TOWARDS A POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY
FOR LEADERS

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ABSTRACT

For the past fifteen years we have practiced a positive psychology for leaders—without calling it that. We have learned that the work of positive psychology is not just to affirm leaders for their strengths but to call out which of those strengths they overplay; that therefore a leaders' strengths cannot easily be separated from their weaknesses; that frequently leaders overuse their strengths because they worry that they aren't strong enough; that a good way to allay that anxiety is to administer a potent dose of positive feedback; and, finally, that the work of positive psychology is to deal with their resistance to that feedback.

Key words: strengths overplayed, internalizing strengths, lopsidedness, positive psychology for leaders, resistance to positive feedback, leadership versatility index

Introduction

For the past 15 years we have practiced a positive psychology for leaders—without calling it that. In consulting to senior managers on leadership, our firm has emphasized the utility of positive feedback in leadership development and designed a suite of interventions for using positive feedback as leverage for development (Kaplan, 1999; 2002; Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006a). In our research and development efforts, we have created a patented leadership assessment tool—the *Leadership Versatility Index* 360-degree feedback survey—that distinguishes strengths effectively applied from strengths overused (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2003a; 2003b; Kaiser & Kaplan, 2007). This distinction is important yet often overlooked in positive psychology and in its practical application in organizations.

Martin Seligman is credited with establishing the new field of positive psychology (Seligman, 1998). In so doing, Seligman became the latest prominent psychologist to call for a shift of emphasis from mental illness to mental health, along with a concomitant focus on personal qualities like resilience, optimism, and courage that foster health and well-being (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The call for the helping professions to move away from the disease model has a long history going back at least to Marie Jahoda's (1958) seminal conception of mental health as not simply the absence of illness, but rather its own distinct condition characterized by self-acceptance, growth, personal integration, realism, autonomy and mastery.

This chapter is based on our research and practice over the last decade and a half; it is not a transliteration of positive psychology to the domain of leadership. Instead it aims to contribute to positive psychology by drawing on novel insights from our work in helping executive leaders grow and become more effective and by bridging research on leadership and its development from a unique perspective on strengths.

Leaders' Needs for Positive Feedback

We agree with the emphasis a positive psychology puts on positive feedback but for reasons that may depart from conventional wisdom. For one, most leaders do not have a firm sense of their strengths and this compromises their effectiveness. For another, leaders are surprisingly resistant to positive feedback and, therefore, need plenty of it, along with help in accepting it.

Leaders Don't Know Their Strengths

There is a large body of research on 360-degree feedback that compares a leader's self-assessment to assessments made by the "full circle of coworkers"—the boss, peers, and subordinates. One finding is that self-ratings are of dubious validity; they correlate very weakly with coworker ratings and even less so with objective measures (Beehr, Ivanitskaya, Hansen, Erofeev, & Gudanowski, 2001; Conway & Huffcutt 1997). Another finding is that overall most managers evaluate their performance more favorably than coworkers evaluate their performance (Atwater, Waldman, Ostroff, Robie, & Johnson, 2005; Harris & Schaubroeck, 1988). One could infer that most leaders *overestimate* their strengths, but that would be a misreading of the data.

Studies comparing self-ratings to coworker ratings find that the most effective leaders are more likely to *underrate* themselves compared to coworkers (Church, 1997; Eichinger & Lombardo 2003). In other words, the strongest performers don't see what they do well as clearly as their coworkers see it. This finding is consistent with a more general one from experiments in

social psychology: while people regularly overestimate their performance in areas in which they are not competent, the most competent people in a given area underestimate their competence (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). They have the misguided idea that other people are as capable, or more capable, in that respect than they are and that their own ability is not extraordinary.

These statistical and experimental findings agree with observations from experts who work closely with leaders. For instance, Peter Drucker has repeatedly argued that few executives, even highly successful ones, know what they are good at (e.g., Drucker, 2000). Similarly, through deeply intensive assessment-and-development consulting to executives, we have regularly found that they do not know the extent of their own strengths—especially the outstanding ones—and, ironically, they are uncomfortable with feedback about their strengths (Kaplan, 1999).

