

# The Versatile Leader

Make the Most of Your Strengths  
Without Overdoing It

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with Rob Kaiser

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## Preface Oversights and Insights

A thousand accidents of memory, attention, sensation that cross my mind appear in my finished work. And yet all of it is certainly part of me, since my weaknesses, my strengths, my lazy repetitions, my manias, my darkness and my light, can always be recognized in everything that falls from my hands.

—Paul Valery

I did not set out to discover what the leadership field overlooked. I stumbled on the several oversights that form the basis of this book in the course of working closely with leaders on their development. From time to time over the past twenty-five years I have had a little revelation, like a curtain lifting on part of the drama of leadership. Most of what I have observed is in plain view for all to see, and yet its significance has been missed. Perhaps that is the way of all discovery. In the 1860 presidential election campaign, Abraham Lincoln opened a speech in New York City by saying:

The facts with which I shall deal this evening are mainly old and familiar; nor is there anything new in the general use I shall make of them. If there shall be any novelty, it will be in the mode of presenting the facts, and the inferences and observations following that presentation.<sup>1</sup>

Serendipity has led me to the simple truths that led to this book, yet it has not been pure happenstance. I have enjoyed exceptional, enviable firsthand exposure to the phenomenon of senior leaders, including CEOs of major corporations, attempting to perform better. First at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) and now in our own firm, my colleagues and I have long conducted searching assessments of individual leaders. We collect plenty of data so there is little doubt in the person's mind or ours that the findings are valid and credible. And even as we cast the net widely, we systematically reduce the catch down to its essence. Then we stay involved with the individual as he or she attempts to change so we are able to see firsthand what spells success and what does not. Every consultation doubles as informal research. Personally, I know no greater satisfaction than to learn and improve, and to help others learn and improve.

The field's oversights reported here are important because they represent major missed opportunities for leaders to gain effectiveness. I have not simply noted them or talked casually with my colleagues about them. In each case I have developed the thought and turned it into something practical. In each case I have hit on what I believe is a better way for leaders to get a reading on their performance, one that is truer to the realities of managerial work. This includes a cutting-edge assessment tool that breaks from the dominant tradition. I have also hit on novel ways of using the results of an assessment to spur or free leaders to actually change for the better. Leadership development amounts to moving an individual from point A to point B. Each of the practices described in this book offers the leader added leverage for making that move.

### *Little Epiphanies*

There has usually been a signal instance when the pattern has snapped into focus. I remember the feedback session fifteen years ago when it dawned on me that doing too much of something was as much of a problem as doing too little of it. After going over the assessment report with the executive, whom a coworker had

described as "an elemental force in nature," I attempted to sum up by saying, "You're a force, a force to be reckoned with." I went on to characterize his weaknesses in a way I hadn't deliberately done before: "The problem is that at times you're overly forceful." I realized later that not one of the assessment tools currently on the market, not even my own, which was distributed by CCL, was equipped to measure strengths overused.

The idea of strengths overused became an organizing principle for my next coworker-feedback survey, the Leadership Versatility Index. I conceived of the tool and put it into practice. Rob Kaiser and I have since turned it into a finished product and brought it to market. The tool has had the side benefit of allowing us to do statistical research. Our findings, complete with pretty bell curves and striking scatter plots, helped shape the book's conceptual framework.

I remember the time ten years ago when it occurred to me that the value of feedback wasn't just in the criticism. Preparing for a feedback session with Rick Freed, I was startled to see that he was so highly regarded that there was practically nothing wrong with his leadership. It unnerved me. "I've got nothing to work with," I thought. It turned out, though, that I had plenty to work with. His idea of his capability had lagged behind the reality. So the assessment became an opportunity for him to catch up with himself. And to my surprise, it was, without exaggeration, a breakthrough that enabled him to raise his level of play even further.

