

Leadership Versatility: What Leaders Need to Deal with Complex Challenges—And Don't Always Have*

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What does it mean when we call a challenge complex? Literally, that it has many parts—for example, multiple constituencies, business trade-offs, conflicting points of view on the team and perhaps a limited ability to argue openly and constructively, the leader's own uncertainty or self-doubt. For leaders to deal effectively with complex challenges, they need to be versatile—possess requisite variety, as system theorists call it.¹

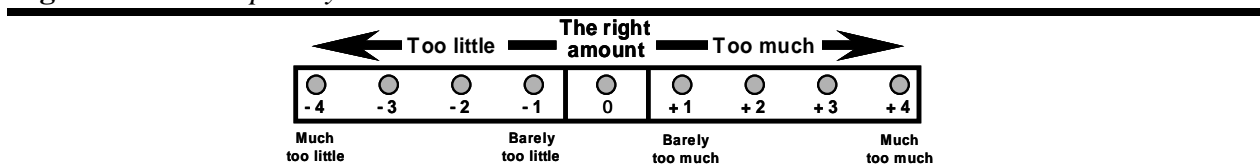
Basic versatility

When leaders lack versatility, often the problem is they're deficient—at thinking strategically or thinking things through or asserting themselves. But versatility isn't just possessing the needed capacity but also the dexterity to draw on it to the right degree for the situation. How do leaders misapply an ability? They overdo it. They generate new ideas—indiscriminately. They are detail-oriented—to the point of bogging themselves down in operational detail. Aristotle figured this out 2,500 years ago: the optimal amount of a desirable quality like courage or compassion is about midway between deficiency and excess—and the midway point varies with the situation.

An implication for leadership-development systems: although we all know that one way that leaders get themselves into trouble is by going to extremes, formal systems don't reflect this reality directly—and they should. Specifically, the rating scales used in performance management, in 360-degree questionnaires, and in executive coaching don't include a provision for overdoing it. Conventional response scales take two forms—frequency scales and evaluation scales. A frequency scale, of the less-to-more variety, acts like more is always better. If the questionnaire item is "asserts self," then a high score could mask a tendency for assertiveness to verge over to abrasiveness. An evaluation scale, of the ineffective-to-highly-effective variety, introduces ambiguity at the other end of the scale. If the item reads, "delegates," then what are we to make of a low score? Which could mean either that the individual delegates too little or too much.

To remedy this problem I came up with a new scale (which my colleague, Rob Kaiser, and I evolved to its present form)—where the best score is in the middle and where degrees of deficiency are represented by minus scores to the left and where degrees of excess are represented by plus scores to the right.

Figure 1. *The "implicitly curvilinear" scale*

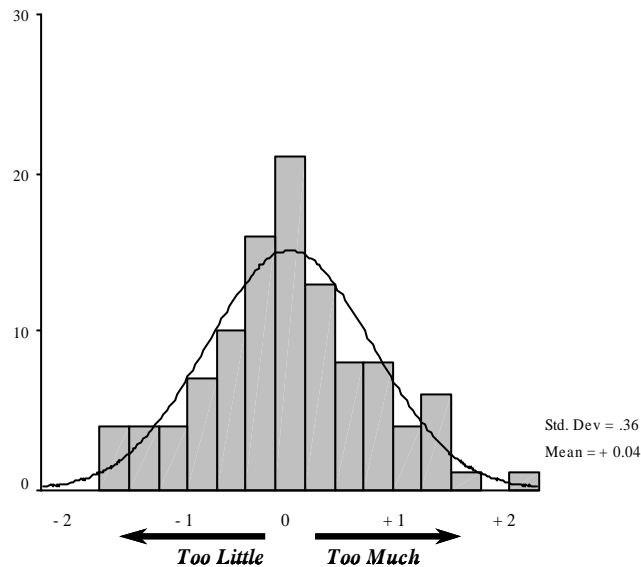


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¹ I collaborated with Rob Kaiser on much of the work described here.

You can see from the graph below how well this scale works. Executives span the range on the questionnaire item, "declares himself (or herself)—lets people know with feeling where he (or she) stands." The distribution includes the ratings of 107 executives by 507 direct reports.

Figure 2. Frequency distribution of average subordinate ratings using the "implicitly curvilinear" scale to evaluate a Forceful leadership item ("Declares self")



Higher-order versatility

Beyond being defined in terms of a single dimension, versatility also takes a more complex form—in terms of a pair of dimensions that look contradictory yet in fact are complementary. Like task-oriented versus people-oriented. On pairs of dimensions like these, leaders are often not versatile but lopsided. They lean to one side, sometimes decidedly. Meaning they overdo one side and underdo the other.

Implication for leadership-development systems: define leadership requirements—as well as development needs—in terms of dualities. Most sets of leadership requirements constructed by HR professionals, consultants, or academics are lists—create a vision, translate the vision into an operating plan, focus people on executing, support people, etc.

Although harder to build, duality-based models of leadership are more faithful to the reality that leadership is fundamentally two-sided. That's why so many of us talk about striking balances—between a short-term versus a long-term orientation, for example.

