

# ADJUSTING YOUR LEADERSHIP VOLUME

*by Bob Kaplan and Rob Kaiser*

**S**ome individuals perpetually talk too loudly in public—and all the more so on cell phones! Other people are chronically soft-spoken; in a meeting with a large group of people or against a car's background noise, you have to strain to hear them. Effective speakers know how to modulate their voices so the volume is neither too high nor too low for fellow participants or for bystanders. Effective Leadership requires a similar ability.

Whichever managerial attribute—for example, delegating, looking ahead, or questioning your boss—that the situation you're facing requires, the idea is to set the volume on that attribute to the right level, neither too low nor too high. In setting expectations, for example, you shouldn't set goals for your staff too low or too high. Don't misunderstand: expectations ought to be set high, even somewhat higher than people think they can achieve, but not so high as to be demotivating or alienating.

The idea of leadership volume, along with the need to adjust it to the right level for the situation, is easy to grasp—but far from the prevailing idea of performance or performance improvement. What prevails is “The stronger, the better.” If you're learning a language, the more fluent the better. If you're new to general management and have never been responsible for strategy, the more able to think strategically, the better. If you're training for a long-distance race—a 10K run, a marathon, a triathlon—the more stamina the better. If you're a student, the higher your grades the better.

Maybe a belief in the perfectibility of humankind drives this mental model. Maybe it is the innate motivation to be competent, a built-in desire for proficiency. Maybe it's an abhorrence of being or feeling merely adequate. In any case, a more-is-better mentality predominates. But as we show in our new book, *The Versatile Leader*, more is not always better.

## Strengths Overused: The Volume Turned Up Too High

When it comes to performance improvement, somehow the collective managerial mind-set places most of the emphasis on deficiencies, the areas in which managers lack capability. Take the frequently used phrase, “strengths and weaknesses.” What is a weakness except, literally, the lack of a strength? Isn’t it striking that the implicit model makes no place for strengths overused?

The 360-degree survey, which did not exist 20 years ago, now saturates managers with feedback (not to mention saddles them with constantly filling out questionnaires on their coworkers). What’s the best score on the typical to-what-extent scale? It’s a 5, “To a very great extent?” But wait a minute. Let’s take the case of Fred, whose coworkers describe as “berating” his people. How would you rate him on the following item: “Direct—tells people when he is dissatisfied with their performance.” A 5, right? That seemingly good grade doesn’t distinguish between being very direct and being too direct. It’s a giant blind spot in the leadership field. Virtually all assessment tools do only half the job. They tell you where you’re deficient, weak, not strong enough. Inadvertently, the designers of these tools have failed to build in a way to indicate where you take your strengths too far, where you talk too loud.

You might be saying to yourself, “Yeah, I know; strengths become weaknesses; I see it all the time in the people around me.” True enough, but it’s an entirely different matter to see it in yourself.

## Volume Control: What It Means to Get the Setting Right

The trick is to get the setting right for the situation. Of course, no single, fixed setting on any managerial dimension will work in all circumstances. Sometimes you may need to crank it up; other times you might do better to dial it down. The idea of volume control goes all the way back to Aristotle, who postulated that

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what is good, virtuous, and effective in thought and action is the midpoint between deficiency and excess. This is a large part of the art of management: reading accurately what the situation requires and applying just the right amount of that skill or attribute, neither too little nor too much. One reason that this is harder to do than it may sound is that managers who overdo it think they’re doing less of it than in reality they are. According to our data, managers who overdo it actually think they are underdoing it!

Managers have no trouble with the idea of turning up the volume on a deficiency. But the prospect of moderating a strength scares them. “I’ll lose my edge!” they say, or “I’ll stop being a good person!” This fear is needless, and, in part, it’s due to a misunderstanding. Managers wrongly think that to moderate or to modulate means moderation in all things. What it in fact means is to make an adjustment when the volume is turned up too high for the situation—to eliminate the excess that wastes time and energy or otherwise detracts from high performance.

## How to Lower the Volume on Strengths You Overuse

*First, you must know what you overdo.* That’s easier said than done; when it comes to something managers cherish in themselves, their gauges are off—they can’t imagine doing too much of it. Consequently, they think they’re doing less than they are. They also don’t

realize how strong they are. This is a root cause of overusing a strength: underestimate-overdo.

