

Knowledge Summary Series: 360-Degree Assessment

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The common thread of the three short pieces that make up this article is assessment. We assess ourselves. We ask others to give us their assessments. And we welcome (or at least tolerate) boss assessments. All for the purpose of performance improvement, development, and getting ahead.

The research presented here first looks into whether self-assessment is accurate or even important. Because self-rating is commonly used in organiza-

tions, its deficiencies—and how to overcome them—should be well-understood. In a cautionary mode, the second piece explores whether sharing 360 assessments is good practice. Next comes assessments of strengths and weaknesses, and where to focus development efforts. Much has been written about concentrating on strengths. Here, the dangers of overemphasizing strengths are exposed and an argument made for balance: enhancing strengths but working on or around weaknesses.

The Dynamics and Value of Self-Ratings

Self-rating is a common HR practice. Almost all 360s, many performance appraisal processes, and some competency systems include a self-rating component. Many development programs allow people to self-insert based upon self-evaluation. Few would argue self-ratings should not be included in these applications. People should compare their own viewpoints with what bosses, direct reports, peers, and customers have to say about them, but probably not for the expected reasons. The dynamics of self-rating must be understood in order to use it better: to know the ways in which it is useful, useless, or even harmful.

To look at the dynamics and value of self-ratings, the existing research is summarized by the following questions:

1. Do self-ratings agree with ratings by other people?
2. Do self-ratings relate to anything of importance? Who is right?
3. Does it make any difference that self-ratings are not very accurate? (This makes perhaps the biggest difference of all: A person with inaccurate self-ratings might end up getting fired.)
4. What are the typical patterns of inaccurate rating? (On what areas are those who get fired overrated?)
5. Summing up, what might some best practices be?

Do Self-Ratings Agree with Ratings by Other People?

No. Not closely. Many studies show low relationships between self-ratings and those by other people (Conway & Hunnicut, 1997; Clark, et al., 1992; Harris & Schaubroeck, 1991; Mabe & West, 1982). There is much higher agreement between all of the other rater groups (boss, peers, and direct reports) than between any of these groups and self-raters. The norm is for self and other ratings to be different; so one use of self-ratings is to look at differences. Differences between self and others of typically a scale point or more are usually called either blind spots or hidden strengths. In blind spots, one rates oneself higher than others. In hidden strengths, one rates oneself lower than others do. As discussed later, only one of these is a likely problem. The other may be a blessing.

Self-ratings and ratings by others differ significantly most of the time.

Do Self-Ratings Relate to Anything of Importance? Who Is Right?

The question here is who is most right? Whether self-ratings agree with those of others (they do not) begs the question of who is more accurate. Self-ratings might relate to performance or promotion better than those of others. Shouldn't the self know the self best?

Self-ratings ordinarily relate to nothing of importance (Mabe & West, 1982). In our last round of studies, the overall correlation between self-ratings and performance was .00, with the boss being the most accurate rater by far in predicting long-term performance and promotion (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2003). On average, we collected competency data about two years before collecting measures of performance and if the person was terminated, status unchanged, or promoted. Peers and direct reports provided some value as well, with at least some of their competency ratings correlating with the criterion measures. But the boss was the best rater.

Other than for public relations purposes, why include self-ratings at all when they are likely to be different from everyone else and wrong.

Self-ratings do not relate to performance or potential for promotion or whether a person gets promoted in the future.

Does It Make Any Difference that Self-Ratings Are Not Very Accurate?

The inaccuracy of self-ratings is understandable. People often overestimate their strengths as part of a positive self-image or false self-esteem. Research by Stone (1994) indicates people tend to overestimate their facility at more complex tasks. Similarly, Vonk (1999) found people engaged in more bragging and self-promoting behavior when they thought that a claim could not be verified, that statements were more a matter of opinion. That self-ratings tend to be higher than those of others is fairly well-established (Harris & Schaubroeck, 1988).

This finding requires important qualification when we look more deeply at research data. Thrown together so far are low performers and high, people with little interest or possibility of promotion, and people on the fast track upward.

When we split data by performance, we find the overestimators (who rate themselves higher than others do) are the poorest performers. Research by Fleenor, et al. (1996) concludes those who overrate themselves are perceived as lower in effectiveness by others, noting that the evidence is clear that "self-ratings (alone) tell us



little about leader effectiveness” and that there is a kind of manager who routinely over evaluates his or her performance, and that tendency is associated with poor leadership. Atwater, et al. (1998) came to a similar conclusion.