In our research on executive leadership and in our consulting to executives, we have identified two dualities that tower above the rest:

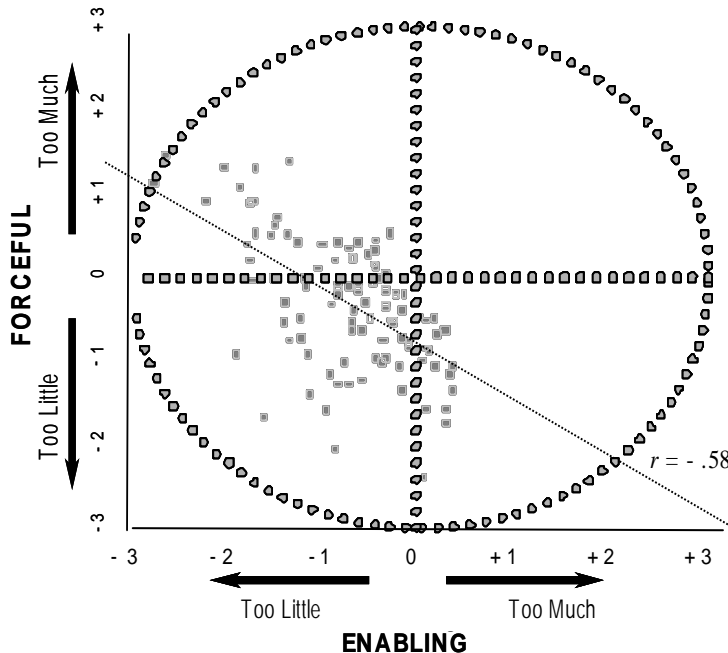
Strategic Leadership & Operational Leadership

Forceful Enabling & Enabling Leadership

Our 360 tool is designed to measure these two dualities. And gives us an opportunity to study them statistically. Question: what do you think the correlation between forceful and enabling is

(that is, between the scales)? Right, it's an inverse relationship. What do you predict is the size of the correlation? It's $-.58$. (This is in contrast to the negligible or positive correlations that traditional measures of these two factors produce.)

Figure 3. *Inverse relationship between all coworkers' average ratings of 107 executives on forceful and enabling leadership*



The inverse relationship you see depicted here tells us, mathematically, that most managers do indeed tend to overdo one dimension and underdo the other. But it doesn't have to be that way—some managers manage to perform more or less optimally on both. They're versatile.

We constructed an index of versatility and correlated it with coworker ratings of overall effectiveness. Do you think these two variables correlated? In which direction? How much? It's $.53$, fairly high. We all "know" that versatile leaders are more effective but it's always nice to have empirical support for something as important as this.

Leadership development as increasing an individual's versatility

To correct for lopsidedness, two things need to happen—bring up the underplayed side and tamp down the overplayed side. We know what it means to make up a deficit—that's the stuff of conventional training and development. Perhaps it's not as obvious that one trims excesses by learning to be more selective.

Becoming more versatile isn't just a matter of adjusting one's behavior. It's also grappling with what it is that throws off the leader's form. This is the beauty of a duality-based model of leadership: it naturally raises the question of what inside the person distorts his or her behavior.

What keeps the individual from exhibiting enough of one side of the duality and what prompts him or her to produce too much of the other side? One answer: values. Dollars to donuts, lopsided leaders place more value or importance on the overdone side and less value/importance

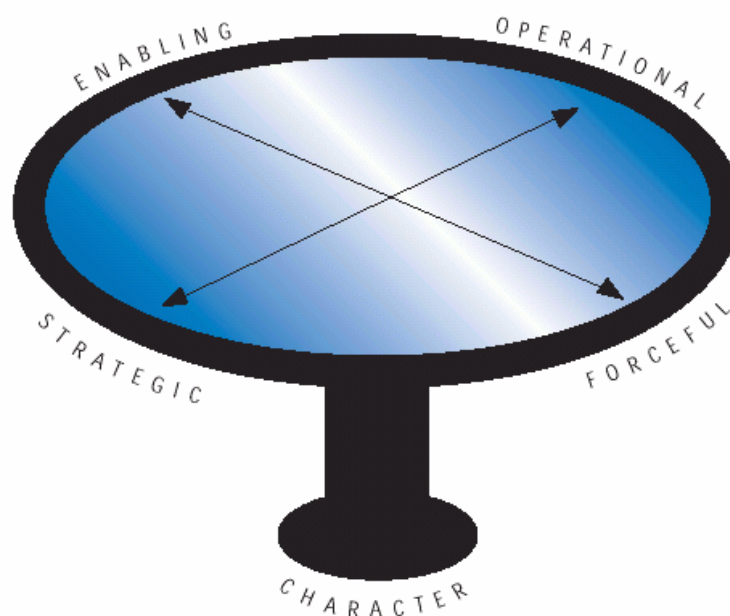
on the underdone side. My colleagues and I have seen these tendencies in numerous leadership consults over the last twenty years.

Another answer: fear. Scratch the surface and fear of failure comes into play, to use a rough-and-ready term. Fear of not being good enough in some respect like knowledgeable or prepared often drives doing too much—excessive preparation, going overboard on knowing "everything" about one's business or function. On the flip side: a fear of being too much of something like powerful often drives too little—afraid of being overbearing or overcontrolling, some leaders bend over backward....

Implication for leadership-development systems: leaders have a better chance of becoming more versatile if they work on the values and sensitivities that throw off their leadership and not just directly on the behavior itself. Knowing what drives a given behavior helps them get better control over that behavior.

Our model that takes account of the inside and outside of leadership looks like this:

Figure 4. *Kaplan DeVries Inc. model of executive leadership*



The table's surface is leadership behavior defined in terms of the two major dualities in executive leadership. The base is the individual's make-up.

Conclusion

To wrap up: to match up well against complex challenges, then, leaders need to develop a corresponding "complexity" to their skill-sets. What is an organization's role in that? To bring an adequately complex yet parsimonious notion of leadership to its models of leadership and to its assessment-and-feedback systems.