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MANAGING YOURSELF

Stop Overdoing Your Strengths

by Robert E. Kaplan and Robert B. Kaiser

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Stop Overdoing Your Strengths

The Idea in Brief

Taken too far, your strengths can become weaknesses.

Consider two leadership strengths: forcefulness (driving your team hard) and consensus-building (getting everyone's agreement on decisions). Overdo forcefulness, and your team's productivity may improve but its morale will weaken, eventually undercutting productivity. Overdo consensus-building, and morale may rise but productivity might ultimately suffer (for instance, decisions take too long), eventually eroding morale.

How to strike a balance? First, seek evidence that you're overusing particular strengths. Extremely high ratings on a 360-degree feedback report may offer clues. Then, redirect your strengths. For example, one executive who was seen by his colleagues as overly aggressive applied his inherent determination to himself—to stop coming on so strong.

The Idea in Practice

Kaplan and Kaiser offer these suggestions for rebalancing your strengths:

ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR OVERUSED STRENGTHS

It's hard to spot strengths you're overdoing. The following practices can help:

- When coworkers give you the highest rating on a leadership behavior, this may indicate you're taking the behavior too far. 360-degree feedback doesn't capture overkill. Review the highest ratings on your most recent 360-degree report and ask yourself, "Is this too much of a good thing?"
- Ask coworkers three questions: "What should I do more? What should I do less? What should I continue unchanged?"
- Ask yourself, "Do I privately pride myself on being superior to other leaders in any way?" If so, this is precisely the attribute you're at risk of overdoing.
- If you're still not sure, ask your spouse or partner whether you're overdoing any strengths.

REDIRECT YOUR STRENGTHS

Try to balance the strengths you're overdoing by doing a bit more of their opposite.

▶ Example:
A manager's strong preference for consensus building made for overly long meetings that tried her team's patience. Beyond a certain point, they wanted her to step in and decide. When she stopped shooting for agreement among the entire team and began settling for eight out of ten instead, her meetings became much more productive. The people who didn't agree accepted the majority's opinion and appreciated that their views had been considered. The entire team was glad that meetings no longer took so much time from their day.

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MANAGING YOURSELF

Stop Overdoing Your Strengths

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The conventional wisdom in leadership development circles is that you should discover and capitalize on your strengths, assuming that they are aligned with some organizational need. No matter how hard you work on certain weaknesses, the logic goes, chances are you'll make only marginal progress. Don't waste too much time overcoming flaws; better to focus on what you do best and surround yourself with people who have complementary strengths.

It's a reasonable approach that emerged as a response to an arguably unhealthy fixation on weaknesses when it came to performance reviews. Seven years ago, in fact, one of us (Kaplan) cited in a short HBR article the value of understanding your strengths—and not just because it's hard to overcome weaknesses. But it turns out you can take strengths too far. The article referenced a brilliant media executive who considered himself unexceptional. Although he grasped complex concepts more quickly than most people, he didn't realize it—so he was impatient with colleagues who, in his view, couldn't keep up. Only with some pointed feedback did he see that he was running roughshod over his colleagues. In other words, he had unknowingly corrupted his quick-wittedness by taking it to excess.

This is a common problem. Most managers can point to an off-kilter leader—the supportive boss who cuts people a little too much slack, for instance, or the gifted operational director whose relentless focus on results leads to hypercontrol. But it's extremely difficult to see such overkill in yourself.

And that's where leadership development tools are failing us. Dividing qualities into "strengths" and "weaknesses" implicitly ignores strengths overdone. Given this incomplete mental model, it is no surprise that most leadership 360s employ five-point rating scales in which high scores are the best. Such tools overlook a key lesson from decades of research on derailment: More is not always better, and executives lose their jobs when their strengths become weaknesses through overuse.

Based on our 25 years of leadership consult-

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ing and our analysis of 360-degree feedback on about 1,200 middle and senior managers (completed by nearly 15,000 coworkers over the course of a decade), we've devised strategies and tools to help managers recognize when they're taking a strength too far and then correct this counterproductive tendency.

