

## Strengths-Based Development in Perspective

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Marcus Buckingham, a leading advocate of the strengths movement, is one of the best examples why the “stick with your strengths” strategy doesn’t work. In a television interview on the *Today Show* (April 20, 2007), an NBC reporter said that Buckingham had overcome “his own weakness to reach the top of the guru game. As a child, he stuttered. Years later his speech, once his weakness, is now his greatest strength.”

In my almost 30 years of experience studying executives and what makes good ones great, I’m struck by the irony of the previous statement. Buckingham was talking from the road on his city-to-city bus tour, talking to companies and schools about going with your strengths and leaving the rest behind. Yet his own professional beginnings illustrate a behavior counter to his current message. A behavior characteristic of all great leaders is the ability to learn, grow, and adapt—to overcome weaknesses and develop new strengths to fit a changing world. And as the collection of chapters in this book makes clear: Only the self-aware, not the strong, survive.

In this concluding chapter, I take stock of the previous chapters and offer my own point of view on strengths-based development. By building on the contributions of nine authorship teams along with my own direct experience as both a student of leadership and a teacher of leaders, I try to put the strengths-based approach to development in perspective.

### Ready for a Simple Solution

Having gotten to this point in the book, you have been bombarded with why an exclusive focus on strengths is shortsighted. My colleagues have all taken great pains to point out why a strengths-based approach, when examined in the cold light of day, may not be up to the challenge of producing the skilled, dynamic, and adaptable leaders required to succeed in the global marketplace.

Right now the American ethos is primed for finding a quick-fix leader. The economy stinks. We’re in a leadership crisis. We’re looking for answers. In the work place, people constantly bend and flex in new directions—a response to changing technologies, merging businesses, stiff competition, and an uncertain economy. We’re seeking relief. So when a new movement—like the strengths movement—comes along, it gets the rock-star treatment: the bus across America, the Oprah interview.

### *Off the Hook*

For the moment Buckingham and other proponents of the strengths movement seem to be passing out permission slips: “Stop stretching yourself in so many different directions. Focus instead on what you can do, not what you can’t.” Once the tour bus packs up and heads for another city, reality sinks in. It doesn’t matter how hard you wave that permission slip. The nature of business requires that you shed the strengths you no longer need, and develop the new ones required to be viable and relevant.

The danger comes with looking toward any one single solution as a savior. And as my colleagues have shown here, relying on our strengths is the antithesis of what we need. Research and experience shows that in times like these, we need something different. Something we've never done before. In total, the chapters in this book make a compelling case for why the strengths movement simply isn't strong enough for the modern workplace. Continuous learning and dealing with the unknown is critical to leadership development (Hodgson & White, 2001; Hogan & Warrenfeltz, 2002; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988).

### *Hidden Dangers*

Relying too heavily on one's strengths is a key dynamic leading to executive derailment (McCall & Lombardo, 1983; Morrison, White, & Van Velsor, 1987; and summarized by Gentry & Chappellow, this volume) and promotes stasis and stagnation while inhibiting growth and development. The danger in yoking our future to what worked in the past is multiplied by the fact that many of today's executives don't know what their company truly needs from its leaders to win in the global marketplace.

Further complicating matters are the complex issues skirted over by simple admonishments to "play to your strengths." In Chapter four, McCall explained how it is tenuous to define a strength as a strength, given the contextual nature of leadership—a strength in one environment (for instance, a no-nonsense approach to cost cutting in a mature market with eroding margins) isn't necessarily a strength in another (a start-up venture selling a new product in an emerging market). Elaborating on this theme in Chapter five, Kaiser and Kaplan showed how leaders routinely flex the wrong strengths—not knowing their strengths, they are prone to relying on them too much and at the wrong time and this comes at the expense of complementary skills that also have their time and place.

In my own research (Hodgson & White, 2001) and in that of my colleagues (e.g., Lombardo & Eichinger, 2006; McCall et al., 1988), we have found that continuous learning and dealing with the unknown, untested, and untried may be the secret to success. But this is undermined by playing to an individual's strengths. Exploiting one's strengths by repeatedly assigning the person to one type of job (for instance, a "fix-it" person for turnaround situations) robs the individual of the opportunity to develop a wider repertoire and broader perspective, which will matter at the top. Playing to strengths may have a short-term advantage—you capitalize on deep smarts and well-honed skills—but this strategy also has a long-term disadvantage: the opportunity loss in not providing the diversity of job experiences needed to develop a seasoned and well-rounded leader for the future.

