

Versatile Leaders

Make the most of strengths.



by Robert Kaplan

OUT OF NOWHERE 360-degree feedback for managers sprung up 20 years ago, and now it's hard for managers to avoid getting swamped by it. Only 15 years ago, there was no such thing as "executive coaching." Now it is pervasive. Still, 360-degree feedback and coaching both need to become more useful.

In my consulting, I've hit on six new strategies and tactics, for capitalizing on the leader's strengths:

1. Don't succumb to the gravitational pull of your negative feedback—give positive feedback its due. When managers receive a 360-degree report, they act like only the negative feedback has practical value.

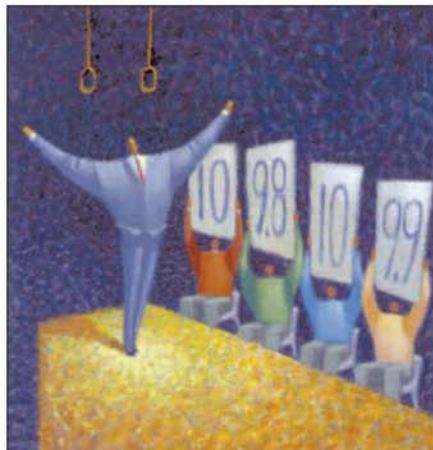
There's now a movement to shift the field's focus from correcting weaknesses to capitalizing on strengths. Sure, let's not place excessive emphasis on fixing what's wrong. But there's another reason to take the positives seriously: Leaders often underestimate their strengths! Positive feedback is leverage for correcting a limited idea of strengths.

Giving positive feedback equal time entails more than giving the positives a careful reading. It's truly taking in the positives in areas where you think less of yourself than your coworkers do. We all know how hard it can be for managers to face up to their weaknesses. It's no less hard for them to value their strengths!

2. Underestimating your strengths throws off your performance. So, take positive feedback seriously. Not appreciating that you are strong in a certain area—not knowing your strength—you may overuse that quality. Not realizing how powerful she is, and privately worried about not being powerful enough, one general manager overpowered her staff. In denial about he smart he is, and wanting nothing more to be seen as smart, a department head had to know every detail and answer every question. Yet to catch up with their high standing, and harboring doubts about their

capability, some senior managers are boastful, hog attention, and come across as arrogant. When you underestimate yourself, you're prone to overdo it.

3. Any inventory of your strengths ought to also capture which ones you overuse. What could make more sense? But in practice, virtually all surveys used to assess leaders lack a way to pick up strengths taken too far. The most commonly used rating scale asks, to what extent does this manager delegate, think long-term, follow up, and take charge. The highest score, and presumably the best score, is a "5," "to a great extent." But a "5" does not distinguish between a lot and too much. It masks excess. The truism—strengths taken to an extreme can become weaknesses—leads to the con-



clusion that you owe it yourself to discover which strengths you overuse. Strengths overused are just as much a performance problem as weaknesses.

4. Think volume control. Managers who learn that they take a strength to an extreme worry that if they make a change they will lose their edge. For example, one executive called me with the urgent question, "If I stop working 90 hours a week, will I become complacent?" *Of course not* was my answer. He imagined that the control mechanism regulating his work ethic was an on-off switch. Once he realized that it was a dial, a rheostat, he could modulate that strength. To modulate, incidentally, means getting the setting right for the circumstance, which means stripping away the excess. To perform well on any dimension of leadership is

to apply the right amount, neither too little nor too much.

5. Look for the side of leadership that gets crowded out when you overdo a strength. If you talk too much in meetings, you not only turn a strength into a weakness, you also trade off the opportunity to listen. This is the thing with going overboard on any dimension of leadership: as a consequence you sacrifice the opposing dimension, the complement, often unwittingly. A great believer in being open with his team, one manager seemed to forget that he had a responsibility to be discreet with sensitive information. One senior manager was so identified with being respectful of others and never doing anything that would make them feel bad about themselves that he fell far short on candor and accountability.

6. Shoot for versatility on pairs of opposites. Take charge and empower: can you do both? Get results in the short term and pay attention to the long term: can you do both? To be an effective leader you must do justice to both sides of many such leadership functions. The hitch is that managers tend to place too much weight on one side of a duality and too little weight on the other side. And this isn't necessarily just an accident of how their skills developed. Often individuals believe in one side of leadership more than the other. They become blind to the merits of the other. To be versatile is to be neither biased in favor of one side nor prejudiced against the other.

On which basic pairs are you versatile? On which are you lopsided? And on which pairs do you fall short on both sides? Surprisingly few assessment tools will provide feedback in these terms. Most are built on "competency" models that list dimensions unidimensionally, one after the other. And the rare tool that is built on pairs does not capture overdoing it and can't identify lopsidedness. To remedy this situation, we designed the *Leadership Versatility Index*. We find that the greater a leader's versatility, the greater his or her effectiveness.

These several points and practices, all revolving around a leader's strengths, give leaders added leverage in toning down strengths overused, bringing up flat sides, and becoming more versatile. **LE**

Bob Kaplan is coauthor with Rob Kaiser of The Versatile Leader: Make The Most Of Your Strengths Without Overdoing It (Wiley/Pfeiffer). At the Center for Creative Leadership in the 1980s, he designed one of the first 360s and wrote on leadership coaching. www.versatileleader.com.

ACTION: Become more versatile.