Research findings differ on whether higher performers agree more with others and are presumably more self-aware, seeing themselves more as others see them, or underestimate their ratings in comparison with those of others. Some researchers (Kelley, 1998; Boyatzis, 1982; Atwater, et al., 1998) find them to be more in agreement. Others find they are just underestimators (they rate themselves lower than others do). On 360-degree competency assessments, average performers typically overestimate their strengths, whereas star performers rarely do. If anything, the stars tended to underestimate their abilities, possibly an indicator of higher internal standards (Goleman, 1998). Lombardo and Eichinger (2003), in predicting performance two years out, also found the more effective people to be underestimators.

Looking at the flip side, at what gets people in career trouble, the evidence is similar. Shipper and Dillard (2000) found that derailers (people who fail or stumble after being successful for some period of time) are “managers who overestimate their own abilities, are often ineffective and fail to learn from management development programs.” They note: “those rating themselves high often demonstrate traits such as lack of self-awareness and arrogance, usually associated with ineffective management.” The managers most likely to derail are usually those who have too high an opinion of their own skills and abilities compared to managers who underestimate their abilities. Underestimators were more able to bounce back from career derailment regardless of level.

In our last round of studies we looked at three groups of people across on average a two-year period. Some were promoted, most were unchanged, and some were terminated. *In terms of actual promotion (as well as performance), the higher the self-rating compared with those of other groups, the more likely a person is to be terminated.* Those who are terminated rate themselves higher (as do their direct reports). Direct reports tend to rate fairly highly and undifferentiatedly in most cases. Some may have worried about retribution from a marginal boss. Bosses and peers rated them much lower (a full standard deviation on average).

Those who were unchanged rate more similarly to their rater groups, but still rate themselves more highly. And those who are promoted rate

EXHIBIT I

Self Rates Significantly More Favorably Than Other Rater Groups

| Measures | Terminated | Unchanged | Promoted |
|---|------------|-----------|----------|
| Rated higher on 67 competencies | 30 | 22 | 1 |
| Rated lower on 19 career stallers | 10 | 6 | 0 |
| Total (out of 86) Self-rated more favorably | 40 | 28 | 1 |

themselves lower than does any rater group. The same trend holds for career derailleurs or stallers. Those terminated rate themselves lower (more positive) on career-stalling behaviors; those promoted rate themselves higher (less positive) (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2003).

To get an idea of how differently those who get fired rate, we looked at our 86 measures (67 competencies and 19 career-stalling patterns). Exhibit 1 shows the significant differences.

Overraters fail and underraters succeed.

What Are the Typical Patterns of Inaccurate Rating? On What Areas Do Those Who Get Fired Overrate?

They are generally self-deluded, but in particular they think they are better at creating something new and different, keeping on point, making accurate people calls, energy and drive, managing diverse relationships, inspiring others, and honor.

The most accurate rater by far in our studies is the immediate boss (many more boss ratings are related to long-term performance and whether promoted/terminated/unchanged). Bosses rate significantly lower than the fired do 41 times out of 67. Thirteen of the differences are large (more than a standard deviation). Bosses describe the terminated as less able to deal with conflict, make tough choices, or think things through broadly. There is also a large interpersonal theme: lack of interpersonal savvy, poor at managing diversity, or failure to build teams. Finally, as other research has shown, lower self-knowledge (see Shipper & Dillard, 2000).

Bosses do rate them higher than they rate themselves on a few things such as functional/technical skills, technical learning, intellect, career ambition and work/life balance. But bosses rate the same

five competencies as higher for the promoted as well. This is nice for the promoted, and deadly for the terminated, as they are the only relative strengths the bosses see in them.

We might expect the narrow technocrat with serious people problems who just can't make tough calls. Bad enough to be seen this way by others, but they think they're pretty good at these competencies.

But what about self-image? Couldn't all the groups be as deluded as the terminated? The answer is no. One simple method is to compare the absolute self-rating scores. The promoted are the lowest rater (or tied for low) for 48 of 67 competencies. The terminated are the lowest rater five times.