Trends in areas as distinct as executive turnover and evolutionary neuroscience highlight the centrality of learning to sustainable success. The short-lived tenure of today's chief executive—somewhere in the neighborhood of two years, on average—and the plasticity of the brain converge to indicate how learning is critical not just for your career but for survival itself (Gilkey & Kilts, 2007). The political biographer Doris Kearns Goodwin stated that the best candidate for president of the United States would be the one who could learn, grow and change ("Meet the Press," October 21, 2007)—hardly the poster child in finding your strengths and building a career around them.

The development of effective leaders, or anyone with talent, involves transitioning through a series of increasingly difficult and complex skills. This is an interesting set of ideas first pioneered by Elliott Jaques (Requisite Organization, 1989) who put forth the argument that increases in organizational complexity demand a greater ability to imagine further into the future. Hence, as a leader deals with greater complexity at each stage in his or her career, he or she needs to be armed with a different, more widely developed skill set and a broader perspective for viewing complex problems and anticipating the consequences of various solutions.

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### *Thinly Veiled Self-Indulgence*

There is an insidious reason why the strengths-based approach may resonate with individuals, especially in cultures that embrace Western individualism. By giving out permission slips to ignore weaknesses, the strengths-based approach excuses individual leaders from the hard work of development. In effect, it says: "Those mean managers, they want you to be something you are not. They are telling you that you need to fix your weakness in math and working with numbers and financial reports. They don't recognize that you are an artist; instead of giving you a hard time about math, they should give you paint, brushes, and a canvas." But what if the person's job is in accounting?

When expressed with a single-minded focus, the strengths movement is an exercise in self-indulgence. It focuses on what comes easy for the individual, what the individual enjoys doing, and what will bring the individual fulfillment. What is ignored in this philosophy is what the organization needs from the position that the individual's job is designed to provide. As Rob Kaiser has said (Kaiser, 2007), "Leadership roles are not elective—if the leader can not fulfill those roles, the performance of the team and organization will inevitably suffer." The philosophy behind the strengths approach offers yet another example of putting the needs of the individual above the needs of the greater good.

### **A Single-minded Focus on Strengths Can't Work**

#### *Out of the Comfort Zone*

In chapter two, Bob Eichinger, Guangrong Dai, and KingYii Tang restated a question from two grown children entering the world of work: "Would a strengths-based approach be the best way to manage my career?" I can't imagine a parent saying to a child, "Stick with what you know, kid—you probably won't get any better." I wouldn't say that to a child, nor would I say it to a leader.

For the sake of the argument, Eichinger, Dai, and Tang took on a strengths-based strategy and assumed it to be true. With this assumption in mind, they did an analysis of the most successful managers. What they found is that the more you hone those strengths to be successful—the skills in short supply that matter most to effective leadership—the closer you move to a smaller group of people, competing at your level, who have exactly the same strength as you. And if you're among the top 10 percent of the people Eichinger and his colleagues studied, the competition is fierce. Everybody looks the same. The range is restricted. To stand out, you've got to be willing to learn what you—and they—can't do, or don't know how to do. To differentiate, you've got to develop your strengths.

Even if you play this out, you suddenly find yourself in a restricted range situation where everybody looks the same: a) how boring, b) how shortsighted, and c) how limiting.

The point is we don't tell children, "Stick with the crayons, kid. You'll never get better with anything else." We encourage them to try a variety of things. The same is true for leaders: Discover what you didn't even know you could do.

#### *Flexing the Wrong Strengths*

In chapter three, Jean Brittain Leslie and Anand Chandrasekar of the Center for Creative Leadership point out a disconnect between what leaders are good at and what organizations need them to be good at. Most executives have their greatest strengths in areas that aren't central to the kind of dynamic leadership organizations need to be competitive. The danger these executives could face is relying on strengths that won't make them a better leader.

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“The skills most prevalent among managers—that is, current strengths—are not the same as the skills that are most critical to organizational performance. If we’re going to rely on our strengths, there’s good cause for concern that we’d work the wrong ones,” Brittain and Chandrasekar said.

#### *Development is Hard Work*

Finding flaws is human. Growth and development—especially in areas in which one is weak, or even flawed—takes humility and hard work, not to mention rising above one’s ego. Right down to the core of the human psyche, it’s actually easier to believe in a notion of a perfect leader than it is to do the work necessary to change and become a better or more effective leader.