The lack of self-awareness about strengths is compounded by the fact that as managers climb the corporate ranks, they get less and less candid feedback about their flaws (Kaplan, Drath, & Kofodimos, 1984). Many a savvy executive is aware of the hesitance on the part of coworkers to deliver bad news, especially about the executive's own performance. Most executives are also aware of the tendency for "jokes to get funnier" and "ideas to become more brilliant" just because of a promotion. The net result is that they often treat positive feedback with skepticism.

Leaders Need a Mirror Held Up to Their Strengths

The psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut (1977) stressed the importance of "mirroring" to the healthy development of children. Mirroring on the parents' part is an "in-tuneness" with the child, an empathic response that fosters self-acceptance. Children hunger for mirroring: "Mommy, come see my painting… watch me climb the tree… I slept in my bed all night!" As adults, leaders need their own version of mirroring. They need to have reflected back to them, from time to time, an accurate sense of what they do well. Opinion leaders from Drucker to his modern-day disciples exhort managers to, "play to your strengths." But how are leaders to play to their strengths if they don't know what their strengths are?

In our consulting experience many leaders are running a sizeable mirroring deficit. They don't simply need to know whether they are making the grade in their first job as a general manager or if the new CEO wants them on his or her team. Let's call that *situational* mirroring. Leaders' deprivation is such that they need *corrective* mirroring, a program of positive reinforcement to rectify a perceived deficit carried forward from the past (cf. Kaiser & Kaplan, 2006; Kaplan & Kaiser, 2003c).

For nearly 25 years the senior author and his colleagues have done assessments of leaders that include life histories taken not just from the individual but from members of their family of origin. Designed as an intervention, the assessment doubled as "biographical action-research" (Kaplan, Drath, & Kofodimos, 1991; Kaplan, 1998). From the data on childhood comes a long list of antecedents to the reinforcement-deprived condition we encounter in many senior managers. This is not to mention setbacks, illness, and other adversity experienced in adulthood:

1. Being small or overweight or having to wear glasses; worse yet being handicapped physically

2. Being picked on by peers (see #1)

3. Being a member of an outgroup (e.g., religious, racial, ethnic, socio-economic), and therefore in a one-down position

4. Moving repeatedly, each time having to break in socially again

5. Having a parent die and therefore being thrust prematurely into a position of responsibility

6. Having an abusive or neglectful parent

7. Having the wage-earning parent suffer a serious financial reversal

8. Getting poor grades in school and concluding "I'm not smart",

9. Being typecast in the family as the child who's social or athletic but "not the smart one."

10. Lacking a college degree or attending a low-status or less than prestigious college or graduate school

11. Attending an elite secondary school where they judged themselves as not smart relative to the "geniuses" in their class

12. A high performer academically and/or athletically and therefore burdened by the pressure to repeat

13. The repository of their parents' extremely high expectations; self-esteem hinges on high performance and self-acceptance is lacking

14. In general, unfavorable growing-up conditions greatly outweighed favorable conditions

Winnicott (1971) wrote of the "environmental provision", the emotional support that a child needs to develop normally. In cases like those listed above in which parents and the larger social environment did not provide sufficiently for their emotional needs, leaders carry a deficit into their adult lives and careers.

Not just a liability, deprivation motivates. At least it does in leaders who ascend the hierarchy. Few extraordinarily successful people have nothing to prove. But outward success notwithstanding, deprivation leaves an inner residue (Kaplan, Drath, & Kofodimos, 1991).

At stake is not just the leader's well being; their effectiveness hangs in the balance. When an individual's adjustment is off, it throws off his or her performance (Kaiser & Kaplan, 2006; Kaplan & Kaiser, 2003c). For example, a leader may see him- or herself as not that smart even though everyone else sees him or her as plenty smart. As a result, to compensate for his or her felt deficiency s/he may overstrive—and come off as a "know-it-all". Or perhaps a leader doesn't see his or herself as powerful even though personal power radiates off of him/her. As a result, to compensate, s/he is overpowering. Another leader may be universally experienced as "emotionally intelligent" and having "people skills" yet because s/he is not secure in that knowledge, s/he can't do enough to convey how much s/he values other people—and is slow to make tough personnel decisions.