When I ask leaders who overdo one dimension of leadership what's the opposite dimension, they're stumped. Someone who believes in being open with direct reports can't identify the opposite—using discretion with confidential information imparted by top management. A change agent brought in from the outside is so good at detecting what's wrong with the current business model, culture, and people, that she can't tell me what the complementary function is—that is, recognize what is worth preserving in the existing organization and to show appreciation for it.

Lopsidedness—the volume cranked up on one side to the point where it overwhelms the other side—is rampant among managers. A great strength has the unintended consequence of diminishing or limiting its complement.

*Second, as you are about to go overboard, catch yourself with a pure act of willpower, of self-restraint.* And to do this, you need to know the signs of the urge coming on. Often the indications are physical: your neck gets tense, your blood pressure rises.

*Third, change your mind-set.* You may, for example, believe the more the merrier when it comes to a skill or attribute that you value highly. For one manager there was no such thing as being too responsive to others, even if it meant being late for dinner, even if it meant leaving Sunday to fly halfway around the world to deliver a keynote address that in truth was discretionary. For another manager who received an average rating of 5 on a 5-point scale on “Drives for results” and figured the higher the score the better: “I wish I was a 10,” he said, although we think his subordinates would beg to differ. To moderate an overused strength, then, you have to call into question the idea that more is better. If you are a principled person, can you imagine being too principled? If you're a consensus-builder, is there such a thing, in your mind, as taking the quest for consensus too far?

*Four, use a counterweight.* To the extent that you can't keep yourself in bounds, turn to others to help you accomplish that. Here's what a manager with a strong personality learned: “I know I need a couple of temperate souls on the team, and if they find my pres-

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## *Leadership involves two great pairs of opposing approaches.*

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ence too intense and difficult to approach, they can safely let me know.” A proviso: you need to be able to tolerate the tension of having another person on your team counter you. This can be challenging, especially if you have a bad attitude about people who aren't like you.

### **How to Raise the Volume in Areas Where You Do Too Little**

*First, discover what you underdo.* As mentioned earlier, this is something that in school and at work you have no doubt gotten accustomed to doing, even if it's painful. And it's something that formal HR systems are set up to do for you—to serve up a report on where you fall short.

*Second, force yourself to do more of what you underdo.* This advice applies when you have what it takes but for whatever reason you hold yourself back. This is about overcoming a reluctance, an inhibition. In this case, you have to *make* yourself do more of the desired behavior. One manager understood this intuitively: “I have to force myself to sit back and think strategically. It's harder for me because it's the sort of thing that takes a leap of faith.” So did another manager about an entirely different area: “When it came to public speaking, I was a wreck. But I knew that in my line of work I had to force myself to do it. I just had to push past my fears and learn to do it.”

Not all instances of underdoing it call for an exercise of willpower. In some cases managers simply have not

gotten around to acquiring a skill or it hasn't yet been important to their jobs to learn it.

*Third, adjust your mind-set and in particular any distorted beliefs or unwarranted fears that hold you back.* If you find yourself not speaking up enough or giving short shrift to part of your job, ask yourself, "What keeps me from doing more?" A functional head who didn't let his boss know about his group's achievements had, it turned out, a horror of boasting that originated in his growing-up family. His developmental task was to stop equating a necessary managerial function, keeping his boss informed, with self-promotion. The adjustment you need to make to free yourself to use an ability more fully may be a pleasant one, which is to correct an underestimate of how much of that ability you possess. Underestimate-underdo.

*Fourth, a familiar one: compensate for your limitations.* If you are not willing or able to make up a deficit, or can't wait while you get better at it, you can bring in reinforcements. There is, again, a proviso: you must value what you lack. If a bad attitude ("I don't trust feel-good") kept you from using a skill or developing it in the first place, you will need to drop the prejudice. You are never going to get better at something that you don't believe in.

## Two Complementary Pairs of Opposites

Leadership involves two great pairs of opposing approaches. One pair, the *how* of leading, consists of forceful leadership and enabling leadership. Forceful leadership is assuming authority, making your presence felt, taking stands, holding your ground, setting high expectations, and making tough calls. For some people forceful leadership is the very definition of leadership.

But forceful leadership is not complete without its complement, enabling leadership, which consists of empowering your people, delegating authority and responsibility, involving your direct reports in decisions, seeking their input, making it easier for them to push back, showing appreciation, providing support.

