DETECTING EXCESS TOO:

A QUANTUM LEAP IN 360° ASSESSMENT

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In the mid 1980s 360-degree feedback was virtually unknown. At about that time one of us (Bob Kaplan) came up with the idea of a "letter from home" to add more punch to a program he ran at the Center for Creative Leadership. Not long after, the Center helped to create the 360-degree industry by putting on the market both Bob's instrument (SKILLscope For Managers®) and Benchmarks®.

Sold by distributors or developed in-house, and made a staple in executive coaching and performance management, the use of 360 surveys has spread like wildfire. Barely 15 years after it came into existence, this market is glutted; the industry has matured.

To be sure, the technology continues to evolve. Questionnaires can now be administered on-line. Increasingly, verbatim comments are collected along with ratings. Vendors now offer tools that can be customized by adding competencies to a standard set or choosing competencies or items buffet style from a large preset pool. As useful as enhancements like these can be, however, they don't affect the fundamental nature/design [*sic*] of 360 tools. Is there nothing new under the sun? Our answer is no.

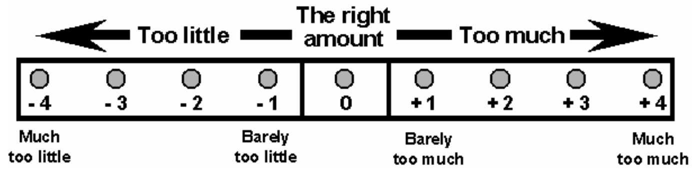
We have developed a radically different 360 tool, based on a single simple truth about leadership that dawned on us over the course of years of data-based consultations to senior managers. It is the simple truth that performance problems don't just consist of deficiencies; they also consist of excesses. Words like weaknesses, shortcomings, and limitations obscure the distinction between the two basic classes of faults: those where leaders exhibit too little of management functions like delegation, operational discipline, visionary thinking, tough-mindedness, etc. and those where they exhibit too much of managerial functions like those. We are all familiar with managers who are overly forceful or who empower to a fault or who go overboard on growing the business or who take accountability to an abusive extreme or who overdo follow-up or who are excessively concerned about other people's feelings. So it's startling that the assessment field could neglect to measure overdoing it. But it has.[1]

Although we all know that one way that leaders don't perform well is by going to counterproductive extremes, conventional measures of leadership do not reflect this reality directly—and they should. Specifically, the rating scales used in 360 questionnaires do not include a provision for overdoing it. So-called frequency scales—of the less-to-more variety—act like more is always better. Yet the highest rating (say, "to a very great extent" or "almost always") on a questionnaire item like "asserts self" might seem like a good thing when it could actually mask the tendency for assertiveness to verge over into abrasiveness. So-called evaluation scales—of the ineffective-to-highly-effective variety—introduce ambiguity on the other end of the scale. A low score on an item that reads "delegates" could mean either that the individual delegates too little or too much!

To remedy this problem we have come up with a new type of rating scale, where the best score is in the middle and where degrees of deficiency are represented by minus scores running to the left and degrees of excess are represented by plus scores running to the right (see Figure 1).[2]

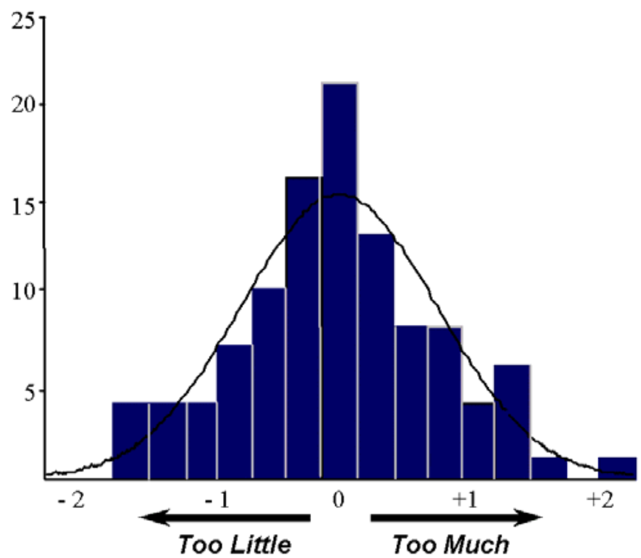
Figure 2 shows how well this rating scale can work. On the questionnaire item, "Declares self," average ratings by subordinates of 107 executives distributed themselves beautifully across the too-little, right-amount and too-much ranges of the scale.