This is where corrective mirroring comes in. Positive feedback, administered effectively, can make up for some of the deprivation experienced earlier in life. If leaders can revise upward their unrealistically low estimate of themselves on the attribute in question, they will not only grow and heal; they will increase their effectiveness.

In addition to underestimating themselves on specific aspects of leadership, many leaders undervalue their capability across the board. A senior manager we worked with grossly underrated her overall effectiveness. As she put it, "I place much more emotional weight on the negatives than the positives."

Note: corrective mirroring can't happen in a vacuum. For leaders to grow and improve, they need not only the informational support provided by corrective mirroring but also a reparative relationship, a medium for conveying affirmation. The other party does not have to be a helping professional. A reasonably well-put together significant other—a spouse, personal friend, close colleague, a higher-level manager acting as a mentor—can serve in that capacity.

Challenges Faced by a Positive Psychology for Leaders

Positive psychology will have to overcome two problems if it is to make a significant contribution to leadership development: first, the tendency for managers to resist positive feedback and second, the tendency for managers to turn their strengths into weaknesses by overdoing it. Linley's (2008) recent work, influenced by our own theory and practice, takes steps in helping managers to do just that.

Resistance to Positive Feedback

Ironically, needy leaders fortunate enough to have a generous measure of positive feedback served with the help of an able third party don't tend to be particularly open to it. In fact, they resist it in three ways.

First, there is the common discomfort with compliments. Most people find it mildly embarrassing to receive praise. Further, strong norms against arrogance and conceit can dissuade people from doing anything that resembles "tooting your own horn."

Second, in the usual feedback exercise the informational meal consists of servings of both negative feedback and positive feedback. Predictable to the point of being comical, virtually every leader we work with acts as if only the negative feedback will nourish them. "Give me the negative feedback," they exclaim, "because that's what I can do something about." Leaders completely overlook the developmental value in positive feedback. This herd instinct is an obvious indication of the need for a positive psychology of leadership. Incidentally, those who deliver feedback—supervisors and even helping professionals, internal and external to the organization—have also been known often to succumb to the gravitational pull of the negatives.

Third, once leaders receive positive feedback, they have a tendency to discount it or otherwise explain it away. More on this below.

How Strengths Become Weaknesses

To be effective, a positive psychology for leaders must contend with another major complication: a focus on strengths must also include a focus on the problem of strengths overused. The tacit assumption that "more is better" has led to major oversights in the literature on strengths and in the practice of leadership assessment (Kaiser & Kaplan, 2005; Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006).

To possess a strength is to be at risk of taking that strength too far. The greater a leader's desire to be strong in a given respect, the greater the risk. The greater a leader's fear of being inadequate in some respect, the greater the risk s/he will overcompensate. Strengths become weaknesses not only by over-relying on them but also continuing to rely on strengths that made for high performance early in a managerial career but that no longer fit well for more senior jobs (Charan, Drotter, & Noel 2001; McCall, 1998).

As many leaders know, this is how strengths become weaknesses: they are taken to an extreme. And taken to an extreme, strengths make for either waste or harm. Waste in the sense of spending more time or expending more effort than the situation requires—for example, burn-out, in yourself and others. Harm that often takes the form of excessive force—for example, being direct to the point of being confrontational. Harm can also result from being excessively concerned for the feelings of underperforming staff members. Leave those people in their jobs and eventually everyone suffers.

In addition to the direct effects, wasted effort and needless harm, overdoing it has a major side-effect: it crowds out the opposing, but complementary, side of leadership (Kaplan, 1996; Kaplan & Kaiser, 2003b; 2006a, 2006c). Leaders who are quick to step up and take charge often do a poor job of delegation. Participative leaders have a hard time cutting off discussion and making the call. Visionary leaders often struggle with implementation. And many managers are too absorbed in day-to-day firefighting to think strategically. Overemphasizing one side of a pair of complementary approaches goes hand-in-hand with placing too little emphasis on the other side. This side-effect is thus a second way that strengths become weaknesses.

