabling the important developmental work necessary to mitigate it. We have enjoyed enviable firsthand exposure to senior leaders, conducted thousands of assessments of individual executives, and collected reams of data. We have put our thinking into practice in the form of an assessment tool, the Leadership Versatility Index (LVI, US Patent No. 7,121,830), a coworker-feedback questionnaire (360) that we designed expressly to assess for strengths overplayed. It has in turn served to further refine our thinking.

Our statistical findings as well as our practical experience form the basis of this book. We regularly illustrate our insights with case studies of executives with whom we have worked closely and extensively. To guard the executives' anonymity, the protagonist of each "case" is actually a composite and real names are not used. But the anecdotes, experiences, and voices we describe are unfailingly real, as are the problems we identified and the solutions that were implemented.

Among our most surprising findings has been that leaders often have a hard time acknowledging

their strengths in the first place. Once, when preparing for a feedback session, we were startled to see that the executive was so highly rated that there seemed to be practically nothing wrong with his leadership. “We’ve got nothing to work with,” we thought. It was unnerving. It turned out, however, that there was plenty of “ammunition” in the positive feedback. This individual underestimated his assets and, as a result, sometimes overcompensated, making him less effective than he might have been.

Gifted leaders, we have found, are often the last ones to acknowledge their gifts, even when they have ample evidence and feedback that attests to it. The practical fact is that the only way to manage your strengths is to accept them. If you literally don’t know your own strength, you have no way to calibrate or modulate it. In a relentless effort to be better, you have no way of knowing if you are going too far. One of the main missions of this book is to help you come to grips with your strengths and make full use of them without overdoing it.

We have also found that, for most executives, waking up to the potential dangers inherent in their strengths can be a vertigo-inducing shock. As one senior leader admitted, “The idea is unsettling. It’s chilling. I really mean that.” When leaders are faced with the prospect that the very intensity that fueled their rise to the top can be smothering their coworkers

and sabotaging their effectiveness, they are often panic-stricken at the thought of needing to ease up. “I’m afraid I’ll lose my edge,” is what we often hear, a reaction that is natural but misguided. In what may be the cruelest of ironies, overplayed strengths are often at the root of career failure. Analyses of derailed leaders time and again point to the excessive reliance on qualities that were key to past success but less relevant to the current role. We have learned that to stop overplaying a strength does not mean, as many leaders fear, to stop using it. It means using the strength more selectively. As another hyperintense executive finally realized, “I don’t have to give up my fast ball. I just don’t have to throw it all the time.”

Coming to grips with the need to modulate your strengths is some of the hardest developmental work you will ever do. After all, it’s your strengths that have made you successful. Why would you ever tamper with a winning formula? As one client quipped, “Overplaying your strengths: that’s a comfy, cozy place to be.” We wrote this book to ease the transition, to offer you real developmental leverage on both a behavioral level and a personal level. The work on yourself isn’t therapy. It is a plainspoken and useful approach that helps you trace your leadership behavior back to the “crooked thinking” and “trigger points” that can throw it off kilter. We offer a practical psychology of leadership—a better way for leaders to get a reading

on their performance, one that is truer to the realities of managerial work. Leadership development amounts to moving an individual from point A to point B. Each of the insights and practices described in this book offers the leader added leverage for making that move.

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