Of the 67 comparisons, there are 15 statistically significant differences; in all cases, the terminated are the highest raters. Their inflated view of self forms some strong patterns. They think they are better than others think they are on:

1. Problems with conflict
 - Command skills
 - Conflict management
 - Confronting direct reports
 - Sizing up people
 - Hiring and staffing
 - Negotiating
2. Narrowness
 - Perspective
 - Business acumen
 - Innovation management
3. Poor hands-on managers
 - Delegation
 - Directing others
4. Honor
 - Integrity and trust
 - Ethics and values

Finally, we verified whether any of the groups' self-ratings of competencies correlated with performance. None did. Self-raters apparently are rating something else: largely how they see themselves against an internal image of excellence. The fired generally rate higher; the promoted, lower. Neither is accurate for performance. The fired obviously have an inflated self view in some bad areas: breadth of judgment, conflict skills, people skills. They believe they are better hands-on managers and think they are more trusted than other self-raters or any rater group (except direct reports in some cases).

Because interpersonal skills usually do not relate as much to performance as the more operational and strategic skills, their overrating there

doesn't hurt them until later: When we look at what gets people fired, it's quite often interpersonal. And here is the only significant relationship of self-rating with performance: The promoted rate themselves significantly higher on people problems and overall stallers. The terminated are as clueless as ever.

The promoted save themselves with self-criticism and setting a higher bar. They are on the lookout for potential problems with people. The terminated don't expect problems. Their inflated view of their conflict, interpersonal, degree of trust, and hands-on management skills gets them run out the door. Their blind spots become fatal flaws. As many research studies have shown (McCall, et al., 1988; Morrison, et al., 1992; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2002), what doesn't get you in trouble early (poor people skills) will get you later when the demands of the job change to orchestrating change and building a productive climate for high performance.

Poor performers rate themselves higher on conflict, operating skills, perspective, and honor.

What Might Some Best Practices Be?

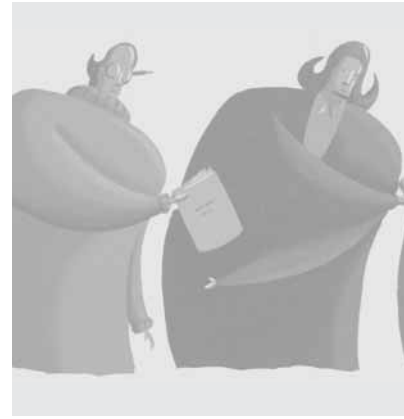
In summary, self-ratings and those by others differ significantly most of the time. Self-ratings do not relate to performance or potential for promotion or whether a person gets promoted in the future. Overraters fail and underraters succeed, although both are inaccurate. And poor performers rate themselves higher on conflict, operating skills, perspective, and honor.

What's the value of self-ratings? They are not useful in determining what a person is like. They don't identify a person's real strengths and weaknesses. They can't reveal if a person is qualified for a development program. They tell us nothing about whether a person is qualified for a job.

Summary

Again, what's the value of self-ratings? There is some evidence people's ratings become more like those of others with repeated 360s and feedback; even if there were not, self-awareness can be enhanced through more candid performance evaluations, 360 feedback and peer review. Continuing to overrate and rate inaccurately is deadly and a clear sign of a non-learner. So we need to collect self-ratings to find out whether people know themselves.

If not self, who? Focus on boss ratings. While other groups (besides self) make some contribution, boss ratings are the most accurate and the most differentiated by far:



1. Bosses make sharper distinctions between levels of performance and promotion/termination that other rater groups don't.
2. The difference in how boss and self rates is a powerful predictor of who gets ahead and who gets shown the door.
3. Bosses really hammer people who get terminated later. For example, in career stallers, bosses rate defensiveness (again a non-learner) and political missteps as quite different for the promoted and the terminated.

What should you be looking for? Watch out for blind spots. The fatal pattern in lack of self-awareness is relatively high self-ratings compared with those of others, especially the boss. On most 360s, one point or more should be highly significant. Look for patterns of inflated strength assessment, especially in conflict, perspective, honor, and managing.

Once again, what is the real value of self-ratings? Treat underrating differently. When one underrates, we call these hidden strengths or a lack of self-confidence or lack of self-knowledge. While any of those is possible, multiple research studies indicate the person more likely has high self-confidence, is highly self-critical, has high standards, and is a high performer. Lower self-ratings only have meaning once we add the information on how well the person performs.

Self-ratings don't really tell much about people other than how successful they may be in the future—not because of what they say about their strengths and weaknesses as much as how their ratings compare to the ratings of others, especially bosses. Self-ratings are collected to judge self-awareness, which in turn may indicate a lot about a person's future.

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Should 360 Results be Confidential?