Unfortunately, some applications of positive psychology to leadership development play straight into this trap. Advocates of "strengths-based development" encourage managers to discover and build up their strengths and typically discourage a focus on weaknesses. The logic is that there are some things you are naturally good at and it is more efficient and profitable to maximize those talents than to try to get good at something for which you don't have much talent (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Proponents of strengths-based development often hold a "more is better" assumption about strengths; some even deny that one could overdo a strength (e.g., Brim, 2007; but see Linley, 2008, for a counterpoint from the perspective of positive psychology). One "happiness intervention" experimentally proven to improve mood has people identify their strengths and then find new ways to use that strength (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). The problem is that these approaches can encourage leaders to overuse their strengths and, by ignoring what doesn't come naturally, underuse opposing but complementary skills. The result can be a one-dimensional leader with a restricted repertoire. Since most leadership roles are not elective, these more limited leaders are invariably less effective than their versatile counterparts (Kaiser, Lindberg, & Craig, 2007; Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006).

A positive psychology for leaders must take into account the universal human tendency to take strengths too far. It must grapple with the direct effects and the side-effects of overusing strengths, first by bringing these ill effects to light and, second, by helping leaders make the most of their strengths—without overdoing it. Would that positive reinforcement was enough.

Practical Applications of Positive Psychology to Leaders

It is not our intent to cover interventions that are well established in positive psychology or in psychology in general. At most we will refer briefly to, for example, methods for

reconditioning behavior (e.g., Lazarus, 1971) and combating negative thinking or revising perfectionist expectations (Ellis & Harper, 1975). Instead of standard fare, we report here on practices that are either not used or not widely used in our field or elsewhere. It would be natural to go first to the application of positive feedback, the hallmark of positive psychology. Instead we follow this logical progression: assessing strengths and their overuse, tempering strengths when they're overused, internalizing strengths as a way of tempering strengths, assessing polarized leadership, and de-polarizing a leader's way of operating.

1. Assess Strengths and their Overuse

The research cited above shows that people do not know their strengths. In particular, they underestimate their capability on truly outstanding strengths (and overestimate how strong they are in weak areas).

Of the many ways to give leaders insight into their strengths—performance appraisals, coaching by supervisors or by helping professionals, informal on-the-job feedback—questionnaires have become the standard method. However good they are at serving up a clear picture of the leader's strengths they suffer from a serious limitation. They don't determine which strengths the leader overuses. For instance, popular "strengths inventories" such as *Values in Action* (*VIA*, Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005) or *StrengthsFinder^{TM}* (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001) ask respondents to identify the activities they enjoy, prefer, and succeed at to determine a rank-ordering of the most-to-least prominent areas of talent. These results say nothing about how those talents are applied, including whether the individual is likely to take them to counterproductive extremes. Peterson (___) does, however, note that *VIA* strengths can be taken too far. Likewise, Schwartz and Sharpe (2006) point out that virtues can be overused and can result in "deformation of character."

The same limitation applies to 360-degree feedback surveys. Although they have proliferated in the last 20 years, they take the same form and are mostly variations on a theme. In particular, these surveys employ a 1-to-5 rating format where higher scores indicate more of the behavior, skill, or attribute in question (Leslie & Fleenor, 1998). High scores are considered better, which stands to reason since low scores are worse. But more isn't always better, and high scores often obscure the difference between doing something a lot and doing it too much (Kaiser & Kaplan, 2005).

How then to hold up a mirror to for leaders to see their strengths alongside their strengths overused?

Once the senior author recognized the oversight in the design of assessment tools, including one of his own (Kaplan, 1988), it was a relatively easy matter to devise a rating scale that captured strengths overused (Kaplan, 1996). Of the many ways it might be accomplished, the format in Figure 1 is the latest version of the scale developed by the two of us (Kaiser & Kaplan, 2005).

Figure 1. The "Too Little/Too Much" Rating Scale

Note that this rating scale is probably different from scales that you are accustomed to using. On this scale the best score is "0," in the middle of the scale. The premise is that performance problems arise when managers either do too little or do too much of something.
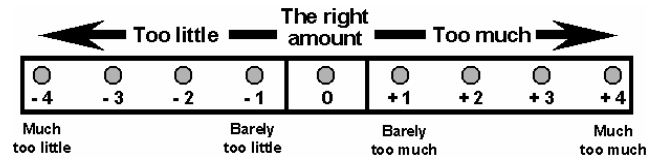

WARNING: Some people misread this scale. Please do not mistake it for one where higher scores are better.

