

Too Good to Be True

Are strengths all leaders need? • BY ROBERT B. KAISER



Robert Kaiser is a partner with the executive development consultancy, Kaplan DeVries Inc. His latest book, The Perils of Accentuating the Positive, discusses the hidden dangers in strengths-based development and how to avoid them. He can be reached at editor@clomedia.com.

It's woven into human DNA that when the going gets good, we can't get enough. The wealth created by the bull market of the 1990s and by the resurgence of the post-Sept. 11 markets fueled an unbridled optimism. We lost our grounding. Reality testing and risk management got brushed aside in a rush toward risky investments, hyper-leveraged corporate assets and unwise personal borrowing.

There is a clear lesson in this for leadership learning and development. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Consider the "focus on strengths" fad that has become all the rage.

Since the 2001 publication of *Now, Discover Your Strengths* — the best-seller by Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton — more and more gurus are telling leaders and those who develop them to stop wasting time and effort trying to fix weaknesses and instead focus on maximizing strengths.

"There are some things you will never be good at," goes the thinking behind this advice, "so focus on those things at which you have a natural-born talent and the most potential for greatness." The take-home message for learning and development professionals. Don't try to build well-rounded leaders; create instead a cadre of specialists.

There is a seductive appeal to focusing on strengths and leaving the rest behind. Leaders are drawn to it because it lets them off the hook for their shortcomings. And it gives development professionals permission to keep leaders in their comfort zones and avoid confronting weaknesses.

The problem is that a strengths-only approach is oversimplified and ignores what we know about how managers learn to become good leaders. It also neglects what we know about how and why leaders get derailed in their careers.

First, the obvious: Weaknesses matter. The job requirements of leadership are not elective, and if managers can't or won't perform them, organizational performance will suffer. The usual solution proffered by advocates of the strengths approach is to staff around weaknesses. But this has limited applicability.

The No. 1 reason for executive derailment is re-

lationship problems. How realistic is it to appoint someone the role of soothing the bruised feelings left in the wake of a brilliant business thinker who is weak on the soft side? Ignoring weaknesses is both a lethal career strategy and a poor way to manage talent.

Second, strengths can be a mixed blessing. Again, the work on derailment is relevant. Strengths become weaknesses when overused. For instance, we all have seen technical experts get mired in the minutia, unable to see the big picture and think strategically.

Encouraging leaders to maximize their strengths inadvertently encourages overuse and misapplication of their strengths, often to the neglect of complementary skills and perspectives. This creates one-dimensional leaders with limited toolkits. The bigger their hammers, the more everything looks like a nail. The most effective leaders are the ones with a broad perspective and wide repertoire that enables them to handle an array of challenges.

Finally, playing to strengths can inhibit development.

Continuous learning and dealing with the unknown, untested and untried, may be the secret to long-term success. But this is undermined by playing

to strengths. Exploiting one's strengths by repeatedly assigning the person to one type of job robs the individual of the opportunity to stretch and learn. Playing to strengths has a short-term advantage: Managers capitalize on their extensive knowledge and well-honed skills. But this strategy also has a long-term disadvantage that is easily overlooked: the opportunity lost from not providing the variety of job experiences needed to develop a well-rounded leader.

In an era of scarce talent, concern with employee engagement and retention, and growing numbers of the Millennials — the "everyone gets a trophy" generation — entering the workplace, it is no surprise that we are eager to embrace an approach that only dealt with the positives. But this is like making business decisions based on the upside potential without seriously considering the downside risk. A balanced approach to learning and development is much more likely to yield the leaders we desperately need in these most uncertain times of crisis, turmoil and never-ending change. **CLO**

COUNTERPOINT

Read Marcus Buckingham's December 2008 guest editorial on strengths-based development at www.clomedia.com/buckingham