

Developing Strengths or Weaknesses

by Jack Zenger

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Compelling evidence supports the idea that leaders who focus on their strengths have greater success in their development plans.

One of the basic questions facing everyone creating a personal development plan is the fundamental question of whether to focus attention on correcting faults and failings or to focus on building strengths. Though the question appears simple, the answer depends on the competencies of the person involved—and the answer for any one person can vary over time.

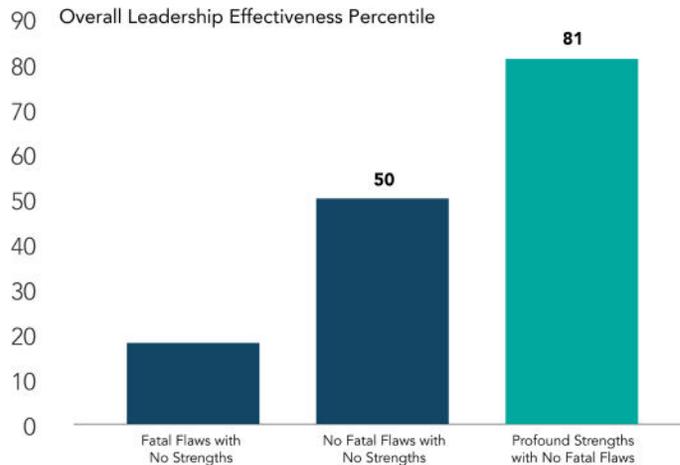
Leaders fall into three categories

The first issue to be considered is

whether or not the person in question possesses one or more “fatal flaws.” After analyzing over 6,000 leaders in our database on the dimension of possessing strengths or weaknesses, we observed that they are arrayed into three roughly equal categories.

Figure 1 summarizes those three groups and how they are perceived by the people who work with them.

Fig. 1 – Impact of Fatal Flaws and Profound Strengths



1. The first group consists of those who have one or more weaknesses. We've defined that serious weakness as a "fatal flaw." It describes some behavior at the 1st to the 10th percentile. Note that as a group that they are seen to be performing at the 18th percentile in the eyes of their peers, direct reports, and managers.
2. The second group consists of those who have neither strengths nor weaknesses. Strengths are behaviors or competencies at the 90th percentile and above. Overall it is seen as

- performing right in the middle of the curve, or at the 50th percentile.
3. Third is a group of leaders who have one or more strengths. As a group they are perceived as performing at the 81st percentile.

When a "strength focus" is poor advice

Having a "fatal flaw" gets in the leader's way and they should not spend time working on developing strengths at this time. It's extremely important to first correct the obvious flaw. Only when it has been improved does it become useful

for a person in the "Fatal Flaws" group to work on developing a strength. Therefore, for one-third of the leader population, the focus should be to correctly identify the weakness and get it fixed.

To illustrate that principle, imagine you need a piano moved into a second story apartment and it won't fit in the elevator. You hire two men to move your piano. Let's assume there's a state of physical fitness that the average piano mover enjoys; we'll call that "0." If our piano movers have the flu, broken limbs, or bad backs they are in minus territory. Getting them back to "0" is mandatory if the job is to get done. This is the arena where working on weaknesses is necessary and pays off.

But getting our piano movers to zero is not sufficient. In this case, being strong, having the stamina to carry the piano up two flights of stairs, and having the ability to balance this heavy object as they go are the strengths they'll need. It is the presence of strengths that ultimately gets the piano upstairs. After getting over the flu, having the broken leg heal, and their back muscles no longer painful, they can

then get in good condition to move the piano.

Much of our work in counseling, coaching, and behavioral therapy has been to get people who are in negative territory up to ground zero. We can't overemphasize the need to get that done. But never forget that such work only gets you to ground zero. Now the focus has to be on the "positive deviance" side of the equation where the real payoff comes. That is when building strengths come in to play.

The challenge of fixing a weakness

Leaders are prone to believe they know their weaknesses and their strengths. Our data confirms that self-scores on a 360-degree feedback instrument are notoriously deviant from everyone else's. As a rule, people are not accurate in their perception of their weaknesses nor their strengths. That is why the 360-degree feedback process is so valuable. It ensures that people have more accurate data, which in turn provides both guidance and motivation in the improvement process.

We believe that in general, fixing weaknesses is harder than building strengths. But motivated people with low scores need only do a few new things to begin to change those perceptions into positive territory.

When building strengths is the correct advice

A popular idea of late has been to have leaders focus on developing their strengths and largely ignore their weaknesses. When is that good advice? For the second and third groups, or those leaders without any detracting weakness.

To start with, it is clear that extraordinary leaders possess strengths. In our database containing 360-degree feedback results for tens of thousands of leaders, here's what the data shows:

- 64 percent have no strengths.
- 11 percent have only 1 strength.
- 15 percent have 2–5 strengths.
- 10 percent have six or more strengths.

Organizations differ. In one extremely well-managed financial services organization we found that 46 percent of their

leaders had no strength, while 33 percent had six or more. This "rabbit ears" distribution of strengths signaled a big opportunity for development of leadership skills with the nearly half who possessed no strengths at all.

The challenge of getting leaders to focus on strengths

Convincing leaders to develop their strengths rather than hack away at their weaknesses is hard work. Like Ulysses' sailors being drawn to the Sirens' song, and despite all the passionate encouragement we can give, the majority of leaders gravitate toward fixing their weaknesses.

For example, when we go back to groups of leaders who have put together their personal development plan some 12 to 18 months earlier, we discover that about 60 percent are working on weaknesses, nearly twice as many as should be. The tacit assumption appears to be something like: "My strengths came from some unseen source. They will take care of themselves. My job is to discover what I'm bad at and work on that. That's what 'real development' is all about."