Note: Reproduced from Kaplan and Kaiser (2006), *Leadership Versatility Index*®, with permission from the authors.

If on a competency such as "Drives for results," a majority of coworkers choose "right amount," then the leader can claim that as a strength. If a significant percentage of coworkers rate it as "too much," then we know that the individual drives too hard. Leaders know that they fall short on an item if a sizeable number of coworkers rate it "too little." Our statistical research affirms this interpretation of ratings by documenting a strong relationship between ineffectiveness and doing both too little *and* too much of certain leadership behaviors (see Kaiser & Kaplan, 2007). For instance, Figure 2 shows the typical relationship between behaviors rated on the "too little/too much" scale of the *Leadership Versatility Index* and independent ratings of overall effectiveness on a 10-point scale where 5 is "adequate" and 10 is "outstanding." We find this inverted-U shaped function for a range of forceful, enabling, strategic, and operational leadership behaviors when predicting such leadership effectiveness criteria as employee job satisfaction and engagement, unit morale and cohesiveness, and team productivity. The implication is clear: strengths overused can hamper effectiveness just as much as weaknesses and shortcomings.

Figure 2. Effects of "Underdoing" and "Overdoing" on Leadership Effectiveness
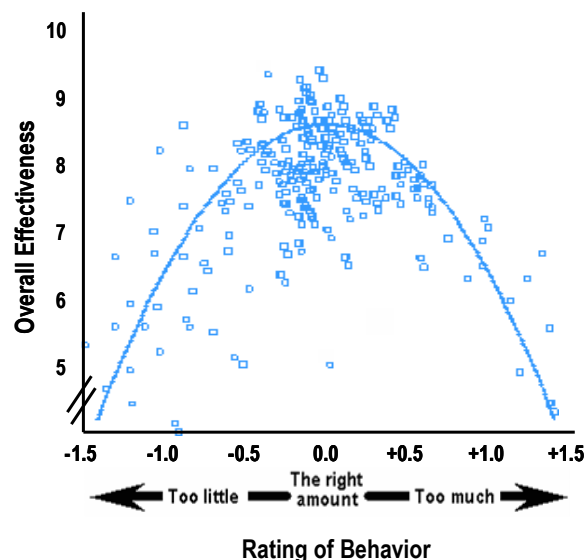
Note: Reproduced from Kaiser and Kaplan (2007), *Leadership Versatility Index*® *facilitator's guide,* with permission from the authors.

Any intervention that calls attention to leaders' strengths but ignores the possibility of overkill is incomplete. We owe it to leaders and their organizations to provide mirrors that reflect the whole story of their strengths.

2. Temper a Leader's Strengths—When They're Overused

A positive psychology for leaders can't limit itself to reinforcing them for what they do well. Its must also come to grips with the problem of strengths overused. To be effective it must make room for this dark side of strengths. Note that there is an upbeat aspect to calling overkill to the attention of leaders: the excess contains a strength, which they happen to carry too far.

The crux of the developmental work is to strip away excess. To accomplish this change in behavior, leaders must first see the excess. Though the idea of taking strengths to an extreme is not unfamiliar to them, they find it far easier to observe overkill in other people than in themselves. In their own cases they find it difficult to distinguish between doing something enough and taking it too far.

To effect this change requires delving into the psychology of strengths overused. At its simplest, this specialized psychology amounts to this: leaders overdo what they overvalue. The simplest intervention then is get leaders to recognize this in themselves and to place not as much importance on the managerial function in question. Of course, interventions get deeper as they address what underlies a skewed value system—sensitivities along with the painful antecedents of those sensitivities (Kaiser & Kaplan, 2006; Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006c).

The work of tempering strengths would be made immeasurably easier if assessment tools were designed to bring to light not just strengths and shortcomings but strengths taken too far. But, in a remarkable decades-long collective oversight, the leadership field has omitted this crucial feature from its tools for assessing leaders (Kaiser & Kaplan, 2005). How are leaders to curb excess in themselves if assessment tools systematically fail to point it out?

