

Every Strength a Weakness

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Talking Points

Make things as simple as possible, but not simpler.
-Albert Einstein

There is a certain appeal in thinking (and, apparently, advising others to act on the thought) that the road to success lies in “playing people to their strengths.” An effective strategy, perhaps, for some outstanding football quarterbacks, world-class quarter milers, and champion chess masters, this approach may not work as well for leadership roles. Its appeal is that it sounds simple, and that it avoids the difficult and often futile effort to “fix” people. But for people with leadership potential, that simplicity is overly simple and even may be dangerous.

The limitations of a strength-based approach to development are suggested by research on the derailment of talented executives, on how executives develop through experience, on the transitions required for career success, and on the acquisition of expertise. All support the conclusion that relying on one’s strengths is a dangerous strategy in the corporate leadership world.

Derailment of Talented Executives

Research on derailment (defined as successful managers who were expected to continue being successful, but something went wrong) has identified four dynamics (see McCall, 1998, for a summary):

- Strengths that have led to success become weaknesses in a new situation.

“The skills that made him a brilliant engineer—obsessive problem solving and an ability to envision elegant design solutions—were of less use in an executive position.” (BusinessWeek on the derailment of Boeing CEO Phil Condit)

“His greatest strengths...turned out to be critical flaws. [His] high-minded resolve began to look to others like simple-minded obstinacy.” (BusinessWeek on former Sun CEO Scott McNealy)

“How Traits that helped Executive Climb Ladder came to be Fatal Flaws” (Wall Street Journal subtitle for article on Carly Fiorina’s “ousting” from H-P)

Strengths can be over-used (Fiorina), used when they are no longer the ones needed in the situation (Condit), or literally become a negative in a situation requiring different strengths and for which the existing strength is counterproductive (McNealy). As situations change, the development of new strengths (and letting go of old ones) may be required. People, especially successful people (Charan et al., 2001), like to do what they are good at, and organizations, rational as they are, like to keep them doing it. This unconscious collusion works to prevent development of new skills, which requires doing things people don’t know how to do, and gives the appearance that “playing people to their strengths” is an effective strategy. Until, of course, the situation changes and the old strengths no longer serve.

- Existing flaws become salient in a new situation. Playing to strengths spares managers the painful and difficult task of trying to fix other people’s flaws. It does not, however spare managers from being derailed by their flaws. It is true that “towering” strengths can overshadow flaws and lead to forgiveness of them, but just as changing situations can negate strengths, they can also ignite flaws. Because flaws may also be strengths (it’s often a matter of degree), they can be difficult to self-assess and to change. Nonetheless, ignoring them leaves a time bomb ticking: the time to pay attention to flaws (to manage if not correct them) is before they become fatal.
- Success leads to arrogance. While this is really just an extreme case of a strength (self-confidence) becoming a weakness, it is so frequent it deserves its own category. Repeated success and the reinforcement accompanying it can be quite seductive, leading people to believe that their strengths are greater than they are, that their strengths will always carry them, that they don’t need other people, or that they don’t need to do anything about their dark side. In other words, arrogance creates the perfect conditions for the first two dynamics to do their work.
- Bad luck. It might appear that when bad luck leads to derailment there is no message about strengths or weaknesses. But it is relevant to point out that when bad luck occurs, existing strengths may be irrelevant and untended flaws can make matters considerably worse.

People are complex tapestries of strengths and weaknesses, and understanding their success or derailment requires considering combinations of strengths and weaknesses in specific contexts. Strengths can be overplayed or become irrelevant; strengths in combination with certain flaws may be benign in one situation but not another; arrogance resulting from towering strengths can lead to failure. In short, there is no such thing as an unqualified strength, and any effective development strategy will have to acknowledge that what matters are combinations of strengths and weaknesses as they manifest

themselves in specific situations. Rather than relying on strengths, we are better served by becoming more capable (building new strengths) and less vulnerable (by mitigating flaws).

Development through Experience

Research on how experience shapes leaders also calls into question settling for existing strengths (McCall, et al., 1988; McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002). Different kinds of experiences (for example start ups v. turnarounds; domestic v. global jobs) teach different lessons, implying that different strengths are necessary to successfully meet different kinds of challenges. As leadership roles become more complex, the ability to draw on many different strengths becomes increasingly important. While no individual can be skilled in all the areas needed to lead effectively across situations, areas that are not current strengths cannot be ignored when situations require them. If managers stay in the same kinds of assignment with the same kinds of bosses with the same kinds of expectations, then their strengths may indeed be sufficient. But the likelihood of such calm waters lasting for long, especially for talented managers, is slim indeed. And because the same kinds of turbulence—namely changes in jobs, bosses, expectations, and the like— can either develop or derail an executive, sticking to (or accentuating) old strengths when new ones are required is not an effective strategy.

Transitions

All of the above point us towards research on transitions, which seem to be essential for moving from one set of strengths to another. Hill (1992), for example, found that “becoming a manager” required both a psychological shift and giving up strengths that had served the individual contributors well. Gabarro (1987) showed that for new general managers “taking charge,” existing strengths focused their initial actions but were not adequate and even could be detrimental as time went on. McCall and Hollenbeck (2002), in a study of global executives living and working in foreign cultures, found that what was a strength in one culture could be a decided disadvantage in another. In The Leadership Pipeline (2001), Charan et al. make the case that successive turns or passages in a leadership career require letting go of some of the old strengths, building on some of the existing strengths, and adding new strengths. This is consistent with our understanding of transitions in general, in that they typically require individuals to work through three stages: separation (letting go of the old), ambiguity (being neither what you were nor what you will be), and integration (becoming something different). Indeed, in earlier times rituals were required to force people at transition points to let go of the past so that new strengths could emerge.

Acquisition of Expertise

Finally, research on experts (e.g. world class musicians, chess grand masters) shows that experts, unlike non-experts with similar years of experience, learn more from their experiences and “play on the edge” (Ericsson, et al., 1994 & 1993). Experts seek the next challenge rather than staying with their current strengths. In the world of music, for

example, the strengths that make a child prodigy at five are hardly the skills required to be world class at 21. And, flaws that don't matter at five aren't necessarily harmless later on. In other words, true experts are never satisfied with the current level of performance but seek new approaches that will move them to the next level. Tiger Woods, for example, changed his swing several times so that he could get better.

In Conclusion

Even if we knew which strengths are crucial to leadership across situations, which we don't, and even if there were only one way to be effective, which there isn't, a strength-based approach to development comes up short. Development requires consideration of combinations of strengths and weaknesses, giving up some strengths that have served while acquiring new strengths, avoiding turning strengths into weaknesses by over-playing them, developing the ability to use other people's strengths, and attending to flaws (sometimes camouflaged as strengths) that, in combination with certain strengths, can cause derailment. As much as a simpler world of playing to strengths might appeal, when it comes to developing talent neither staying with existing strengths nor simply building on them is sufficient.

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