Ah, the good old days. Long ago and far away (five years ago), best practice was clear and almost everyone agreed: 360 results and feedback were confidential and anonymous, one copy only, it went to the participant and that was that. It was for development. Armed with accurate data on strengths and needs, most ambitious people would address their needs on their own. The participants were responsible for carrying the results forward to their bosses. Many did; some did not. Development and performance appraisal needed to be separate. Every professional conference had a panel on this topic.

In recent years, a different trend has emerged. Shared 360 results. Boss gets it. HR gets it. It's in the file. It's used for performance appraisal and succession planning. Why? It was probably spurred by comments from bosses like: "Why do we do this if I can't see it?" "I need to see it if I'm held responsible for developing my people." "What's the ROI?" "If I don't know what my people need, how can I develop them?" "We have an open culture here, so people don't mind if I see their reports." "I need to know when people under me are causing people problems below them so I can prevent legal issues." "If we use 360 feedback for performance assessment, I have to see the results."

The trend has become widespread. In a recent survey (Rogers, 2000), almost half the bosses had access to full 360 reports and about one-third of HR groups did. The most recent survey we have seen on using 360 for performance appraisals showed about 50 percent of the firms had tried it, although the majority had stopped the practice (Lepsinger & Lucia, 1997).

Why Not?

Like many emerging practices, this one is well-intentioned and the reasons sound persuasive. The problem is unintended, overwhelming consequences. Publicly sharing 360 results is a well-meaning but flawed practice.

What Happens When 360 Results Are Shared?

The Scores Go Up

- Antonioni's study (1994) of upward feedback (ratings of the supervisor by direct reports only) found that direct reports whose ratings were not anonymous rated their managers significantly higher than direct reports whose ratings were anonymous.
- When raters didn't mind whether the learner saw their ratings, the average scores went up, and the variance (spread of ratings over the scale) decreased. When ratings are made public, they bland out and go up – the scores of 43 of our 67 competencies increased significantly. The themes are clear: When people rate under total anonymity, those rated (the learners) take a significant hit on most ratings, particularly caring, motivating, managing diversity, general interpersonal skills, and self-knowledge: how they come across. They also get lower ratings on intelligence, vision, developing others, composure, conflict skills, and, perhaps most important, ethics and values (Lominger & Eichinger, 2003).
- In a study of 58,000 performance appraisals, scores went up significantly in public appraisal processes (Jawahar & Williams, 1997). The title of the article was, "When All the Children Are Above Average."

Scores on typical 360s are inflated under the best of circumstances (probably around .5 on a five-point scale). Sharing results inflates them even more.

Variance Decreases

The spread of the scores decreases. People are less willing to use especially low scale points. The range is restricted even under the best of circumstances. Sharing makes it worse.

Accuracy Vanishes

In the only study we've located on the subject (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2003), accuracy disappears when the ratings become more public and

identifiable. The 360 process we use (VOICES®) allows each rater to select the level of confidentiality. The rater can choose to have the learner see their results directly (no anonymity), only with one other rater (some anonymity), or only with two other raters (a group of three raters, maximum anonymity). When raters said they don't care if the learner sees their individual ratings, the correlation with independent ratings of performance was .09 and not significant. When they selected "my rating will be combined with one other rater," the correlation was .27 and significant with performance ratings. When they selected "see my ratings only in groups of three" (the maximum anonymity), the correlation was .30. Accuracy increased with confidentiality. When raters thought their ratings might be revealed, they were high, bland, and meaningless.

Fear of Retribution

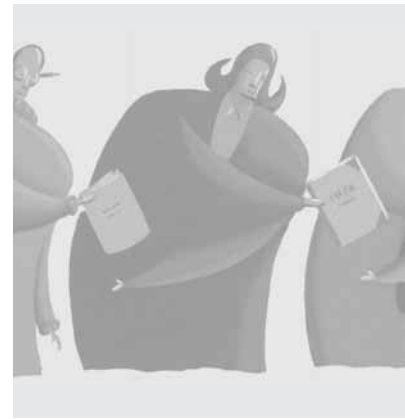
Chappelow (1998) argues that when raters' responses aren't anonymous, or if individuals don't feel enough safeguards have been put in place to protect their anonymity, raters may fear retribution and be less than candid in their responses or not respond at all. Bracken, et al. (2001) had similar findings. They found that giving feedback providers (raters) a guarantee of anonymity (or the perception of anonymity) maximizes honesty, candor, and response rates. They note that the perception of rater anonymity can be as important as the guarantee of actual anonymity and can affect feedback honesty.