3. Temper Overplayed Strengths by Internalizing the Strengths

There is no better way to contend with the dark side of strengths than to employ positive psychology to accentuate the leader's positives. It is such a good solution because leaders typically overdo it to compensate for an imagined deficiency. Stated another way, leaders overdo what they underestimate (Kaplan, 1999; Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006a). This applies especially to truly outstanding strengths. Among the senior managers we have consulted to lurks a well-kept secret: many of them privately doubt that they are smart enough. This despite the fact that their peers regard them as plenty smart, even exceptionally so (cf. Clance, 1985, on the *impostor phenomenon*). Harboring this underestimate, they compensate by trying too hard to demonstrate to themselves and to others how smart they are. They have to know everything about their function or organization—and hamper their effectiveness by getting mired in the minutia. They are compelled to display that knowledge, even to their staff, to the point where they block others' efforts to contribute and deprive subordinates of the opportunity to develop.

If there were ever a role for corrective mirroring, this is it. In our practice we hold up a mirror fashioned out of positive feedback, large quantities of it, both qualitative and quantitative. If leaders can give credence to the rigorously developed image of the attribute they underestimate in themselves, then they naturally alleviate the overuse of that strength. They stop

overcompensating. But as noted above, instead of welcoming the positive feedback and revising upward their estimate of themselves, they often resist it.

Herein lies the hard work of a positive psychology for leaders. Admirable as it is to offer a strengths inventory to correct for an overemphasis on weaknesses, a positive psychology for leaders is not that easily practiced. Practiced well, it makes room for the complex work of overcoming the resistance to feedback on strengths. Otherwise positive feedback isn't worth much and leaders are not likely to heal, grow, and improve.

When prompted, leaders will cooperate in turning their attention to the positive feedback. Perversely, though, if there is a discrepancy between what they regard as their strengths and what others report, they find the nourishment difficult to swallow. Changing analogies: confronted with a discrepancy, leaders believe the mirror held up by coworkers is distorted. "They're just being nice." "They're gilding the lily." "I know better what it means to be very bright." On one or another strength, they trust their own crooked mirror more than the one held up by coworkers.

In our practice we employ a continually expanding set of tactics for overcoming the resistance to positive feedback. A sampling follows (see also, Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006a, chapter 3):

- We make sure to gather a large quantity of data on the positives. For example, in conducting interviews with coworkers, we don't settle for one-word descriptions of strengths like "leadership," "intelligence," "people skills". We ask for elaboration: "What does intelligence look like in his case?" In addition, we don't only ask, "What are this manager's strengths?" To discover what the individual is really good at, we then ask, "Which of his or her strengths is truly outstanding?"

- On the *Leadership Versatility Index* we add the percentages of right-amount ratings and too-much ratings of each dimension. Let's say that 55 per cent of a leader's coworkers rated her "right amount" on "Steps in when problems arise" and an additional 25 per cent rated her "too much." The sum, 80 per cent, is a powerful indication of her strength on this dimension—apart from the need for her dial it back.

- In the feedback session, not taking anything for granted, we check out the individual's reactions to coworkers' answers to these two questions. Innocently, we ask, for example, "Do you discount any of this praise?" Often we find that the leader does not take at face value one or another of the strongly supported strengths.

- We uncover, and work to overcome, the resistance to accepting the positive feedback, which often lies just beneath the surface. It quickly emerges that the leader has, for example, a "fear of getting a swelled head." It may be that the praise touches a nerve. The individual has long nursed a painful sense of inadequacy in precisely that area. (For more specific interventions and a curriculum design for overcoming these deep-seated sources of resistance, see Kaiser & Kaplan, 2007; and Kaplan, 1999.)

The affirmation of strengths goes to the heart of positive psychology. As experienced helping professionals know, it can be difficult to get through to people on this point. Grappling with what to some looks like a non-obvious and irrational resistance describes a basic function of positive psychology for leaders.