Thanks to Rick Freed, I realized that gifted leaders are often the last ones to know about their gifts. For years I had taken it for granted that, if they didn't already know they were strong in a given area, they simply welcomed the good news like a refreshing drink on a hot day. Wiser now, I hit on another type of leverage for development: much of the work of development is getting the strengths to sink in. Half of leadership development is on the strengths side of the ledger.

Rick Freed is a pseudonym. His story, told at greater length in Chapter 8, is taken largely from one leader's experience, but not entirely. All the cases in the book that are graced with a name are

composites, individuals with roughly similar profiles whose managerial appendages, torso, and head have been stitched together into one pseudonymic example. As much as I would like to write about individual leaders and use their real names, the last thing I want to do is invade their privacy or, through the exposure, hurt them in any way.

Disparate realizations like the two mentioned here eventually led, down a baroquely looping path, to this book. From talking up a new idea with anyone who would listen, testing it out informally in my work with managers, studying it systematically, formulating it carefully for presentations, putting it to work in leadership development programs, and writing it up in articles, ideas gradually took shape and then built on each other to form the basis for this book.

For the last several years Rob Kaiser has been my collaborator on the project that led to the publication of both this book and the Leadership Versatility Index. Although I developed the prototype, he and I together have since strengthened the tool's conceptual framework, rewritten questionnaire items, and revamped the feedback report, and he did the statistical analysis that underpins the instrument (see the Appendix). Rob also has helped me flesh out the book's model of leadership and leadership development. Yet since the book's major ideas are mine, the voice you hear on these pages, for better or worse, is my own.

**Capstone Concept**

The book's capstone concept is versatility. Several characteristics distinguish this notion from the usual sense of versatility.

First, versatility is usually understood as a wide repertoire, along with the capacity to call appropriately on one aptitude or another. I assign versatility a more restrictive definition that describes better what is required of leaders and where they go wrong.

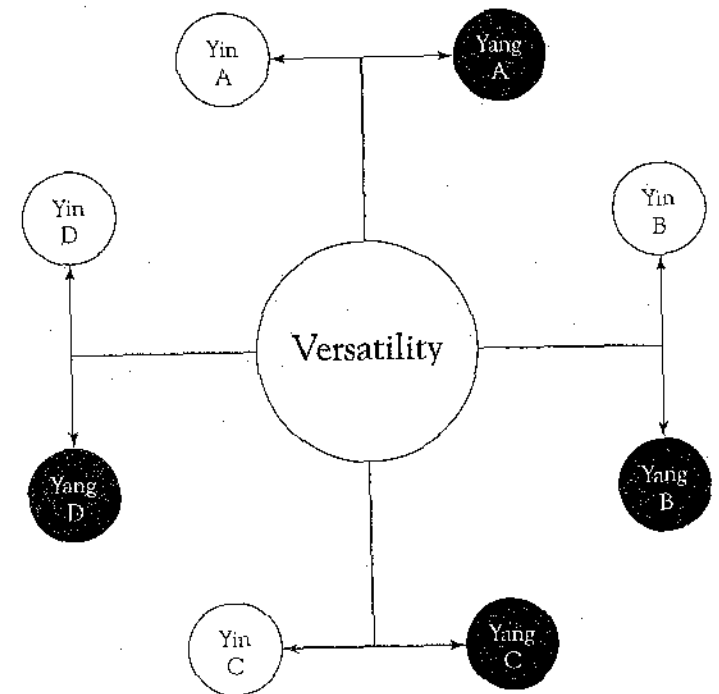
In this conception a wide repertoire comprises *pairs* of aptitudes that complement each other. The reason for structuring aptitudes in complementary pairs is that, in the case of every complementarity known to humans, leaders have a strong tendency to favor one side

over the other, to be lopsided, and a pair-wise arrangement throws that tendency into relief (see Figure P.1). Leaving aside for the moment which pairs we have found to be most important to effectiveness, I have used as placeholders matched sets of "yin and yang" dimensions.

Second, versatility is defined as covering all of the two-sided bases that are deemed important. This book is predicated on two major pairs, identified below.