There Can Be Rating Coalitions

Especially in the case of 360 used for performance appraisal, people informally agree to rate each other highly. It's just standard coalition formation and group protection against threat.

Rater Misidentification

In most 360 processes, the raters indicate the rater group (boss, peer, customer, direct report) to which they belong. Throughout the 20-year history of this practice, some raters misidentified themselves. In anecdotal examination of this phenomenon over the years, 50 percent of the misidentification is caused by administrative incompetence—not reading the instructions properly—and 50 percent is caused by purposeful deceit. Why? Probably fear of retribution and fear of later questioning by the learner, who might ask: "Why did you rate me so low on ...?"



In another common event, a person assembles his or her staff after a particularly brutal 360 feedback, usually in the interpersonal and listening skills areas, and asks, with possibly good intentions: “Why did you all rate me down?” No one admits to the low ratings.

Some organizations have abandoned 360 feedback for performance assessment because of some of the preceding problems. Raters make deals and scores go up. One company reported that the average score on an item on its 360 was 4.5 on a five-point scale. This is obviously useless for any purpose. For an excellent discussion of the use of 360 feedback for performance assessment, see Lepsinger and Lucia (1997).

Common Sense

Think about similar processes, for example, an anonymous tip line for citizens to report bad people and crimes. The tip line gets 100 calls a day. Now announce that caller ID will be used to record callers’ phone numbers. What will happen to the call rate and accuracy of the reports?

There is currently a system to report tax cheats anonymously and get a percentage of what the IRS collects. Again, say that there are 100 reports a day. The law changes and the person who reports the tax cheat must now be identified. What will happen to the call rate? And the whistleblower must testify why he or she thinks the person is cheating on his/her taxes. What happens to the call rate now?

Your company provides as a wonderful benefit an annual physical paid for by the company. Ninety percent take advantage of the program. One small change: The doctor will forward his or her notes about the physical and what was talked about to your boss. What happens to the participation rate?

Rater exposure to risk and conflict decreases participation and honesty. The same is true for 360.

Best Practices

We can’t have everything from one application. 360 works best for development. As typically written, the items are not finely grained enough or tied to work objectives for performance purposes. Public processes don’t work as well. From our research, the data are near worthless. So our answer is to use it as intended.

The main reason 360 feedback arose is

The main reason 360 feedback arose is because it is difficult for peers, direct reports, managers, and executives to engage in straight talk about weaknesses.

because it is difficult for peers, direct reports, managers, and executives to engage in straight talk about weaknesses. Giving critical feedback to direct reports face to face is ranked 63rd out of 67 (5th from the bottom) for the typical supervisor, manager, and executive (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2002). That’s why most performance appraisals—even anonymous 360s—are inflated.

Important Questions to Consider

1. *Is this truly confidential?* Be sure to describe the process in a straightforward fashion. Some people won’t trust that feedback is confidential, but the more said the better. A typical policy for developmental feedback is

that the actual report is confidential. Most 360 instruments are now processed electronically, so no one in the organization sees them. There is one copy, which the facilitator hands to the person at the feedback session.

2. *How can development plans be constructed if only the recipient has a copy?* The covenant we recommend goes like this: “We’re investing in your development through our 360 feedback for development system. The actual results (the numbers, ratings, and comments) are private. The summary of your strengths and

weaknesses should be discussed in some form with your boss, HR, or your mentor. Your job is to improve continuously and ours is to help you. Your direct boss will help with your short-term development (for performance) and top management and human resources will help with long-term development (projects, next job, anything outside the present scope of your responsibilities).”

All participants (learner, raters, bosses) need to know about the rules before they fill out the surveys. If data is going to be shared, partially or fully, everyone involved needs to know. Don’t collect data under one set of rules (confidential and anonymous) and then apply another set of rules after the fact. This has negatively affected many 360 programs.

So best practice is private, confidential, and anonymous. Worst practice is shared. The middle ground is mandatory sharing after the feedback. Even mandatory sharing will have negative consequences.

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If a Lot Is Good, More Must Be Better: Overusing Your Strengths

Most of us have a few significant strengths and many things we'll never be particularly good at doing. Most can't run the 100 meters in under 10 seconds, or be inspiring team builders, or be strategic or improve on Einstein's theory of relativity. Most successful people get to the top and near to the top and retire happy just repeating their limited strengths time and time again. Many go through their careers never improving anything they were not good at to begin with.

