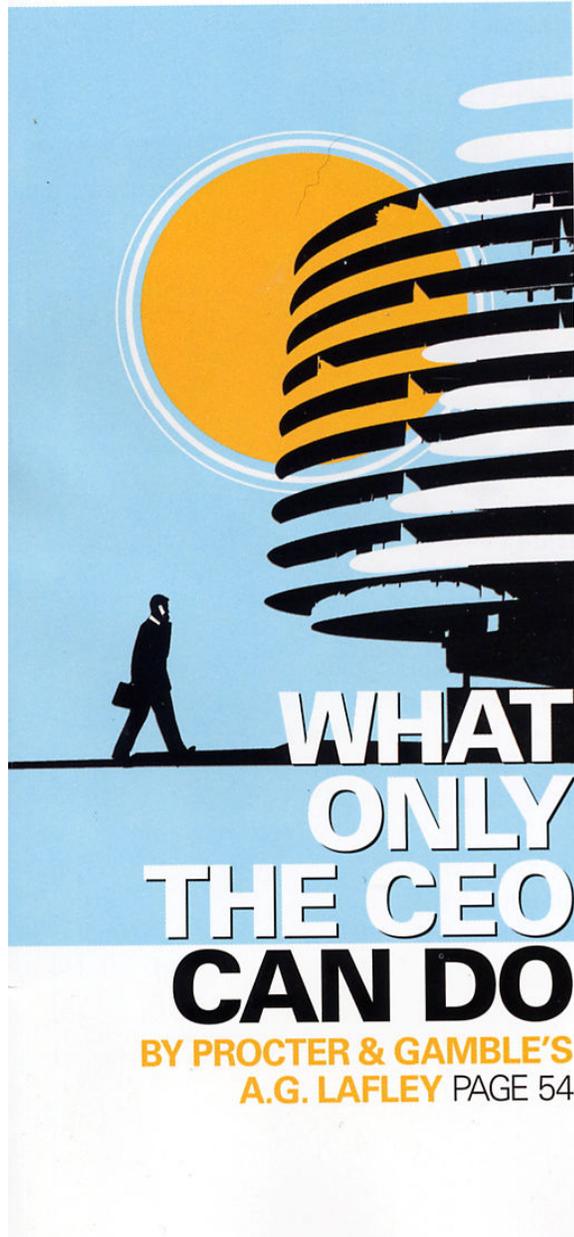


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Letters to the Editor

Stop Overdoing Your Strengths

In their article “Stop Overdoing Your Strengths” (February 2009), Robert E. Kaplan and Robert B. Kaiser assert that managers who overdo their strengths can recover balance in their behavior through a greater understanding of root causes. They offer two examples of executives they had worked with: Tom, who was seen as too forceful, and Maureen, who was too focused on building consensus. Both managers, through the force of sheer will, were able to balance their lopsided tendencies.

As the authors point out, however, more typically change is easy to talk

about but very hard to do – especially when dealing with strengths that seem to have produced success in the past. Fortunately, when willpower is lacking, there are many other work-arounds. Instead of dialing back his forcefulness, for instance, Tom could have honed his active-listening skills; Maureen could have increased the efficiency of her meetings by improving her time-management skills or assigning a timekeeping role to another team member.

In today's marketplace, feedback on overused strengths must be fully integrated into leadership development. Let me add that the VOICES 360 feedback instrument developed by Lominger International has long included ratings on whether the person receiving feedback is overdoing a competency.

Lawrence P. Clark

*Independent Lominger Associate
Chappaqua, New York*

Kaplan and Kaiser respond: We heartily agree with Lawrence P. Clark that the remedy for overused strengths isn't just for managers to dial back – they must also dial up the other side. Leaders who come on too strong do well not only to keep their powerful personalities in check but also to improve their listening and empowering skills. That two-sided approach can rectify lopsidedness – which, though common, often goes undiagnosed by typical assessment tools, for two reasons: (1) the underlying concept of leadership is unidimensional, not the yin-and-yang type it needs to be, and (2) most five-point scales don't capture overused strengths.

Managers can't rely on willpower alone to rebalance lopsidedness. They also need to adjust the tilt in their mindset that sent them overboard in the first place. This is what Clark meant by getting a better understanding of root causes. One common root cause is underestimating your own strength – how analytical or direct or inclusive you are, for instance. If your standards are too high or you worry needlessly about exercising one of your leadership abilities

well enough, you run the risk of over-compensating by employing that ability too much or too intensely. The outer work of behavior change hinges on the inner work of personal growth.