In chapter four, Morgan McCall suggested that we think too highly of ourselves—mostly around skills that don’t matter. As if an answer to the unspoken prayer, the recent emphasis on “playing people to their strengths” provides just such an escape. There’s an underlying belief that talent is born not made, and if you just aren’t born with a natural inclination in a particular area, well, just forget it. We all know that’s not true.

As one extraordinary French executive said, “To me, the real test of leadership is getting people to follow you and do something, even when they don’t have to,” suggesting to us, that leadership isn’t about just being great at something, it’s about inspiring people.

#### *Save Yourself from Your Strengths*

In the original “derailment” studies at the Center for Creative Leadership, it was discovered that the “jack of all trades,” not the strongest, survived (see the review of this research in chapter seven, by Bill Gentry and Craig Chappelow.) In fact, McCall and Lombardo’s (1983) original study found the secret to long-term career success is having a well-rounded portfolio of skills and a lack of glaring weaknesses. Successful executives learned a little bit of everything. Derailed managers, on the other hand, relied too much on a few towering strengths to the neglect of complementary skill sets. This prompted McCall and Lombardo to declare a now well-known phrase: “strengths can become weaknesses.” Later research demonstrated that managers who derail in the middle of their careers can turn it around and get back on track if they were willing to make an honest self-appraisal of both their strengths and weaknesses (Kovach, 1989).

And while the essential stuff that makes leaders great is similar around the world (again, see chapter three by Leslie and Chandrasekar), a strengths-based approach only perpetuates a uniquely American obsession to find the perfect leader.

#### *Batter up*

Playing to your strengths is only as good as the degree of certainty in your situation. In their chapter, Robert Hogan and Michael Benson use a baseball analogy. Fielding a baseball team, the person chosen to play third base needs specific strengths because he’ll always be in that position. Same thing for pitchers, catchers, outfielders, and the rest of the infield because their positions too are well defined.

Yet business is certainly uncertain. In his classic 1975 Harvard Business Review article, “The Manager’s Job: Folklore and Fact,” Henry Mintzberg showed the range of unpredictable events executives have to field each day. Several studies have confirmed Mintzberg’s original finding that managers work at an “unrelenting pace, that their activities are characterized by brevity, variety, and discontinuity, and that they are strongly oriented to action, and dislike reflective activities.”

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Dealing with this uncertainty makes leaders great. Successful leadership in such an environment is born from unpredictability, mistakes and “redoes,” the individual’s propensity to accept challenges. In our research we found that managers who can tolerate risk also value the learning opportunity afforded by making mistakes. In fact, one executive we consulted to said that he wants his employees to fail fast, but to fail forward.

The greatest risk in not trying new things is overplaying what you know—a proven cause of derailment. This is a line extension to the natural development process. Skills in childhood won’t serve adolescence. And a young adult can’t rely on the skills that got him through his teens to serve in him in adulthood. What is more off-putting and frustrating than a middle-aged man acting like a young man in a hurry with something to prove?

### **The Seductive Appeal of the Strengths Movement**

A collective sigh of relief could have been heard in cubicles and boardrooms across the Western world when company leaders first embraced “the new thing” in leadership development—the strengths movement. The modern workplace today is an anxious one. Leadership trends and project plans rarely survive the fiscal year. In the course of a day, people flex and bend outside their comfort zones as technology comes and goes, businesses merge, fold, or struggle to break even. One result is a lackluster love affair with leadership.

#### *Only in America*

The United States is an ideal environment for the strengths movement. It’s built into the American ethos to find a strength and build on it. Go to McDonald’s and you’ll pay the lowest price for the biggest burger, a Big Mac loaded with 485 calories—it even tastes good, while slowly it is making you sick.

Buckingham said it himself on his bus tour: “One of the reasons I’m here is because this is the kind of country which goes, ‘Who are you? What can you become?’ If this strengths movement does anything at all, it will elevate that idea to the national stage.”

Even if we don’t necessarily know what they are, the reality is that we do have strengths and weaknesses. As Americans, we have a uniquely over-inflated sense of abilities in general. In my teaching around the world, I find that 80 percent of people in the United States lean heavily towards using fours and fives (on a five-point scale) in their ratings of others and themselves. In the classes I’ve taught in Germany and particularly in Scandinavia, people rarely think in fives—they think in threes. Yet in the U. S., we have a cultural halo around everyone’s head. We don’t use C’s. We don’t differentiate. Everyone is an A or B—no one is average. Think Garrison Keillor’s Lake Wobegon, “where all the children are above average.”

