

Can Strengths Be Taken Too Far?

by Jack Zenger, Joe Folkman, Bob Sherwin, and Barbara Steel

Can Strengths Be Taken Too Far?

A commonly held belief is that strengths taken too far cease to be strengths and become liabilities or weaknesses.

Is there such a thing as a behavior practiced to excess?

Chances are we can all think of behaviors that when done in moderation are positive, but when done to excess cease to be helpful. For example, the wife of one of the authors is a wonderful organizer. Closets and cupboards are always orderly; refrigerator shelves are labeled. Yet she is the first to admit that this can get out of hand. While cooking, she sometimes becomes more interested in reorganizing the drawer of utensils

than in the meal she is fixing—and that can have unfortunate consequences. Most of us can agree there are many behaviors that can be carried to an excess. Just as drinking a moderate amount of water is good for your health, drinking multiple gallons at once can be deadly.

Can strengths be taken too far?

A commonly held belief is that strengths taken too far cease to be strengths and become liabilities or weaknesses. That

Forceful and enabling behaviors can each be taken too far, just as organizing drawers can be practiced in excess.

point of view was strongly advanced by two respected researchers, Kaiser and Kaplan, in an article in the Harvard Business Review entitled “Stop Overdoing Your Strengths.” The conclusion from this article was that people should stop magnifying these behaviors that had been a strength.

For example, Kaplan and Kaiser divided leadership behavior into two buckets. They labeled one group of behaviors as “forceful” and the other group of behaviors as “enabling.” Each of these was defined as a “strength.” They observed that if a leader overused the forceful behaviors by being exceedingly directive, always taking charge, making every decision, and constantly pushing people, the leader’s effectiveness diminished.

Similarly, they observed that a leader who was too cautious, too gentle, too understanding, mild-mannered, only expressed appreciation, didn’t stand up for personal beliefs, and was almost exclusively focused on others was also less effective. We agree with that conclusion, and suspect most would as well. Force-

ful and enabling behaviors can each be taken too far, just as organizing drawers can be practiced in excess. Every behavior is not a strength. Are being forceful and enabling truly leadership strengths?

The opposite view

We take an entirely opposite point of view from Kaplan and Kaiser. We think it is terribly confusing to tell people to work on a strength whilst simultaneously monitoring themselves to determine when they become too effective or use the strength too much.

Our view begins with how we have defined strengths. Kaiser and Kaplan used forceful behavior or enabling behavior as examples of strengths. However, we do not think these fit the usual or classic definition of strengths. Indeed, we see being forceful or enabling as behavioral tactics, not strengths. These are more akin to qualities measured by a personality test or other psychometric instrument.

Strengths defined

We believe that strengths are defined by

the following characteristics:

1. A trait that ideally is practiced at an extremely high level, typically the top 10 or 20 percent of leaders in a given population.
2. A trait that can be broadly used in a variety of situations or settings.
3. A trait that is ideally used consistently, not sporadically.
4. A behavior that can be used effectively over time.
5. A trait that consistently produces positive outcomes.
6. A trait that is valued for its inner worth, along with its outcomes.
7. A trait that spans cultures.
8. A trait that is harmonious with other strengths, rather than being opposed to them.

If you apply these characteristics of strengths to forceful and enabling, you begin to see why we come to different conclusions. Let's look at forceful. Being increasingly forceful is seldom a positive thing. Further, being forceful cannot be effective in all situations. It does not produce positive outcomes with consistency. Being forceful is not

valued for its intrinsic worth, like honesty or truthfulness would be. Indeed, some cultures are offended by forcefulness. Finally, forceful and enabling are competing behaviors. Using one tactic more of the time means you are not doing the other.

A similar analysis can be done with enabling. Done to excess, it becomes less effective. It doesn't always produce good outcomes, it is not valued for its own worth, nor is it valued in every culture; in addition, it is opposed to other strengths.