Figure 1 The curvilinear "Too little-Too much" scale.



By detecting excess, a 360 tool is able to tap into utility that virtually all existing tools lack. It's not just the ability to pick up overdoing it on single behaviors or dimensions of performance; it's also the ability to pick up a pervasive problem in leaders—lopsidedness, the troubling pattern where the individual goes overboard on one side while giving short shrift to the opposing side. Everywhere we look we find managers who lack balance in this sense. They are too task-oriented and not people-oriented enough, or conversely too people-oriented and not task-oriented enough. Or they are too focused on the short term and not enough on the long term; or the converse. Or too absorbed with work and career and not invested enough in their personal life.

Figure 2 How the curvilinear scale works: A frequency distribution of average subordinate ratings on the item, "Lets people know clearly where she stands on issues. Declares herself."

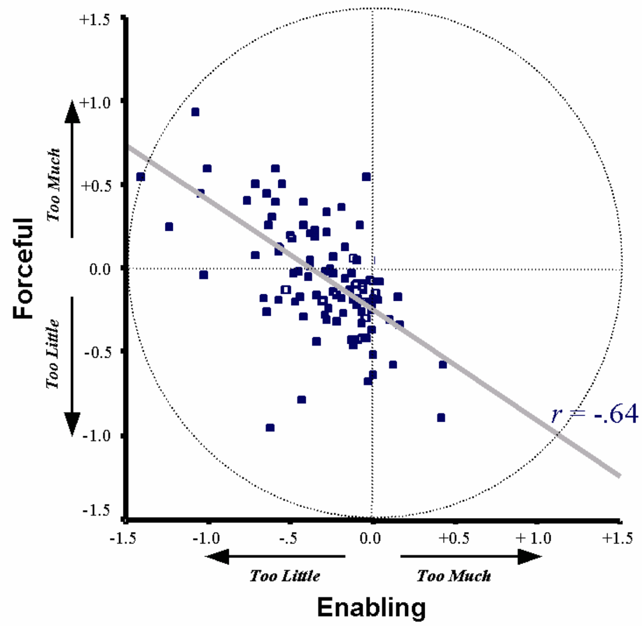


Since lopsidedness consists of placing too much weight on one thing and placing too little weight on an opposing thing, the only way a 360 tool can identify lopsidedness is if the tool measures excess as well as deficiency.[3] For a 360 tool to identify lopsidedness, however, it needs another feature too: it must define leadership requirements in terms of pairs of opposing leadership virtues—like task-oriented and people-oriented.

Equipped to detect overdoing with the rating scale presented above and built around pairs of opposites, our 360 tool, the *Leadership Versatility Index*™ (LVI), is able to capture lopsidedness. For example, of 10 coworkers who rated an executive we consulted to, 8 indicated that he was too task-oriented and all 10 indicated that he was not people-oriented enough. Another executive rated by 10 coworkers: 7 indicated that she was too focused on her own unit's success and 9 reported that she was not enough of a team player. Although the LVI reports results in terms of pairs of dimensions, raters filling out the questionnaire respond to each item in a given dimension separate and quite apart from the items in other dimensions.

In addition to referring to these individual examples, extreme cases chosen to make the point, let's examine the samples of senior managers we've studied over the years. Using an early version of the *LVI*, we constructed two statistically sound five-item scales, one to measure forceful leadership and the other, enabling leadership. If it is true that as a body managers tend to be lopsided on forceful and enabling leadership, then would we not expect the two scales to correlate inversely? In an inverse relationship, the more forceful that managers are, the less enabling; and the more enabling they are, the less forceful. In fact, that is what we found, a correlation of -.58. Using a revised version of the instrument we found a slightly stronger correlation of -.64. This statistical relationship is presented to the right. Here it is clear that managers who do too much of forceful also tend to do too little of enabling and vice versa.

Figure 3 The "lopsidedness effect" – inverse relationship between Forceful and Enabling leadership when measured on the "Too little-Too much" scale.



