

# EXECUTIVE EDGE

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## Lopsided Leadership: When Strengths Fail

By Joe Hunt

In the last decade, leadership-development experts have enthusiastically pushed to improve their clients' strengths instead of addressing their weaknesses. This approach may have some success in growing individuals' effectiveness, but it's fundamentally flawed.

Strengths training and coaching have somewhat of a cult-like following among HR and coaching professionals. Leaders are encouraged to develop their unique strengths and focus on fortifying areas in which they're naturally talented.

In some companies, even the word "weakness" has become politically incorrect. Staff is instead described as having strengths and "opportunities for growth" or "challenges."

It's easy to see why concentrating on leadership strengths is popular. It's more enjoyable to home in on innate strengths and avoid discussing weaknesses. But when strengths-oriented programs emphasize a single leadership area, they're often overused.

Management assessment tools are usually ill-equipped to pick up on overplayed strengths. Feedback and performance reviews are commonly structured on scales that range from "never" to "sometimes" to "always" (or "doesn't meet expectations," "meets them" or "exceeds them"). Assessment scales rarely indicate that a leader exercises too little, the right amount or too much of a quality.



"We've seen virtually every strength taken too far: confidence to the point of hubris, and humility to the point of diminishing oneself. We've seen vision drift into aimless dreaming, and focus narrow down to tunnel vision. Show us a strength and we'll give you an example where its overuse has compromised performance and probably even derailed a career."

- Robert B. Kaiser and Robert E. Kaplan, *"Don't Let Your Strengths Become Your Weaknesses,"* [Harvard Business Review](#)

## Career Derailment

Overplayed strengths are often at the root of career failures. Analyses of derailed leaders show they often rely excessively on qualities linked to past successes but less relevant to current roles.

Many leaders fear they'll lose their edge if they stop overplaying a strength. They must instead learn to use this strength more selectively. This may be the hardest developmental work you take on. Behavioral changes are a demanding goal, and it's even harder to change or modulate what you've always done well.

## Lopsided Leadership

All managers, regardless of level, are likely to overuse strengths. Doing so not only corrupts these strengths, but creates specific weaknesses. If you believe your strengths are the only way to manage people, you'll ignore equal, but opposing, strengths. This leads to *lopsided leadership*, Kaiser and Kaplan explain in *Fear Your Strengths: What You Are Best at Could Be Your Biggest Problem*.

Most leaders are familiar with the concept of skill sets coming in pairs. Multiple assessment tools classify people's preferences as either "task-oriented" vs. "people-oriented," "big picture" vs. "detail-oriented" or "analytic" vs. "intuitive."

Our preferences are usually unconscious, reflecting our experiences and innate qualities. We've learned to define ourselves as one thing and not the other. Over the course of our careers, one strength grows while the other decays.

Let's look at the positive and negative characteristics of four personality traits, as explored by Drs. Rick Brinkman and Rick Kirschner in *Dealing with People You Can't Stand: How to Bring Out the Best in People at Their Worst*:

Personality Type	Strength	Weakness
<b>Analytical</b> (Get It Right)	Thinking	Excludes feelings from decisions
	Thorough	Goes too far; perfectionist
	Disciplined	Too rigid or demanding of self/others
<b>Driver</b> (Get It Done)	Independent	Has trouble operating with others
	Decisive	Does not take time to consider other perspectives
	Determined	Domineering; too focused on doing it "my way"
<b>Amiable</b> (Get along)	Supportive	Tends to conform to wishes of others
	Patient	No time boundaries; things do not get done
	Diplomatic	Not assertive or directive
<b>Expressive</b> (Get appreciated)	Good communicator	Talks too much
	Enthusiastic	Comes on too strong
	Imaginative	Dreamer; unrealistic

## Leadership Dualities

While there are many different models of leadership competencies, the one proposed by Kaiser and Kaplan illustrates the tension of dualities that arise in the execution of leadership responsibilities.

*“...there are two core dualities that confront all leaders: the need to be forceful combined with the need to be enabling, and the need to have a strategic focus combined with the need to have an operational focus. Together these dualities constitute the ‘how’ and the ‘what’ of leading.”*

The authors have used their Leadership Versatility Index (LVI), a 360-degree assessment tool, with more than 7,000 managers who have been rated by 60,000 coworkers. Their results show that the more forceful leaders are, the less enabling they’re likely to be. Strategic and operational leadership are also inversely related.

Big-picture/visionary leaders tend to struggle with implementation, while masters of implementation tend to ignore or underplay strategy. The same holds true for the forceful/enabling dynamic, Kaiser and Kaplan note.