Our research on leadership strengths

Our original determination of strengths came from analyzing data on 20,000 managers, who in turn were evaluated by 200,000 colleagues. We identified 16 competencies that described the most effective leaders and distinguished them from average and poor leaders. These strengths included qualities such as:

- Character and integrity
- Problem-solving skills
- Technical competence

Effective
leaders cannot
be terrible
at anything.
Having scores
in the bottom
decile most
often sinks
a leader to
the lowest
rungs of
effectiveness.

- Innovation
- Initiative
- Communication
- Strategic thinking

We cannot envision situations where doing less of any one of them would be better than doing more. Can someone be too honest? Too skilled at solving problems? Can a person be too technically competent or innovative? Conceptually, the more you use a strength, the better things get.

Beyond that, in all our data analysis, we found no evidence that extremely high scores ever had negative consequences. If that “strengths can be taken too far” theory was true, then someone scoring at the 90th percentile on a “strength” would be perceived as being less effective than someone at the 60th or 70th percentile. The extremely high scorer’s business results would be inferior to the results of the people who received lower scores. People would presumably be making more negative written comments about high scorers in their 360-degree feedback reports than they would for those with moderate scores.

We can state unequivocally that none of the above ever happens. To the contrary, those with the lowest scores receive multiple negative comments and produce inferior results. Those with the highest scores produce the best outcomes on everything we have been able to measure.

Our research is quite clear about the impact of serious weaknesses, or as we have chosen to call them, fatal flaws. With rare exception, effective leaders cannot be terrible at anything. Having scores in the bottom 10 percent most often sinks a leader to the lowest rungs of effectiveness.

Do strengths and weaknesses go together?

A prominent consulting company published a study on building a leadership pipeline. In this they quoted a senior HR executive who, as a participant in a roundtable on developing leadership talent, had said, “Whenever you find someone with two or three strengths, most likely you will find that person has a serious weakness.” This would seemingly support the idea that strengths carried too far become

weaknesses, or that it is common to find these mixed together. We examined that question, and our data suggests just the opposite.

Only one person in a hundred people with three or more strengths will have a fatal flaw. From a group of 100 people with two or more strengths, less than 3 would have a fatal flaw. From a group of 100 people with just one strength, only 7 would have a fatal flaw. This means that 93 percent of all people who possess one or more fatal flaws will have no leadership strengths. Strengths and weaknesses just do not frequently coexist in the same person. It is clearly the exception, not the rule.

Should you moderate or maximize strengths?

Kaplan and Kaiser support the idea that backing off strengths is the right solution. They apply this solution to their definition of strengths, and they suggest that the person seen as “too forceful” should become more moderate. The “too enabling” person should be less empowering or less sensitive to others.

Our analysis confirms that exceptional leaders are those who possess five or more strengths. Our operational definition of a strength is a competency at the 90th percentile or higher and that meets the earlier criteria. The more strengths a leader possesses, the greater the likelihood of making a profound contribution to the organization.

One executive who sought to optimize his strengths decided he wished to be more inspiring and motivating. His resolve was to do the following, and he put sticky notes on his computer screen as reminders:

- Be more effusive with praise.
- Let people figure things out for themselves.
- Always ask, “What do you think?”
- Delegate more things (ask others what they’d like to do).
- Deliberately set stretch goals with my team.
- Paint (and repaint) a compelling vision.

Adding those behaviors to his usual pattern of leading caused him to be perceived in a far more favorable light, and to produce far better results for the organization.

Conclusion

We find no evidence that what we and others have identified as strengths can ever be overdone. We can’t envision a time when we would advise leaders to tone down one of their strengths. Some might see these theoretical differences as subtle nuances. They are not. These result in very different approaches to improving leadership behavior.

Our analysis confirms that exceptional leaders are those who possess five or more strengths....The more strengths a leader possesses, the greater the likelihood of making a profound contribution to the organization.

About Us

Zenger Folkman relentlessly seeks to rise above the inconsistent, and sometimes misleading, nature of popular leadership philosophies and beliefs brought on by opinion. The discipline of leadership and those who pursue it deserve better. Our most valuable asset is the expertise of combining hard data and statistical analysis with logical explanations and actionable application that help individual leaders thrive and organizations succeed.