Given these observations, a common argument is to focus on strengths and ignore or just live with our limitations. Get in a job, career path, and organization that need your strengths. Limitations can always be staffed around. For those in a role or career path that does not change much, or a lower level job with no aspirations for different kinds of work or higher levels, this is a good argument. Our strengths are what propel us. Focusing on our weaknesses or limits does not make much sense. If we ignore or minimize our strengths, and focus too much on our less effective selves, won't our overall effectiveness go down?

It probably will, temporarily, but one wrong does not justify another. Focusing on strengths alone can be deadly too. In fact, following only our strengths may get us fired.

Is There Evidence Outside of Anecdotal Observations that People Overuse Strengths?

A few researchers have looked at the question of the extent we overdo our strengths. In investi-

gating how balanced the skill sets of executives are, Kaplan found that only about 5 to 10 percent could be described that way: 35 to 40 percent overuse forceful and operating skills behaviors and 10 to 15 percent overuse enabling behaviors (Kaiser & Kaplan, 2000). In our data on about 100,000 competency ratings, we ask, "To what extent does this person overdo this strength (asked only if the competency was rated as a strength)?" The average overuse of any competency is 17 percent (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2003). These studies indicate overuse is somewhere between 10 to 40 percent and is common. Some competencies get more overused than others.

What Might Happen if Strengths Are Left Largely Untouched?

Strengths can highlight weaknesses—and become coupled with corollary weaknesses:

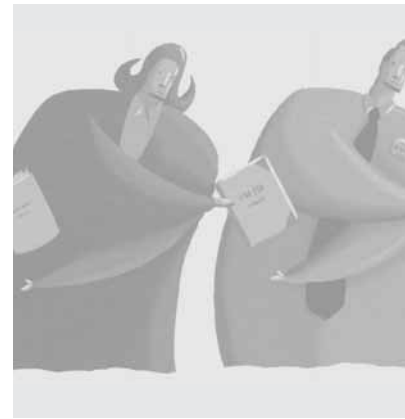
1. The smart person who ignores his or her interpersonal frailties.
2. The independent, stand-alone performer who cannot build a team.
3. The highly results-oriented manager who overmanages and underdelegates.
4. The creative type who starts 50 things and wreaks organizational havoc by not finishing anything.
5. The face-to-face salesperson who cannot make the transition to back-office sales manager.

Years of research on derailment show these patterns are real (McCall, et al., 1988; Morrison, et al., 1992). What we do well we can overdo. We can largely ignore corollary weaknesses.

Strengths Can Lead to Failures to Learn

Focusing on strengths alone leads to repeating the same behaviors in new situations. Low-performing executives seem to have much more difficulty learning from experience. They tend to form preconceived and general notions of, for example, how to develop others. Commenting on the earlier studies done at CCL, Lombardo and Eichinger (2002) remark:

The derailed executives, all of whom had been successful for many years before derailing and who had gone through many of the same key assignments as the successful executives, had virtually no pattern of learning from jobs. Their learning appeared to be virtually random. Derailed executives quit learning, thought they were infallible, became legends in their own



minds, or couldn't make the transition to a different job or way of behaving. They relied on what had gotten them to where they were, ironically becoming victimized by their past successes. They got locked into standard ways of thinking and acting that didn't really meet the new demands. They also underestimated the newness of the demands, seeing them as just another version of what they had done before.

In contrast, successful executives had a strong and similar pattern of learning from key job assignments. In all major studies of success and derailment, learning to do something different in order to make key transitions has figured prominently in the results: Successful people do and the less successful do not.

Strengths Can Lead to Low Self-Knowledge and Overrating Oneself

This is the proverbial smoking gun of derailment. Among different groups of raters, self-ratings tend to be the highest on 360 feedback instruments (Harris & Schaubroeck, 1988) and do not relate to performance or potential. They do not correlate with actual performance, for example, while boss ratings do (Mabe & West, 1982; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2003). It is now becoming clear that primarily the worst performers overrate. (See Fleenor, et al., 1996, Atwater, et al., 1998, for additional findings.)