#### *The Successful Don’t Rest on their Strengths*

Our own work with leaders suggests that the most effective ones are able to embrace uncertainty where a pattern set of leadership behaviors may not be useful (Hodgson & White, 2001). If this is true for individuals, it’s even more true for a collection of individuals—an organization. Organizations continually demonstrate that going outside their strengths is key to survival and greater success. I recently came across two companies, two leaders in the global leadership landscape who embraced what they didn’t know as a deliberate leadership strategy.

**Schibsted—embracing terra nova.** In 2007 many newspaper organizations either braced for or announced company layoffs. One Norway based media company, Schibsted, reported that its earnings rose 28 percent in the fourth quarter. Online operations will generate about 20 percent of the company's revenue this year. Meanwhile, many traditional news businesses are struggling or folding (“While Others Struggle,” 2007).

Schibsted's success actually started in 1995 when the global newspaper industry faced a career-breaking decision: Go with new digital media or stay with old print media. As other organizations hesitated, Schibsted invested heavily in new media, building credibility and the content of their online newspapers. They started charging for advertising space—and let the readers read for free.

In 2000 and 2001, Schibsted didn't bail out when they could have because they continued to believe in the unknown—the unforeseen potential of online media. Leaders in the company said they recognized early that the Internet would change the traditional print industry. They hired experts from outside the newspaper industry to assist in the reinvention. They abandoned what made them successful in the print world and boldly embraced what the company (and the whole industry, for that matter) has never done before.

**Google—using strengths to find weakness.** While Google has gotten stronger acquiring new businesses, the acquisition process has created a unique weakness. As businesses merge with Google, they bring a new set of people, sales processes, and mindsets. The result has been a slew of sewn-together, fast fix solutions for sales and business processes (“Google Push,” 2008).

In January 2008, the Internet analysis group Comscore released its findings on the number of people who clicked on Google's paid ads. On its Web site, Comscore reported a 33% decline in the number of people who clicked through Google's paid advertising links in 2007. With the struggle to sell ads on YouTube, coupled with complaints from salespeople about a slow, paper-heavy process of purchasing ads, Google launched a hands-on fact-finding mission.

In March 2008, Tim Armstrong, Google's head of advertising and commerce in North America, moved himself from his executive office into the middle of the You Tube ad team's cubicle spaces. Determined, he said, to figure out the sales process, he emerged a month later with a list of 105 fix-its. The company has a history of similar initiatives designed to clear the clutter and do the dirty work, including, “Project Spaghetti,” “Weed Days,” and “Project Drano.”

By comparison, Google's billions in annual sales would have caused celebration in any other company. Yet Google didn't rely on the strength of past or predicted sales revenues to fix the problem. They literally did a deep-dive to seek and find the problem: They saw a weakness and jumped right into the middle of it.

As of the writing of this book, the jury is out about Google and whether they'll be a long-term success story or not. Nonetheless, the actions of several leaders at the company underscore the need to move away from simply a “strengths-build process” to also examining the downsides, the negatives, and the “fix-its.” Whether or not Google is a success in the long run is beyond the point: The willingness to be reflective, and examine their weaknesses, and not just assume they'll go away—that's the critical point. They're willing to look at their weaknesses and not be blinded by their strengths.

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## The Situation Comedy of Executive Education

A strength can become formulaic, predictable with tidy conclusions—like a situation comedy. The formula works, proves successful, and is repeated again and again. You get the same variety of roles, and you put people in the same roles again and again. Soon the audience becomes numb. There is no difference, no variety. It's the same episode repeated over and over. And in chapter six, Steven Berglas offered the fallen CEO and founder of Digital Equipment Corporation, Ken Olsen, as a cautionary tale about what happens when leaders rely on the same old tricks.

Remember when you first saw John Cleese in “Monty Python’s Flying Circus”? It was a group of people trying new and different things. Were they playing to their strengths? Or were they celebrating absurdity? Their formula was to be imperfect. To be in the moment, leverage their strengths absolutely, but also stretch themselves into risky new territories, and, ultimately, allow themselves to learn and grow.

If we only play to our strengths, will we ever learn to laugh at ourselves for trying? Truly, to only play to our strengths means we will never grow—and that is surely not a laughing matter.

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