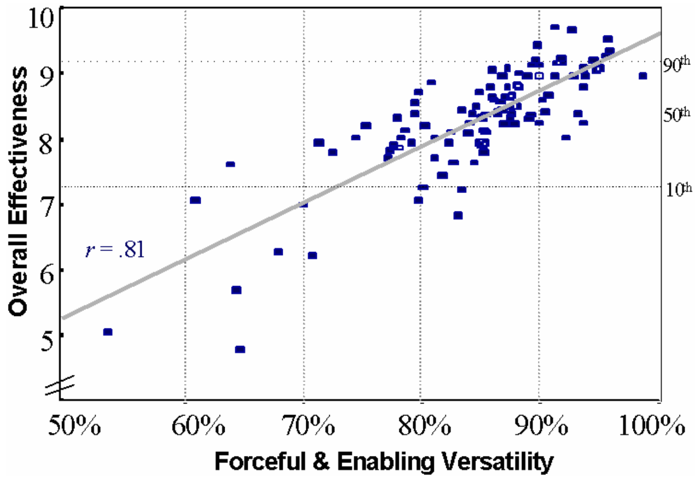
What is striking is that the many studies done on this basic distinction, by whatever name, have turned up not a negative correlation but either a negligible or, most often, a positive correlation.[4] Why? We suspect the reason is that research to date has not directly measured overdoing.

The flip side of lopsidedness is versatility, defined as the ability to draw freely from opposing approaches unencumbered by a bias in favor of one or a prejudice against the other. Versatile leaders are able to continually adjust their behavior, deftly applying the right approach, to the right degree, for the circumstances at hand. These are people who can pivot readily from forcing a tough issue to fostering harmony, from holding a blue-sky session to digging into an immediate problem. Just the kind of agility needed in this fast-paced, unpredictable, and complex modern world of business. Unfortunately, versatility is in short supply. Across three samples including more than 300 senior managers, our research has indicated that less than 20 percent get a grade of "A" on versatility.

Versatility pays off. Not only is it in short supply, but versatility is also a key differentiator between the best in class and the rest of the pack. Our research has found a strong statistical association between versatility, as measured by the *Leadership Versatility Index*, and the overall effectiveness of individual managers.[5] In every sample we have studied, we found substantial correlations between ratings of versatility and effectiveness.[6] This was true for ratings from all coworkers taken together and for each rater group (superiors, peers, and direct reports) taken separately. The correlations were also significant when versatility and effectiveness were each rated by different groups. Figure 4 displays the strongest association yet, a sky-high correlation of .81. (The data reflect the average scores across all coworkers for each of 107 middle managers and executives.)

Let there be no doubt: versatile managers are consistently regarded as the most effective leaders in their organizations.

Figure 4 Statistical relationship between versatility in terms of Forceful and Enabling leadership and overall effectiveness.



To identify versatility, or, conversely, lopsidedness, the model of leadership on which the 360 questionnaire is based needs to be two-sided. From our firm's research and its extensive experience consulting to senior managers on leadership, we have concluded that there are two basic balances to be struck. First, strategic and operational leadership amounts to the *what* of leadership—the business issues managers focus on. This pair (or duality, as we like to call it) is defined as:

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP	**OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP**
Setting long-term direction, thinking broadly about the organization, seeking ways to grow and expand the business, aligning people with the vision and strategy, and the like.	*Focusing on short-term results, getting involved in the details, being grounded in the realities of executing, using disciplined processes to keep people on track, etc.*

The second duality is forceful and enabling leadership, which refers to the *how* of leadership—how do leaders apply their drive, talent, and intellect and that of other people?

FORCEFUL LEADERSHIP	**ENABLING LEADERSHIP**
Taking charge, being direct, pushing people to perform, holding them accountable, making the tough calls, and so on.	*Empowering, being open to input, involving people in decisions, being supportive, showing appreciation, and so forth.*

Another thing our research has made clear: both distinctions, forceful-enabling and strategic-operational, are unique and integral to performance. In fact, although there is surely more to senior leadership than just these two dualities, they do represent the lion's share.[7]

There is nothing revolutionary about defining leadership requirements in terms of dichotomies like forceful and enabling leadership or strategic and operational leadership. These two pairs that we have singled out are tacitly understood if not fully formulated by most managers. Yet the models in common use today—competency models they're called—do not generally define leadership in pair-wise fashion. Instead these models consist of lists, often long and not memorable lists, of skills and personal qualities. Our position is that for every truth about leadership there is an equal and opposing truth, and leadership models are more useful for respecting that reality. What's more, senior managers seem to appreciate this kind of model, as it reflects the very real tensions and trade-offs that make their job a tricky balancing act.