4. Assess for Lopsided Leadership

There is a great irony in the field of leadership assessment. On the one hand, lopsidedness is endemic among managers. On the other hand, assessment tools are not designed to assess balance, or the lack of it. These tools define leadership in linear terms with one discrete dimension listed after another—sets strategy, communicates strategy, turns strategy into operational plans, energizes people, etc. Since balance is by definition a two-sided entity, the only way a tool can assess for it is if that tool is founded on a two-sided conception of leadership that specifies the opposing dimensions to be balanced (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2003b; 2006c).

The idea of juxtaposing opposing dimensions is certainly not new to psychology. Circumplex theories of personality set this precedent some time ago. For instance, Timothy Leary's (1957) circular model of interpersonal relations defines social behavior in terms of dominance and nurturance. Jungian theory is replete with opposites like masculine-feminine, thinking-feeling, and sensing-intuiting. Nor is juxtaposing opposites unknown in the leadership field. Robert Quinn's (1988) competing values framework calls attention to opposing tensions— namely, stability versus change and an internal versus external perspective.

A rating scale, like that in Figure 1, is all it takes to identify the overuse that causes waste or harm. But it is not sufficient to capture the case in which overuse has the side-effect of sacrificing capacity on the opposing side. If a leader goes overboard on "Drives for results," then he or she is likely to trade off the complementary virtue, "Supports people." To pick up the trade-off, the assessment tool needs to define leadership in two-sided terms. That is why we constructed the *Leadership Versatility Index* around what we have found to be the two fundamental dualities in leadership: strategic and operational leadership, and forceful and enabling leadership (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2003a, 2003b, 2006a).

The *Leadership Versatility Index* is unique in possessing the capacity to capture lopsidedness, defined as the profligate use of one approach and the impoverished use of the complementary approach. This singular feature is the reason our firm was awarded a patent for this tool. The feature is a combination of two design elements—a rating scale that captures strengths overused and a model of leadership defined in terms of pairs of opposites.

5. De-polarize a Leader's Way of Operating

Leaders can be said to have a polarized way of operating when they overdo one approach to leading and, as a by-product, underdo the opposing side. To be more precise, their behavior is lopsided. It is the mind-set behind their behavior that is polarized (see Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006a, chapter 4).

An example from our consulting practice: a senior manager respected for being very bright, a voice of reason, and respectful of others suffered from a lopsided stance on the forceful-enabling duality. His constructive, considerate treatment of the people on his team came at the expense of holding them accountable. When people didn't meet deadlines or handed in work that didn't meet his own standards of excellence, he let them off the hook. Behind his lopsided way of managing his team lay a polarized stance toward power and the treatment of people. He identified with treating people well; he dissociated himself from raw power. To strike a better balance on this duality he had to overcome his resistance to being forceful and he had to loosen his tight attachment to being nice. His effort to change also played out on the tennis court, where

he depended too much on his backhand and struggled to develop a put-away forehand shot. Seeing this in his play, his friends pointed out his inability to "go for the jugular."

In his theory and practice Fritz Perls specialized in de-polarizing (1969). For him a polarized mind-set took the form of a dominating "top dog" part of a person and a corresponding weak or recessive "underdog" part. He intervened by having the person take turns giving voice to the two parts. In that dialogue, with the person moving back and forth between two chairs that represented the two halves of the polarized state, the imbalance of power could emerge and it could be redressed if, for example, the weak side stood up for itself against the dominating side.

A positive psychology for leaders contends with the dark side of strengths in this form—a strength taken too far and, as a side-effect, a corresponding underdeveloped side. An intervention that stands a chance of success tackles the lopsided behavior and the polarized mental model behind it. With leaders, practical people that they are, the better place to start is with their behavior. All you need is an assessment tool designed to identify lopsidedness in leaders.

Suggestions for Research and Practice

Towards a positive psychology for leaders we have in this chapter taken several positions, each of which are worth putting into practice and giving further study.

1. *Don't let the pendulum swing from an overemphasis on weaknesses to an overemphasis on strengths*. In practice don't allow ideology or over-exuberance to turn a positive psychology for leaders into an oversimplified school of thought. It is much better--and necessary--to frame positive psychology in all of its requisite complexity.