Shipper and Dillard (2000) found, "The fatal flaw shown by this research is a lack of self awareness. All three groups of impending derailers (early career, mid-career and late-career) overestimated their overall skills profile in comparison to their successful cohorts." The managers most likely to derail usually had too high an opinion of their own skills and abilities compared to managers who underestimated their abilities. They note that, "those rating themselves high often demonstrate traits such as lack of self-awareness and arrogance, usually associated with ineffective management." In contrast, "Fast trackers significantly more accurately estimate or underestimate their ability on the overall profile and on both the upfront and follow-up skills profiles." Underestimators were able to bounce back from career derailment regardless of level.

In our last round of studies we looked at three groups of people across on average a two-year period. Some were promoted, most were

unchanged, and some were terminated. One key finding: *The higher the self-rating compared with those of other rater groups, the more likely a person is to be terminated.* Those who are terminated rate themselves higher (as do their direct reports). Bosses and peers rated them much lower (a full standard deviation on average). Those who are unchanged rate more similarly to their rater groups, but still rate themselves higher. And those who are promoted rate themselves lower than do any rater group.

The same trend holds for career stallers. Those terminated rate themselves lower (more favorably) on career-stalling behaviors; those promoted rate themselves higher (less favorably) (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2003).

The magnitude of these differences is considerable. Out of 86 competency and career-staller ratings, the terminated rated themselves significantly higher than any other rater group 40 times; the unchanged were higher 28 times; the promoted, once.

While this lack of self awareness and a tendency to overrate oneself have been found to be crippling, in contrast, successful people learned more new behavior, were more self-aware (see Spreitzer, et al., 1997; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000; Shipper & Dillard, 2000; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2003).

The terminated obviously have an inflated self-view in some bad areas: breadth of judgment, conflict skills, people skills, a belief they are better hands-on managers and more trusted than other self-raters or any rater group (except direct reports in some cases). It is at least arguable they saw little need to add any strengths beyond the ones they thought they had: If they rated themselves unreasonably high, what is left to develop?

Interpersonal skills usually do not relate as much to performance as the more operational and strategic skills, so their overrating doesn't hurt them until later. What gets people fired is often interpersonal. And here is where we found the only significant relationships of self-ratings with performance: The promoted rate themselves significantly higher on people problems and overall stallers. The terminated are as clueless as ever.

The promoted save themselves with self-criticism and setting a higher bar. They are on the lookout for potential problems with people. The terminated get blindsided, not expecting problems. It's a fair conclusion that their inflated view of

Focusing on strengths alone leads to repeating the same behaviors in new situations.

their conflict, interpersonal, degree of trust, and hands-on management skills eventually gets them run out the door. Their blind spots become fatal flaws. Many research studies have shown (McCall, et al., 1988; Morrison, et al., 1992; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2002) that what does not get you in trouble early (poor people skills) will get you later, when the demands of the job change to orchestrating change and building a productive climate for high performance. You have to be able to work the people side of the organization.

Common Sense: How Long Will Five Strengths Last?

Who among us really believes a single set of a few strengths will carry us throughout a career? Who believes they have not developed a significant new skill or neutralized a weak one? What is the half-life of a strength these days? How many of us do not change our work orientation as we age?

Focusing only on your strengths, while appealing, is short-sighted at best.

What Are Some Best Practices?

Adapt, Grow, and Know

Your best bet is to adjust your portfolio of strengths throughout your career as the requirements of roles, situations, and jobs change and career aspirations shift. Knowing yourself is still the best option—strengths, averages, weaknesses, and untested areas. Successful people do not have all possible skills but they do not have blind spots. Their edge is in fully knowing themselves—developing where they can, enhancing average areas that become more important, and neutralizing weak areas where they will never be strong. No one suggests a truly conflict-averse person can become a conflict master; however, that person can learn to deal in a straightforward fashion with conflict situations (e.g., understanding the other side, asking more questions, making clear, unemotional statements). Remain open to feedback, criticism, and corrective suggestions. Learn from new jobs, other people, and transitions. Be fully self-aware. Monitor your weaknesses. Do not get obsessed with them but make sure they are not causing too much noise.

Expand the Success Profile

An increasingly common poor practice is to assess and give feedback on only a few (7 to 12) core competencies that are “believed” to be critical for success. We say “believed” because what gets

selected for the so-called core competencies is often not backed up by research. This is an example of simplicity gone awry: A good goal, becoming simplistic—producing a bad result. All aspects of human endeavor matter across a career unless nothing ever changes. People get fired for reasons that have nothing to do with their previous success. Many competencies related to termination (approachability, for example) rarely relate to current performance. The lack of these seldom-included competencies accumulates over time. People make transitions and the work environment changes. Lack of skill development in corollary areas and lack of feedback lead to all the ills noted previously—poor self-knowledge, narrow view of a job, failure to grow and change, and overestimating one’s skills. Full bandwidth assessment and feedback is a must. Whether approachability is seen as important this minute, it will be in future minutes.