And it is critically important to identify excess. Because excess is usually none other than a strength taken to an extreme, sometimes so much so that the person exhibiting it gets no credit for being fundamentally good at the behavior in question. That's lost because taking charge has turned into over-control, following up has morphed into micromanaging, an intense drive for closure is experienced by others as insensitivity, being a stickler for details has slid into maddening perfectionism.

This reverse alchemy, where talented people turn the gold of hard-won capability into dross, is important to keep uppermost in our minds at a time when so much is being made of capitalizing on strengths. Yes, it is a service to highlight a leader's strengths. The failure to fully recognize and appreciate one's strengths ironically lies beneath many a performance problem.[8] Too often high-achieving people look upon development only as fixing their weaknesses. But to throw a leader's strengths into relief and stop there is to do just half the job. What if the individual grossly overdoes one or more of his or her strong points? Which brings us back to the importance of measuring excess, the extent to which individuals do too much of an otherwise good thing.

Our developmental task as leaders, in addition to filling gaps in our repertoire, is to curb excess. It is to correct a most unfortunate situation where our strengths, rather than serving as a boon to our organization, are taken to be a bane because we take them too far. As a result, our coworkers don't admire us for our capability; they wring their hands because what they get is a perversion of that capability. For instance, one top person we worked with had a knack for persisting but she drove her peers to distraction by harping on points way past the point of diminishing returns. It behooved her to learn to distinguish between the core ability and the excess around it and then to strip away the excess—the tendency to persist on things that were really not that important—so that the true strength shined through.

There is another, and more insidious, way that focusing on strengths with a blind eye to the possibility of excess can undermine a career. All too often staffing decisions are made to exploit a strength. A turnaround artist is assigned one troubled unit after another, a gifted people manager finds himself constantly cleaning up after predecessors who leave a legacy of morale problems. To be sure, there is some value in this talent-management strategy. The individual savors the rewards of doing what he or she is best at. And the organization can pretty much count on the results that are expected. But at some point this success catches up. It's usually in a senior role, where the scope and scale are greater than ever before, and suddenly it becomes apparent: the individual has become a one-trick pony. And that one trick is no longer enough.

It’s not easy to become equally adept at both sides of dualities like strategic-operational and forceful-enabling. However, a sure-fire strategy for never developing even a modicum of the other side is to focus exclusively on what you're good at. And this is precisely the kind of lopsidedness that accounts for much of the ineffectiveness we have found among senior managers. Even if one can't move from a C to an A+ in versatility, going to a B or even a C+ makes a difference, in one's career and in an organization's pool of leadership talent.

It has become popular to ask the question, "Should leaders work on their weaknesses or leverage their strengths?" Our answer is, "Yes." Rather than being mutually exclusive—as the question assumes—the two strategies are actually related, interdependent. For weaknesses are so often none other than strengths taken to an extreme. Which is why it’s important that leadership-assessment tools not just identify strengths but also detect excessive use of those strengths.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

	*Bob Kaplan* is the founding Partner of Kaplan DeVries Inc., a consulting firm specializing in executive development for individuals and teams. He has been consulting to executives and conducting pioneering research on leadership development since the early 1980s at the Center for Creative Leadership. He is the author of two books and many articles. Bob is based in New York City and can be reached at bkaplan@kaplandevries.com.
	*Rob Kaiser* is the Director of Research & Development at Kaplan DeVries Inc. Prior to joining Kaplan DeVries, he was a research intern and an adjunct research scientist at the Center for Creative Leadership. He has published and presented nationally his scholarly and practical work on leadership, executive development, personality, and performance measurement. Rob also consults to individual managers about their personal and professional development. He is based in Greensboro, NC and can be reached at rkaiser@kaplandevries.com.

ENDNOTES

[1] The field of assessment has not completely ignored the case of performance problems as overdoing it. But it is hard to find in the typical assessment instrument. When the idea is taken into account, it tends to be treated as an afterthought rather than integral to the design of the measure. For instance, there are instruments that render prescriptions for development by comparing ratings of, on the one hand, "how often" the manager does a particular thing to, on the other hand, an "ideal amount" that is estimated using a statistical formula. See examples in J.B. Leslie and J.W. Fleenor, "Feedback to Managers: A Review and Comparison of Multi-rater Instruments for Management Development" (Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership, 1998).