The Costs of Strengths Overused

In our research we tested the effects of overused strengths on two aspects of team performance: vitality (defined as morale, engagement, and cohesion) and productivity (quantity and quality of output). We found that taking a strength to an extreme is always detrimental to performance, but even a mild tendency to overdo it can be harmful. Be a little too forceful, for instance, and your team's output may improve some—but vitality will take a hit, and weakened morale will eventually undercut productivity. Be a little too enabling, and you may shore up vitality—but productivity will suffer over time, which will in turn erode morale. In general, overdoing it hurts your effectiveness just as much as underdoing it (the exhibit "The Upshot of Overkill" displays this result for forceful leadership).

One executive we'll call Tom had, when we met him, recently joined his company's management committee. (In the interests of protecting our clients' privacy, Tom and the other managers we describe in this piece are composites.) Tom's peers and CEO had but one concern: He came on too strong in committee meetings. This dynamic played out, for example, in his very public misgivings over a proposed shift to greater centralization. His company, a telecommunications equipment maker, was moving to a shared-services model to cut costs, which were well above the industry average. Tom argued heatedly that the company should reduce the risk by centralizing in stages. His stated reason was that the business he ran was performing well; the company should first centralize the functions of businesses that needed to better their margins. Tom's unstated, mostly subconscious, reason was that he took the proposed changes as a lack of appreciation for his track record. By taking his forcefulness to an extreme (witness his staunch defense of his position), he degraded it. This is one cost of overdoing a strength.

There is another cost: lopsided leadership. Once you overplay a strength, you're at risk of diminished capacity on the opposite pole. For example, a leader who is good at getting people involved in decisions, and has been encouraged to build on that strength, may not realize that in engaging so many others he is taking too long to move into action. Among the senior managers we studied, 97% who overdo forceful leadership in some respect also underdo enabling leadership, according to coworkers. And 94% who overdo operational leadership in some way also underdo strategic leadership. Marked lopsidedness can limit your personal cachet and career prospects. (See the exhibit "Opposing Leadership Virtues" for more detail on two fundamental dualities in leadership—forceful versus enabling, and strategic versus operational.) Unfortunately, few leaders recognize when they are underdoing a strength's polar opposite.

Finding Your Balance

It's not hard to see why overdoing a strength can get you into trouble, but an intellectual grasp of that concept and even a willingness to change won't save you from yourself. To find some balance, you also have to come to terms with the roots of your behavior. Tom, for instance, had always viewed his conduct in a positive light: He was making himself heard, being direct. What's not to like? To be fair, such qualities are strengths—to a point. Tom was shocked to discover that people found him overly aggressive.

A change in mind-set was surprisingly easy for Tom. That's partly because when he got the bad news, he also learned that his peers, subordinates, and CEO held him in high esteem. Respect was a hot button for him; once he no longer felt he had to sell himself, he could relax and listen to other points of view. In a leadership survey conducted before his feedback session, his peers rated him as greatly overdefending his positions. A few months later, another survey showed a considerable drop in that rating; now the team could get much more out of Tom's generally very good business judgment.

Tom is the exception. For most of us, such a transition is quite difficult. If you can't, for example, imagine that there's such a thing as being too results oriented (which might lead you to drive your team too hard) or too principled (and maybe preachy, judgmental, or intolerant), you're a poor candidate for change. But Tom had an open mind: As he put it, he found

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that he could be passionate without losing compassion; he could be right without being righteous.

Acknowledge your strengths overused. As we noted earlier, it's not easy to spot strengths that you're overdoing. In our research sample, 55% of the managers were rated by coworkers as using too much of at least one leadership attribute, but the majority of those managers did not rate themselves as overdoing that attribute. The problem is made worse on survey instruments with a five-point rating scale. One manager gave himself a five on "decisive—makes decisions in a timely fashion." His corresponding written comments didn't reflect any awareness of the downsides of decisiveness. His coworkers rated him just as highly on decisiveness, but in later conversations they described him as "overwhelming" and cited his tendency to curtail discussion.

The leadership development field lets managers down by inadvertently neglecting to assess for overused strengths. Managers like Tom are to be forgiven for perceiving a five—typically defined as "to a very great extent"—as an excellent grade. The hitch is that when your coworkers give you a rating of five on a leadership behavior, it might be an indication that you're taking that behavior too far—but the score alone doesn't explicitly signal overkill.