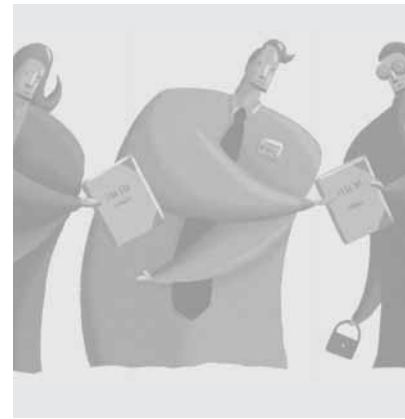
Focus on Strengths, with Caution and Perspective

Is it a good idea to focus on and leverage strengths? Of course. That’s what accounts for much of our success. We should focus on what we’ve been given, leverage it, and use our strengths. But, weaknesses sometimes matter. Each person should make a list of the corollary weaknesses that typically accompany specific strengths (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2002). Get feedback on those specific weaknesses over time and attempt to neutralize the ones that begin to matter. See Exhibit 2 for examples of how overdependence on one skill can become a weakness or result in a negative outcome for executives.

Watch Out During Transitions

Those who focus only on their strengths face the most risk during and after stark transitions. Changing jobs. Changing organizations. Changing roles. Life changes. Location and culture changes. People with a limited portfolio of strengths who are not self-aware and overestimate what they can do have a high chance of crashing before they can get the wheels down. Ask someone knowledgeable in the new context about the requirements for success. Have a mentor or trusted peer observe you to catch any weaknesses early.

The Mae West adage that “too much of a good thing can be wonderful” may have been true for the sultry 1920s star, but that advice is fraught with peril for today’s rising executives. Overreliance on the management skills and personal



strengths that gained them promotions and increased responsibilities may lead to derailment if new skills are not identified and developed and weaknesses neutralized.

The bottom line is that each of us needs to know ourselves completely—the good, the bad and the ugly. Then we can choose what to do about it. Those who decide to stick with their strengths can be successful but will be limited. Those who decide to enhance their strengths, be aware of their weaknesses, and work on them—or around them—will be more successful.

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Biographical Sketches

Robert W. Eichinger is CEO and cofounder of Lominger Limited, Inc. and cocreator of The LEADERSHIP ARCHITECT® Suite of management, executive, and organizational development tools. During his 40-year career, he has worked inside companies such as PepsiCo and Pillsbury, and as a consultant in Fortune 500 companies in the United States, Europe, Japan, Canada, and Australia. Bob lectures extensively on the topic of executive and management development and has served on the Board of the Human Resource Planning Society. He has worked as a coach with more than 1,000 managers and executives. Bob's latest book, a collaboration with Mike Lombardo, is *The Leadership Machine*. It outlines the steps necessary to develop effective and successful leaders and managers.

Michael M. Lombardo is cofounder and director of research and product creation at Lominger Limited, Inc. and cocreator of The LEADERSHIP ARCHITECT® Suite. He was director of research in leadership development at the Center for Creative Leadership for 15 years, where he coauthored *The Lessons of Experience*, a study of executive success and derailment that detailed which learnings from experience can teach the competencies needed to be successful. While at CCL, Mike also coauthored BENCHMARKS®, a 360-degree feedback instrument; coauthored the research on executive derailment revealing how personal flaws and overdone strengths caused otherwise effective executives to get into career trouble; and the LOOKING GLASS® simulation. During his career, Mike has authored over 50 publications dealing with various issues of development and has won four national awards for research on managerial and executive development.

EXHIBIT 2

Overdependence

Strengths

Highly social; interacts effectively with employees and clients

Decisive; takes charge; makes decisions under pressure, even with incomplete information

Delegates well, finds best person for the job; shares responsibility and accountability with others

Composed, mature, handles stress well; calm in crisis

Weaknesses

May be viewed as people-pleaser; too nice cannot face tough issues; wastes time

Dictatorial; does not seek or listen to input from others; may appear impulsive and impatient

Hands off work; does not contribute individually; does not add to strength of department; is not involved

May seem cold and uncaring; easily misinterpreted