Overdoing it can also be found implicit in an approach to assessment developed by our colleague Mike Lombardo. In addition to measuring competencies, Lombardo also sizes managers up on another class of characteristics he calls derailers, career stallers, and stoppers. These lists contain performance problems, some of which we would describe as overdoing it (e.g., "*Overly* Ambitious," "*Over*managing*"*). See M.M. Lombardo and R.W. Eichinger, "The Leadership Machine" (Minneapolis, MN: Lominger Limited, Inc., 2002).

What is unique about our position is that overdoing it is not seen as a difference in kind, but rather a difference in degree from optimal. And this pays off on the back-end, in the developmental follow-up to feedback. Learning to moderate or turn down the dial on an overused strength is more actionable than shedding completely a dysfunctional tendency. This is because the so-called "dysfunctional" is many times something very functional that is used indiscriminately.

[2] Bob Kaplan had the original idea for this new type of rating scale in the early 1990s. He and Rob Kaiser have evolved it to its present form based on their work and findings in the new field of research that examines the cognitive processes involved in responding to rating scales (e.g., N. Schwartz, "Self-reports: How the Questions Shape the Answers," American Psychologist 54 (1999): 93-105.)

[3] We make this claim on empirical grounds. A great deal of research on oppositions like results versus relationships, stability versus change, command-and-control versus participative, and so on usually turn up positive correlations between supposedly opposite behaviors. The positive statistical correlations mean that, in a representative sample of managers, those who are high on results orientation, for example, also tend to be high on relationship orientation. Those that are low on one tend to be low on the other as well. Almost never is a negative correlation found. A negative correlation would reflect a tendency for managers to lean to one side and away from the other; for instance, that managers who tend to use "command-and-control" tend to not use a "participative" approach. But the previous research that reported positive correlations between opposite behaviors is limited by the fact that the data are based on traditional, linear rating scales that do not have a provision for directly measuring overdoing it. As reported below, when a curvilinear, "Too little-Too much" scale is used, the statistical relationship tells quite a different story.

[4] See B.M. Bass, "Bass and Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, and Managerial Applications," 3rd ed. (New York: Free Press, 1990), Ch. 24, for a narrative review and R.F. Piccolo, T.A. Judge, and R. Ilies, "The Ohio State Studies: Consideration and Initiating Structure Revisited," (presentation at the 17th Annual Conference of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Orlando, Florida, April 11-13, 2003) for a quantitative review of more than 200 primary studies that examined the correlations between various interpretations of these two dimensions of leader behavior. Both reviews concluded that there is a strong and positive relationship between the two. And both acknowledge that this is not consistent with how the two dimensions are conceptualized.

[5] This program of research is summarized in R.E. Kaplan and R.B. Kaiser, "Rethinking a Classic Distinction in Leadership: Implications for the Assessment and Development of Executives," Consulting Psychology Journal: Research and Practice 55, no. 1 (2003): 15-25, and R.B. Kaiser and R.E. Kaplan, "Leadership Versatility Index: User's Guide" (Greensboro, NC: Kaplan DeVries Inc., 2002).

[6] The measure of effectiveness is a single item rated by coworkers in an interview (separate from completing the 360 survey). They are asked to, "Please give a rating of [executive's name]'s overall effectiveness as an executive on a 10-point scale, where 10 is outstanding and 5 is adequate." Our analyses indicate that this measure is reasonably reliable and valid. Estimates of inter-rater reliability, inter-rater agreement, and between-source (i.e., superior, peer, and subordinate) convergence correlations for this single-item rating were comparable to meta-analytic estimates of the same statistics for multiple-item scales presented by J.M. Conway and A.I. Huffcut, "Psychometric Properties of Multisource Performance Ratings: A Meta-analysis of Supervisor, Peer, Subordinate, and Self-ratings," Human Performance 19 (1997): 331-360.

[7] The two types of versatility are distinct and uniquely vital. In one study, we found that the correlations between each kind of versatility and effectiveness were about equally high, in the .60s. But each made a unique contribution to predicting overall effectiveness, together yielding a multiple correlation of .74. This explained over half of the variability in effectiveness. In other words, versatility in terms of these two dualities accounted for the majority of what it meant to be an effective executive.

[8] See R.E. Kaplan, "Internalizing Strengths: An Overlooked Way of Overcoming Weaknesses in Managers" (Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership, 1999), and R.E. Kaplan, "Know Your Strengths," Harvard Business Review 80 (March 2002): 20-21.