Therefore, you need to find other ways to bring it to light. You could start with a review of the highest ratings on your most recent 360 report. Ask yourself: Is this too much of a good thing? Ask coworkers what you overdo, or better yet, conduct a survey consisting of three questions: What should I do more? What should I do less? What should I continue doing? If you're still not sure, ask your spouse or a very close friend, who will probably know.

Another technique is to make a list of the qualities you most want to have as a leader. Are you overdoing any of them? That's a tough question to answer, but it forces you to think in a new way, to challenge some of your assumptions about leadership and your abilities. Ask yourself as well whether you privately pride yourself on being superior to other leaders in any way. This is precisely the attribute that you're at risk of overdoing.

Checking for lopsidedness doesn't require an elaborate assessment tool. You can simply prompt feedback from other people with a list of qualities—one you compose or one you get off the shelf (drawing from the exhibit "Opposing Leadership Virtues," for example, or from John Kotter's distinction between leadership and management in the classic HBR article "What Leaders Really Do.")

And now the bigger challenge: Trace overkill to its source, whether that's an unexamined assumption that more is better or a set of overly high expectations. (Your spouse or a good friend can once again be a reliable source of information.)

Redirect your strengths. The stronger your preference for one leadership style, the stronger your distaste for its opposite. So-called servant leaders, for example, can't stand selfishness and are known for not taking good care of themselves.

It would be unrealistic to suggest that everyone could become fully balanced. Our research tells us that only 5% of executives get it about right on forceful versus enabling leadership as well as strategic versus operational leadership. Most managers lean one way or another, and lopsidedness will hurt your own and your team's effectiveness. If you are ready to embrace a new mind-set and begin correcting your lopsided tendencies, you merely need to stop both overdoing a given attribute and underdoing its opposite. That is, of course, a lot harder than it sounds.

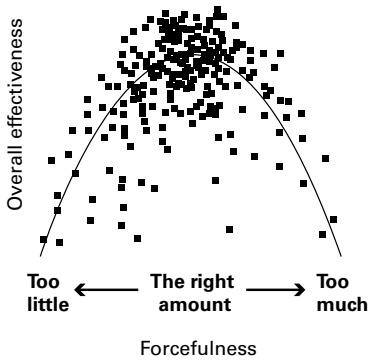
The good news is, managers can sometimes reapply their strengths to recover their balance. That's what we saw with Tom: His inherent determination went from virtue to vice and back to virtue. Once he accepted that others saw him as overly aggressive, he changed his behavior through sheer will, bolstered by knowing he had his colleagues' respect.

Consider also Maureen, another executive we've worked with, a general manager at an insurance company. Her strong preference for consensus building made for overly long meetings that tried her team's patience. Beyond a certain point, people wanted her to step in and decide. When she stopped shooting for agreement among the entire team, settling for eight out of 10, her meetings became much more productive—and the two people who didn't agree didn't mind because at least their views had been considered (and they got some time back in their day, to boot).

Overly enabling and insufficiently forceful, Maureen was also lopsided on the strategic-operational duality. She was a star when it came

The Upshot of Overkill

It's just as harmful to overdo a leadership strength as it is to underdo it. The graph below displays the relationship between forceful leadership and overall effectiveness. It maps coworkers' ratings of managers' effectiveness (based on a 10-point scale) against ratings of forcefulness.



Generally speaking, the managers deemed most effective are also viewed as exercising "the right amount" of forceful leadership—not too little, not too much. At either extreme, we see a marked drop in effectiveness. Our research shows similar patterns for enabling, strategic, and operational leadership.

to strategy, but her grasp of the big picture was undermined by her inability to implement. Specializing in strategic-enabling leadership, she operated at an overly high level and wasn't firm enough with people when they lost sight of broad goals or their progress was too slow. To implement her long-term plan, she needed to ramp up her forcefulness as well as her operational focus. Although it was uncomfortable, she made herself become tougher on people who were falling short in their performance. She also got a little more involved in day-to-day execution but at the same time appointed a deputy general manager, a field-general type who had the strengths she lacked. As important as it is for senior leaders to keep raising their game, precious few can be all things to all people.