FORCEFUL LEADERSHIP		ENABLING LEADERSHIP	
<b>Vice</b>	<b>Virtue</b>	<b>Virtue</b>	<b>Vice</b>
Dominant to the point of eclipsing subordinates	Takes charge; in control	Empowers subordinates; able to delegate	Abdicates responsibility for oversight
Doesn't hear and value others' opinions	Takes stands and articulates them clearly	Listens to others' opinions and ideas	Takes no clear stands
Insensitive; callous	Makes tough calls, including those that have adverse effects on people	Compassionate; responsive to others' needs and feelings	Overly accommodating
Rigid; demoralizes others	Holds others accountable	Understanding	Doesn't hold others accountable
STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP		OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP	
<b>Vice</b>	<b>Virtue</b>	<b>Virtue</b>	<b>Vice</b>
Looks down the road too much	Focused on setting long-term strategy	Focused on getting short-term results	Myopic; has tunnel vision
Hopelessly conceptual	Thinks broadly; focused on big picture	Knows the specifics of how things work	Bogged down in detail
Too ambitious	Expansive; aggressive about growing the business	Respects the limits of the organization's capacity	Too conservative and limiting

The LVI data reveal a strong association between strategic leadership and high scores on curiosity and open-mindedness, coupled with low scores on rule-abiding/detail-orientation. The opposite associations were found for operational leadership.

Forceful and enabling leadership were related to a different set of traits. Forceful leadership was associated with high scores on ambition and low scores on interpersonal sensitivity. Enabling leadership was associated with the opposite scores.

- Strategically oriented leaders are often lauded for their aggressiveness and vision, but criticized for not being sufficiently grounded in reality.
- Operationally oriented leaders are often admired for their focus and ability to systematically drive an organization toward its goals, but they are also faulted for having tunnel vision and a lack of strategic boldness.

## Goldilocks Leadership

How can you manage people “just right” and take full advantage of your natural talents, without going too far?

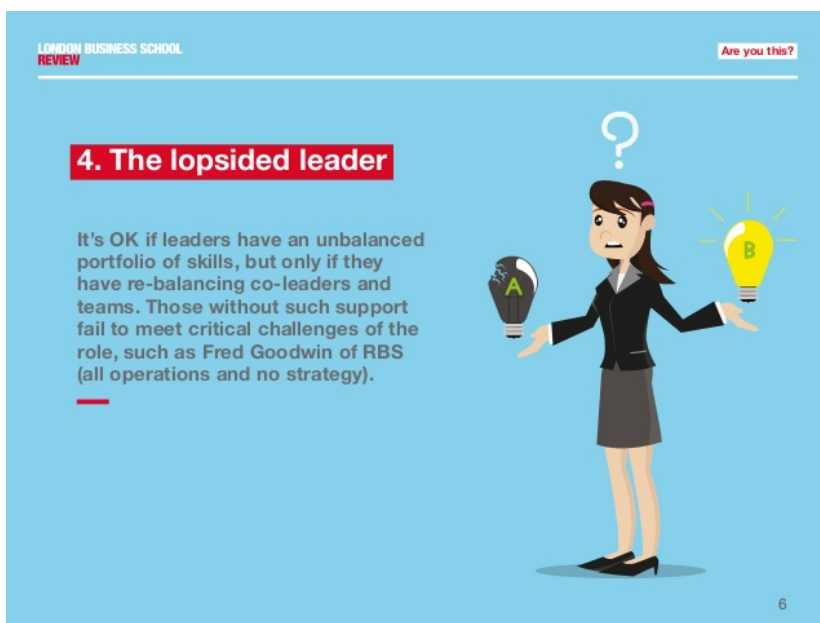
The first step is to acknowledge where you overuse your strengths. Start with a review of the ratings on your most recent 360-degree report. Ask coworkers:

1. What should I do more?
2. What should I do less?
3. What should I continue doing?

Ask yourself whether you privately pride yourself on being superior to other leaders in any way. This is precisely the attribute you’re at risk of overdoing. Take a look at its polar opposite. Explore with your coach how you can experiment with new behaviors that have been underused.

Most managers lean one way or another. This lopsidedness hurts your personal and team effectiveness. Sound leadership depends on learning how to stop overdoing a given attribute and underdoing its polar opposite.

Fine-tuning your strengths is an art that requires a blend of self-awareness and situational awareness. Shifting your preferred mindset is no doubt challenging, but you can successfully conquer this goal with your coach’s help.



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