

# KAPLAN DEVRIES

## ILLUMINATING THE PATH TO EXECUTIVE EXCELLENCE

By Alex Gonsalves

**B** Bob Kaplan and David DeVries founded Kaplan DeVries 30 years ago to offer what turned out to be a forerunner of executive coaching. That field—and even that term—did not yet exist. It was a time when senior managers regarded training as something for supervisors and middle managers, but not for them. That innovative service was the outgrowth of a multi-year study Bob Kaplan and two colleagues conducted at the Center for Creative Leadership, a study designed to find out how did executives need to develop anyway. From that study, the Kaplan DeVries ethos was born. Kaplan and DeVries were co-presidents of the firm until DeVries' recent retirement.

The firm's work with a leader is extensive. It takes the individual's past as well as their psyche into account. Data of all kinds is boiled down to its actionable essence and the individual comes away with a clear, concise and profound understanding of what they have been, what they now need to be, and how to get there. The firm's work is also intensive: the "insight session" lasts a day and a half. Afterwards participants often refer to the experience as "deep." Besides development work with individual leaders, Kaplan DeVries also consults to management teams and evaluates candidates for top positions, among other services.

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Even in today's crowded leadership-development field, this small but mighty firm continues to stand out for the quality of its services, for its innovation and for its thought leadership.

### Quality Service

- At its core, Kaplan DeVries' singular ability to make leaders better is a credit to its deeply-skilled and seasoned consultants, who are notable for having their egos in check—consummate professionals each of whom has worked with many C-level executives, including CEOs. Their work is anything but cookie-cutter. It's good to take the lead and it's good to let others lead, but leaders often do too much of one and too little of the other.

For instance, when a client resists a finding or a suggestion, the consultants don't try to break through the client's defenses. Instead they back off or come at it from a different angle, probing gently for the keys that will unlock the executive's growth. About the firm's consultants, an executive from a longstanding client organization said: "Yes, [there's] intelligence, but there's [also] a kindness and a firmness that's blended in a very nice way."

The firm's effectiveness is not just a function of staff competence, however, but also of the methods in its collective toolkit. They have been added judiciously from time to time when consultants have "ah-has" about how to help leaders grow.

Put another way, Kaplan DeVries has developed a distinctive body of knowledge, techniques and approaches designed to find the precise points of leverage that will move a leader from point A to point B:

- The firm takes multiple perspectives. It doesn't, for example, confine itself to what the leader is like at work but ventures outside of work. How, for example, does the person as a parent compare with him or her as a supervisor? How does the person's style of play on the golf course or on the tennis court or in a game of cards compare with his or her style of leading?
- The consultants collect a large amount of data on each leader but also several different types of data. Why? To make it more likely the individual will conclude the findings are valid. As one executive said at the end of the insight session, "There's convergence, this must be me."
- Partnership model. The firm departs from the traditional expert model according to which the consultant doesn't just

collect data and prepare a report but draws conclusions and makes recommendations—in other words, does most of the work. Certainly, the Kaplan DeVries consultants do their share of the assessment work but then largely serve as a guide. They want leaders to tumble to their own conclusions. People will tolerate conclusions drawn by others but they will actually act on their own conclusions.

- Root cause. Kaplan DeVries doesn't limit itself to the "outer" leader. They have learned that the best chance of raising a leader's game is to work on their mental game and not just their play on the field. That means getting to the root cause, under the surface, of performance problems and stunted growth.

- Leverage positive feedback. Managers are usually much more interested in the negative feedback because, as they say, "That's what I can do something about." But Kaplan DeVries knows that positive feedback is no less a lever for improvement. When, for example, someone underestimates their own intelligence, it distorts their way

of leading. They either hold back for fear of being stupid or they overcompensate—talk too much, straining to prove themselves. It's important for leaders to take in the praise, which counterintuitively many resist doing. But if they can up-level their idea of how smart they are, the distortions in their leadership die down or die out entirely. [<https://hbr.org/2002/03/know-your-strengths>]

- Continued contact. The firm doesn't settle for insight. It stays in contact with the leader as she or he attempts to apply that insight. The key

is to practice the new practices but that can easily fall to the wayside. The firm's consultants also come at it from the other direction. They help leaders with their work, talk over the things they are grappling with, while keeping front and center the person's worst tendencies and guarding against those. After a few months the firm conducts a follow-up survey to reinforce the leader for progress made and to highlight further room for improvement.

### Innovation

Not only did Kaplan DeVries essentially invent executive coaching itself—and write about it at the time, but it has continued to innovate in other ways. In addition to coming out with that pioneering service, the firm came up with an innovative product, the Leadership Versatility Index (LVI),



a 360-degree survey designed to capture strengths overdone—too much of a good thing. Leaders would say strengths taken to an extreme are weaknesses and yet somehow the very idea was counterintuitive and even disturbing, especially when applied to oneself.

Bob Kaplan built the prototype<sup>1</sup> of the LVI and put it into practice. Then he together with Rob Kaiser built out the model and used the growing data base to refine both the model and the survey.



The LVI rests on a compact model of leadership consisting of two yin/yang dualities: strategic versus operational leadership (in other words, what leaders work on) and forceful versus enabling leadership (how they go about their work).

A feature of the tool not found in other 360s is that it captures a common development need—lopsidedness, leaning too much to one side and not enough to the opposite, or complementary, side. Versatility, on

the other hand, is the ability to do, in any given instance, just the right amount of both yin and yang.

After ten years of using the LVI in the firm's own practice, Bob and Rob patented the tool (US 7,121,830) and made it widely available. Today, the LVI, is now owned by Rob's firm, Kaiser Leadership ([www.kaiserleadership.com](http://www.kaiserleadership.com)), translated into many languages, and is used all over the world.



### Thought Leadership

Because of its pioneering approach to service and product, Kaplan DeVries has consistently been a thought leader in the field. Kaplan and Kaiser's "Developing Versatile Leadership," a seminal article published in MIT Sloan Management Review, won that journal's annual award for being both "innovative and practical." Later, the pair published the groundbreaking book, *Fear Your Strengths: What You're Best at Could Be Your Biggest Problem* (Barrett-Kohler).

After years of producing thought-provoking professional writing, Kaplan has lately turned to fiction in the form of short stories. As he says, "I was yearning for a better way to convey what I've learned about leading and about helping leaders be better. These stories attempt to bring to life a leader's efforts to grow and improve, with the help of a third party, not necessarily a consultant. (For example, read "Nothing but the Best," about an investment banker with an ego problem [<http://kaplandevries.com/blog/nothing-but-the-best>]).

Not surprisingly, Kaplan sees his firm's mission as helping leaders to solve problems, both those they face in their jobs as and those in their way of leading. "When it comes right down to it," he says, "our firm is about what works, what doesn't, and what can be done to make it work better."

At the core, Kaplan DeVries delivers clarity—but not the simplistic clarity on this side of complexity. It's the clarity achieved once consultant and leader work their way through the thicket of character and circumstances. Even the firm's icon was handcrafted to represent that notion. It's the deep clarity, the profound simplicity, on the other side of complexity.

To learn more about the firm, visit [www.kaplandevries.com](http://www.kaplandevries.com) **HR**