• • •

Managers are always at risk of being one-dimensional—and often blind to what they sacrifice as a consequence. Your company may be able to help you mitigate the risks by holding up a mirror to your overused strengths and lopsided tendencies (arguably, you're owed the information), but you can't count on it. Now more than ever, it's your job to take control of your career—and it is in your power to manage your strengths so that they do not become weaknesses.

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Opposing Leadership Virtues

Leadership is commonly understood in terms of balancing two basic dualities. Strategic versus operational leadership defines the "what" of a leader's work: Are you positioning your company to be competitive down the road *and* driving it to produce results now? Forceful versus enabling leadership has to do with the "how": Can you take the lead *and* make room for other people to contribute?

These dualities can be cut more finely into subpairs. Based on the collective intelligence of leaders, the literature, and our own findings, we've identified three subpairs under each.

THE WHAT OF LEADERSHIP

Strategic **Positioning the organization for the future**	**VS.**	**Operational** **Focusing the organization on short-term results**
Plans ahead Takes the long view and has a big-picture perspective	↔	**Focuses on results** Manages day-to-day details of implementation
Pursues growth Seeks ways to grow the business and expand capabilities	↔	**Maximizes efficiency** Conserves resources by cutting costs and being selective about priorities
Promotes innovation Questions the status quo and encourages new thinking	↔	**Maintains order** Gets things done using procedures and process discipline

THE HOW OF LEADERSHIP

Forceful **Exercising influence on the basis of one's own intellect and energy**	**VS.**	**Enabling** **Creating conditions for other people to contribute**
Takes charge Takes initiative; gives direction	↔	**Empowers** Gives other people latitude to do their jobs
Declares/decides Takes a position and defends it	↔	**Listens/includes** Seeks input; is open to influence
Pushes Sets high expectations and holds people accountable	↔	**Supports** Shows appreciation and sensitivity

Stop Overdoing Your Strengths

Further Reading

ARTICLES

Assess Your Own Performance as a Leader
HBR Article Collection
October 2008
Product no. 12163

When top executives stumble, they risk taking their companies down with them. How can you stay steady on your feet, so you keep delivering high-quality leadership? Feedback. But getting feedback on your own performance isn't easy. The higher you climb on the corporate ladder, the harder it is to get candid input from colleagues uneasy about criticizing a peer. Few direct reports feel safe telling the boss uncomfortable truths about his performance. And members of the board often focus exclusively on executives' ability to deliver financial results, so directors may ignore additional essential skills of leadership, such as strategy execution and talent management. For all these reasons, you'll have to proactively generate the information you need to spot and address weak areas. For example, set up a formal process for board members to evaluate you on all the skills crucial to exceptional leadership. And learn how to identify problematic behaviors in yourself—so you can take action immediately. Take charge in these ways, and you tackle your weaknesses before they can tackle you.

Fear of Feedback
by Jay M. Jackman, Myra H. Strober
Harvard Business Review
April 2003
Product no. R0304H

Nobody likes performance reviews. Subordinates are terrified they'll hear nothing but criticism. Bosses, for their part, think their direct reports will respond to even the mildest criticism with stonewalling, anger, or tears. The result? Everyone keeps quiet and says as little as possible. That's unfortunate, because most people need help figuring out how they can improve their performance and advance their careers. This fear of feedback doesn't come into play just during annual reviews. At least half the executives with whom the authors have worked never ask for feedback. People avoid the truth and instead try to guess what their bosses are thinking. Fears and assumptions about feedback often manifest themselves in psychologically maladaptive behaviors such as procrastination, denial, brooding, jealousy, and self-sabotage. But there's hope, say the authors. Those who learn adaptive techniques can free themselves from these destructive responses. They'll be able to deal with feedback better if they acknowledge negative emotions, reframe fear and criticism constructively, develop realistic goals, create support systems, and reward themselves for achievements along the way. The authors take you through four manageable steps for doing just that: self-assessment, external assessment, absorbing the feedback, and taking action toward change.

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