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## Versatile leaders get the volume right on both sides.

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The more versatile leaders are on this basic duality, the more their coworkers regard them as highly effective. But rather than versatile, most managers are lopsided, typically louder on the forceful side and quieter on the enabling side. A minority of managers are lopsided in the other direction. In fact, based on data collected with our 360-degree survey, the Leadership Versatility Index, the correlation between the two sides across several samples is significantly negative. What this means is the more forceful a manager is, the less enabling that manager is likely to be. The more enabling, the less forceful.

The other pair, the *what* of leading, consists of strategic leadership and operational leadership. Strategic leadership is about positioning your unit, however big or small it is, for the medium to long term. It involves vision and an orientation to growth, expansion, and innovation. Operational leadership is about getting results in the short term. It is about focus, efficiency, orderly processes for getting things done. There is a similar tendency for strategically oriented leaders to slight the operational side and for operationally oriented leaders to slight the strategic side.

On these big pairs or any others in leadership, managers have a way of going one-dimensional, one-sided, to the point where, smart as they are, they can't identify the other side. And this becomes their blind side.

## Bringing Balance to the Loud Side and the Soft-Spoken Side

An effort to turn down the volume on one side will benefit from a simultaneous attempt to raise the volume on

## ADVICE FOR MANAGERS

1. Think volume control.
2. Make it your business to know where you've got the volume turned up too high. The strengths you overuse are no less a threat to your performance than your deficiencies are.
3. Modulate the strengths you've got turned up too high, and remember that modulation is removing the excess, the wasteful part, the part that gets in the way. It is anything but a wishy-washy, middle-of-the-road response.
4. To improve your performance, you will need to use willpower—force yourself to do more of something you shy away from or catch yourself in areas where you get carried away.
5. To improve, you will also have to change your mind-set—for example, recognize that more of a cherished attribute is not necessarily better.
6. To improve, when it comes to forceful leadership and enabling leadership, you need to focus on both. When it comes to strategic leadership and operational leadership, the same advice applies (assuming your job requires you to plan ahead).
7. To improve, not everything has to come from you. A counterweight can help when you are about to go overboard—provided that you allow the other person to influence you. A counterbalance can compensate for your weaknesses provided that you come to value the thing that you don't do well.
8. To improve, you will need to discover on which pairs of opposites you are lopsided—where you have the volume up so much higher on one side that it drowns out the other side. And you will need to overcome an underlying one-sidedness, a tendency to think about the pair in black-and-white terms that idealize your preferred side and belittle the other side.
9. To improve, you will need, on those pairs of opposites on which you play favorites, to hold two opposing ideas in your head at the same time.

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the other side. Catching yourself (before you overdo it) and forcing yourself (to do what you usually underdo) often go hand in hand. Take work-life balance. If you want to get home earlier on weekday evenings when you are not traveling, and you commit to leave the office by 5:30 twice a week, this is the force-yourself part. Nothing says you will not be able to keep this commitment, but you will have better luck, or at least experience less strain, if you address the complementary problem of taking on too much. Success depends on forcing yourself to leave at the appointed time but it also depends on catching yourself as you are about to give in to your usual tendency to take a call as you are about to run out the door or if you

continue to load yourself down with so many commitments that it makes it impossible to have a life (not to mention getting everything done)

Having the ability to get the volume right on both sides of a pair of opposites, and to escape the chronic tendency to be overpowered on one side and to be underpowered on the other side, is what might be called dialectical intelligence. "The sign of a first-rate intelligence," according to F. Scott Fitzgerald, "is to hold two opposed ideas in your head while retaining the ability to function."

Leadership requirements are best defined in terms of pairs of opposing good things to do. Each of these du-

alities creates tension that a mature manager knows how to manage and resolve. A manager who brings an aggressive performance orientation to her staff meetings learns that she must also make it safe for people to engage with her. Mature managers don't polarize a pair of opposites; they see the two sides as complements. They are versatile in the sense that nothing in

their mind-set, no arbitrary bias in favor of one side or prejudice against the other side, prevents them from reading the situation's requirements accurately and meeting those requirements deftly. Despite the tension between the opposites and the tendency for managers to be lopsided, versatile leaders are able to get the volume right on both sides.



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