Third, being versatile in this sense departs in another way from the usual meaning of the word. It is not just *having enough* of both sides of every major pair but it is also *not having*, or more precisely *not employing, too much* of either side. Getting it right depends,

**Figure P.1. A Model of Versatility**



however, on something that is not a foregone conclusion for leaders—having an accurate reading on how much they are deploying, neither too little nor too much.

Fourth, to employ pair-wise capabilities adeptly, two conditions have to be met. The individual must be evenhanded with each pair, when the tendency is to place too high a value on one side and to disparage the other. The second condition is that the leader be self-aware both about the way he or she behaves with respect to each pair and how he or she regards each pair.

From this notion of versatility fall, directly or indirectly, the several implications for the practice of leadership assessment and leadership development covered in this book. Three of the major implications are

1. *Overusing your strengths is no less of a problem than being deficient.* The answer is to modulate your strengths so that you avoid doing too much of a good thing. To accomplish this you must start by finding out what you overdo. However, virtually all standard leadership-assessment tools are geared to capturing deficiencies but not strengths taken too far.
2. *Know your own strength as well as the effect it has.* A chief reason why leaders overuse their strengths is that they underestimate them. Often their gauge is off: they think they're only going 55 miles per hour when in fact they're breaking the speed limit. It helps greatly if the individual can take in the full extent of his or her strengths, but that is more difficult to do than it sounds.
3. *When you overdo a strength, there's typically a complementary skill or quality that gets crowded out.* The trick is to keep two opposing ideas in your head at the same time. It's capitalizing on the power of both sides. It helps to know in what ways your leadership is lopsided, yet, surprisingly, there are hardly any assessment tools designed to identify lopsidedness in leaders.

The book is in three parts. The first part, largely descriptive, lays out the book's foundation.

Chapter 1: Think Volume Control: Don't Overuse Your Strengths

Chapter 2: "Mirror, Mirror . . .": Look for Excess Too

Chapter 3: Know Your Own Strength

Chapter 4: The Impact of Mind-Set: Learning the Inner Game of Leadership

The second part describes the two dualities, major pairs of dimensions, that we found to be critical to a leader's effectiveness.

Chapter 5: Forceful and Enabling Leadership: The Power of Both

Chapter 6: Strategic and Operational Leadership: The Power of Both

The third part offers ways and means to correct overdoing it, underdoing it, and a combination of both, lopsidedness. All three chapters describe the outer, behavioral work and the inner, personal work of development.

Chapter 7: Throttling Back

Chapter 8: Revving Up

Chapter 9: Adjusting Both Sides

The book concludes with an elaboration of the ideal of "multi-versatility," a direction in which leaders can and should attempt to move.

Chapter 10: The Multi-Versatile Leader

You can think of the book as the next best thing to getting a leadership consultation from me or one of my colleagues. It is a chance to try on for size the innovative models and techniques that we have been using and refining for years. In addition to your self-improvement, you can expect the book to inform your efforts to help others develop and improve. In either case, the intent is to provide you with serious developmental leverage.

The book offers developmental leverage on both a behavioral level and a personal level. This is an approach to development that traces back from the leader's behavior to the "crooked thinking" and "trigger points" that threw off that behavior in the first place. This isn't therapy. It's meant to be a step toward a practical psychology of leadership.

The book is also meant to be a resource for leadership specialists of all kinds. I am thinking of trainers who design and run leadership development programs and anyone, either a leadership coach or an HR professional, who consults to individual managers on their development. I am also thinking of specialists who deal with leaders one step removed—HR professionals responsible for talent-management and performance-management systems, test and measurement professionals who design leadership-assessment tools, and leadership researchers.

I intend for this book to be useful not just to the corporate managers I have typically worked with, but to anyone in a leadership position in any walk of organizational life—a manager in a non-profit human-service organization, an elected official, a minister tending a congregation, the head of a non-governmental organization (NGO), a college dean.

"The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function."

—*F. Scott Fitzgerald*

"Excess is false success."

—*Harry Kaplan*