

Know Your Strengths

by Robert E. Kaplan



Harvard Business Review

Reprint F0203A

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Executives fail when they can't see their weaknesses. But overlooking strengths can be perilous, too.

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Every leader has shortcomings, from the CEO down to the frontline supervisor. Reasonably enough, executive development programs often focus on reducing these deficits, whether the weakness is in public speaking, time management, or people skills. But sometimes it's a leader's strengths that are the problem.

Take one brilliant and well-respected media executive that my colleagues and I interviewed. Though his peers and his staff acknowledged his intellect in a variety of ways, he remained steadfast in his belief that he wasn't exceptional. "I don't think of myself as unusually smart," he told us. "I do have a good-enough understanding about things most of the time, but that's not brilliance." The problem that arose from this misjudgment was that he could be abrasively impatient. When a staff member asked him to repeat a point in a

complex presentation, for example, he chided her for not keeping up, noting that if he got it right away, she should. This destructive behavior intimidated his staff and deprived him of their full contributions.

Underrating oneself, as this executive did, gives rise to two common distor-

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tions in managerial behavior: overdoing and underdoing. In this case, the media executive overdid it by aggressively asserting his intelligence. Another executive that we consulted with was worried that he lacked authority—even though he was a naturally commanding person—and so he poured it on and was perceived by his staff as overpowering.

The flip side of this dynamic is underdoing. Executives who underrate themselves in a given aspect of management may have a void in their repertoire despite having the skills to address it—again, failing to recognize a strength. For example, they may play it safe interpersonally by avoiding close relationships or regular one-on-one meetings, even though their colleagues would (and do) tell them that their people skills are a strength.

One way to correct these types of performance problems is to bring executives' perceptions of their strengths in line with reality by tapping the power of positive feedback—not as a motivational tool but as a device to remedy misperceptions. Once managers realize how strong their skills are in a given managerial area, they can calibrate their reading of how much is

enough—and tone it down or ramp it up as needed.

The idea that positive feedback can be as effective as negative feedback in improving performance is not the prevailing view among managers. In fact, when my colleagues and I direct an executive's attention to the data on his or her strengths, a typical response is, "Don't tell me what I'm good at. Give me something to work on." This common reaction underlies the first rule of applying positive feedback to unearthing strengths: Get beyond the idea that praise is principally a tool to make people feel good or to fortify them against the negative feedback that is about to hit.


Second, don't assume that standout strengths that are obvious to you are as obvious to the individuals who possess them. It can be just as difficult for high achievers to see their strengths as it is for them to see their weaknesses. And

there's a corollary: Don't jump to the conclusion that executives who get great grades through 360-degree feedback have nothing to learn.

Third, when offering positive feedback, don't assume that people will immediately take it in. Just as individuals can have trouble hearing criticisms, they can have a hard time accepting praise. The executives we've worked with cite several reasons they reject praise: They're afraid of becoming complacent; they're concerned it will go to their heads; they fear it will burden them with other people's expectations; and they worry that receiving praise only raises the bar even higher.

Fourth, because of this natural resistance to hearing positive feedback, be sure to administer a heavy dose. Use 360-degree feedback to collect overwhelming data that confirm an individual's strengths—not just numerical ratings but verbal descriptions as well.

Be sure to concentrate the dose, grouping positive comments about specific strengths in one place in an assessment report or during a performance evaluation.

That's what worked for the media executive mentioned earlier. Confronted with a chorus from his colleagues and subordinates confirming his unique brand of intellect, he concluded: "I guess I don't have to prove I know everything." He also realized how he could modulate this strength to the best effect. "I don't have to give up my fastball," he reasoned, "I just don't have to throw it all the time." 

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