2. *Make room, in a leader-oriented positive psychology, for resistance to accentuating a person's strengths*. Resistance to positive messages makes the application of positive psychology more complex. Through research and practice, let's catalogue the classes of this seemingly perverse resistance, expose its roots, and evolve broad strategies and concrete tactics for overcoming it. What methods make it possible for leaders to truly embrace their strengths?

3. *There is no viable alternative to incorporating leaders' negatives, especially those that arise from overdoing their strengths, in a psychology that would focus on their positives*. No practice that purports to be useful can ignore the inextricable ties of an individual's strengths to his or her weaknesses (McCall, 1998). Research would make an important contribution if it could lay bare the complex interplay between strengths and weaknesses, and put to rest the false dichotomy between strengths and weaknesses.

4. *We recommend that a leader-oriented positive psychology define leadership development in terms of the intra-individual tension between opposites*. The field of leadership development needs to make a bigger place for interventions aimed at imbalance between pairs of opposing leadership virtues. This is where leaders overplay roles that suit their strengths and underplay complementary roles—interventions that tackle both lopsided behavior and the polarized mind-set behind it. Research might dig into the relative power of dialing back strengths versus cranking up the complementary weaknesses—as well as the value of doing both in tandem. In practice we need to expose the folly in advising managers to ignore their weaknesses—when those weaknesses are in essential leadership roles, effectiveness is the ultimate victim. We realize that it is an easy sell to let managers off the hook for their shortcomings, but that does a

disservice to the leader and the organization. The data are too clear to ignore: lopsided leaders who emphasize their strengths to the neglect of what doesn't come naturally are far less effective that more well-rounded, versatile leaders (Kaiser, Lindberg, & Craig, 2007; Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006a).

5. *A positive psychology for leaders means nothing unless it increases their effectiveness*. It is not enough for individual leaders to report benefits—that they have a better grasp of their strengths, greater self-confidence, or a stronger sense of well-being. That inner shift has to be apparent to coworkers and manifest itself in improved leadership performance. Researchers can help by studying the links in the logic chain linking the internalization of strengths to a lessened likelihood to overusing strengths and, in turn, to the ultimate indices of leadership effectiveness such as greater employee motivation and enhanced business results.

Conclusion

Like any movement, positive psychology—along with off-shoots like strengths-based development—has proved susceptible to a swing of the pendulum. The same thing happened when an employee-centered school of thought discredited, and sought to displace, command-and-control leadership. The anti-thesis, in attempting to replace the established thesis, ends up equally one-sided. What's needed in a positive psychology for leaders is a practical synthesis that accounts for the realities of change through affirmation and therefore is truly useful in practice.

We consulted to a recently promoted senior manager who received kudos from the coworkers we interviewed. They admired his ability to focus the organization on a few priorities, drive execution relentlessly, and consistently get results. We could have taken it for granted that he took in the positive regard. Checking with him, though, we discovered that the opposite was true. He balked at accepting the affirmation for fear of egotism. Perhaps the block originated with his parents' dictum, "Be humble." In any case, his resistance cost him. One of his great strengths, operational discipline, bled over into over-control. He manfully tried to dial back on control but willpower wasn't enough. He needed to relax his too-tight grip on the controls. Using the applications described above, we helped him to internalize the positives so as to allay the anxiety that drove the over-control. As a by-product he freed up emotional energy to bring out the less well-developed complementary side—focus on the long term and investment in innovation.

This, in a nutshell, is how far we have taken our practice of a positive psychology for leaders. There is no doubt that practice will continue to evolve, as will the field.

Directions for Practice:

1. Keep in mind that leaders, like all adults, often resist positive feedback. Therefore, positive psychology includes the work of overcoming that resistance.

2. If you assess a leader's strengths, be sure to also determine which of those strengths he or she overuses.

3. Use "corrective mirroring"—a large dose of data on the leader's strengths—to stop the individual from overcompensating for imagined deficiencies.

Directions for Research:

1. How to classify the types of resistance to affirmation that leaders, and all adults, put up?

2. Which interventions are effective at reducing resistance to affirmation?

3. In particular, which methods for delivering positive feedback are most effective in having leaders internalize their strengths?

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