Our research confirmed that a small number of strengths, specifically 4–5, elevated leaders to the top levels of their organization.

Is it because so much of our early childhood development consisted of parents and teachers focusing on correcting weakness? Is it some deeply embedded cultural norm from which no one escapes? There are many possibilities, and no one knows the answer.

Important strengths

Strengths obviously range from the trivial to the titanic. Being really good at video games may elevate you in your teenager's eyes but would seldom be relevant to your work. We view strengths as important job skills or behaviors that apply to many situations, endure over an extended period, and produce excellent results for the organization. Our operational definition of a strength is a behavior or trait that is seen by the combination of your manager, your peers, and your direct reports as something that you do at the 90th percentile. In other words, you're really good at it. It is also something that has been shown to be important to people who lead in organizations. It differentiates those who excel from those who lag.

The history of focusing on strengths

The first person whom we recall talking about strengths was Peter Drucker. In a variety of his speeches, writing, and training films dating back to the 1950s, Drucker highlighted the value of focusing on someone's strengths and lamented the strange process of companies hiring people for their skills and then immediately identifying their weaknesses and expecting them to correct these deficiencies. With Drucker it was the leader's strengths that made the difference. Regrettably it appears that no one listened.

In the past decade we've had the advent of "appreciative inquiry" by David Cooperrider, which is the application of the strengths philosophy at the organization level. We've also had the Marcus Buckingham books on the need for employees to discover their strengths. Our work at Zenger Folkman has focused on the relationship of strengths with extraordinary leadership. Our research confirmed that a small number of strengths, specifically 4–5, elevated leaders to the top levels of their organization.

The appeal of strengths

There is a strong logic to the argument about working on strengths. People seldom argue against the philosophy. This is reinforced when you show the compelling data that clearly shows that effective leadership is directly correlated with the number of strengths a person possesses. Additionally, working on strengths, for most people, is more appealing and fun.

What is the allure of working on weaknesses?

There's something appealing about Mary Poppins who proclaims, "I'm practically perfect in every way." We all admire Thomas Jefferson, who could write brilliantly, invent and build clever devices for his home in Monticello, and ultimately serve his country as president.

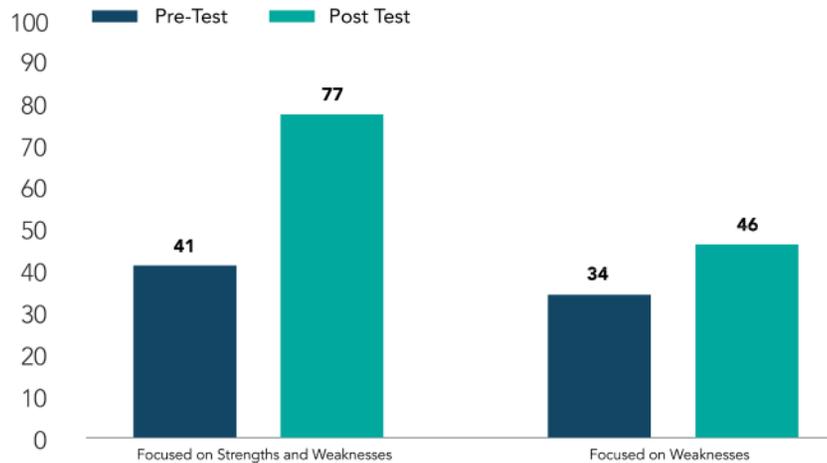
In a strange way, our education system begins with expecting every child to do well in every subject. It isn't until later, in college and graduate school, that we seem to acknowledge that people specialize and become good in specific and increasingly narrow fields.

But the explosion of knowledge and technology has virtually made the Renaissance person a myth. That isn't to say that we can't have broad ranging interests or that we can't learn new things. But simultaneously excelling in science, art, literature, music, business, and philosophy does not frequently happen in the world today.

The reality is that most adults begin to gravitate toward some groupings of skills and traits that enable them to succeed in some occupational family. They gravitate toward numbers and become accountants and bookkeepers. Or they enjoy solving problems and investigating things and become researchers. Some are fluent with words and ideas and move to occupations that reward that. Others are mechanically-minded and move toward automotive repair and maintenance. Still others enjoy designing and creating objects or software. The list goes on and on. In today's world, it is simply impossible to be excellent at everything.

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Fig. 2 – Impact of Development Objective on Leadership Effectiveness



Acquiring strengths

Strengths can be acquired by most people if they make the decision to do it and then put in the study and practice required to make it happen. Effort and determination, coupled with hours of practice, produce miraculous results.

One key ingredient that is missing for many people is accurate information about progress. Having a source of accurate, regular feedback ensures that you are working on the right things. It also provides strong incentive and motivation

for you to continue working on this topic and added incentive to proceed.

People can grow and develop. Children demonstrate that in amazing ways. Their ability to learn new skills and acquire new bodies of information is a joyful process. We have compelling data to support the idea that if adults will focus on their strengths, they will have far greater success in their development. Figure 2 shows the results of a study we conducted with

141 leaders in a packaged food company, grouped by their development objective.

Note that while the group that focused on weaknesses made some gains, improving by 12 percent, the group that worked on a combination of strengths and weaknesses improved 36 percent, or three times as much.

Conclusion

The answer to our original question of whether to focus on correcting weaknesses or building strengths has become clear. If you possess a profound weakness, work on that. Working on strengths is relatively futile until that is rectified. Once the serious weakness is corrected, instantly begin to work on developing strengths. It is the presence of a handful of strengths that will make you the strong leader your organization needs. The latter activity will be more fun, and you'll feel yourself making more progress.

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.