

Introduction

Over the years we've discovered that developing one's leadership is helped by a clear understanding of the difference between strengths, gaps, limitations, weaknesses and flaws, and then approaching each of these in the most helpful way.

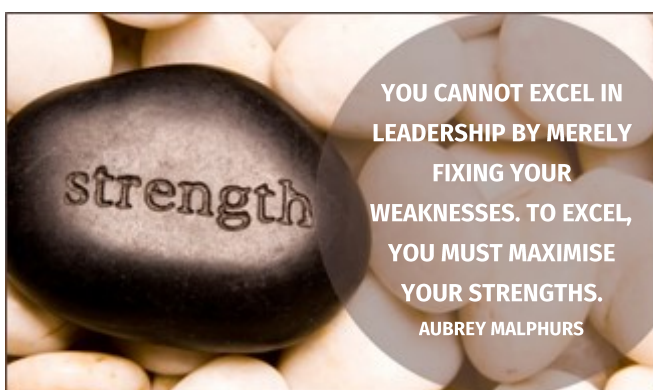
Build On Strengths

THINGS HAVE, AND CAN'T HELP DOING

British people are seven time more likely to be able to talk about their weaknesses than their strengths. It is part of our culture. We support the underdog! We cut down those who think highly of themselves. And there is much that is attractive about humility being valued within our culture. But...

Growth as a leader involves building on our strengths. Strengths are technically defined as a 'near consistent performance in an activity'. They allow us to make a unique contribution. As someone has said 'There is stuff you can't help but do which I can't do with a whole load of help'. Or if you prefer 'You can teach a turkey to climb a tree but its cheaper to hire a squirrel in the first place.'

One of the struggles for leaders is that the nature of the role often draws us away from our strengths to do a wide range of other things.



Strengths are those things we do that strengthen us, bring a deep sense of operating out of the core of who we are. We feel we were made to do this thing. Sometimes people are fooled because they can do something well, and they think it is their strength, but actually they find little sense of fulfilment in doing it.

Strengths are made up of a range of things coming together:

- **Skills** We can acquire these through training. There are a wide a variety of skills it is worth learning as a leader. For example, how to lead a good meeting.
- **Knowledge** We can learn this through asking good questions, reflecting on experience and drawing on the insights of others.
- **Talents** Technically a talent is a 'recurring pattern of thought, feeling or behaviour that can be productively applied'. Each of us has talents, mostly formed by the time you are an adult, although they may lay dormant.
- **Spiritual gifts** Gifts given by God that are used for the building up of the body. Sometimes God takes a natural talent and imbues it with his Spirit and turns it into a spiritual gift to be used for kingdom purposes. Other times it seems God simply gifts someone with a gift that they have shown no talent for previously.

A strength is found where all four of these areas come together (see page 4). Gallup has done some great work on helping people discern their talents and understand their strengths, written up in several books (Now Discover your Strengths, Strengths Based Leadership, Strengthsfinder 2.0)

There are those occasions or seasons in leadership where

we need to operate outside our strengths, but if the balance is less than 50% of our time operating outside what strengthens us it is not sustainable for the long haul. We may be able to keep going for months, even a few years, but ultimately we are likely to be denuding ourselves in the process. Ideally we aim to spend at least 50% of our time doing what we are wired to do, and that brings us strength to keep going for the long haul.

Building on our strengths involves spotting our strengths, and then proactively seeking to maximise our ability in those areas.

Work On Gaps

THINGS DON'T HAVE, BUT CAN GET

Our gaps are likely to be in the areas of knowledge and skills. These are things that can be acquired. If we can spot the gaps we can do something about them. For example, if we find ourselves in a leadership role which requires the line management of staff, there are some skills we can acquire to help us learn how to do this well. Or, perhaps personal management is a challenge. Again there are some skills and knowledge that can be acquired to help with this area.

We don't need to acquire skills and knowledge unless the gaps are affecting our performance in our role.

Manage Around Limitations

THINGS DON'T HAVE, AND CAN'T EASILY GET

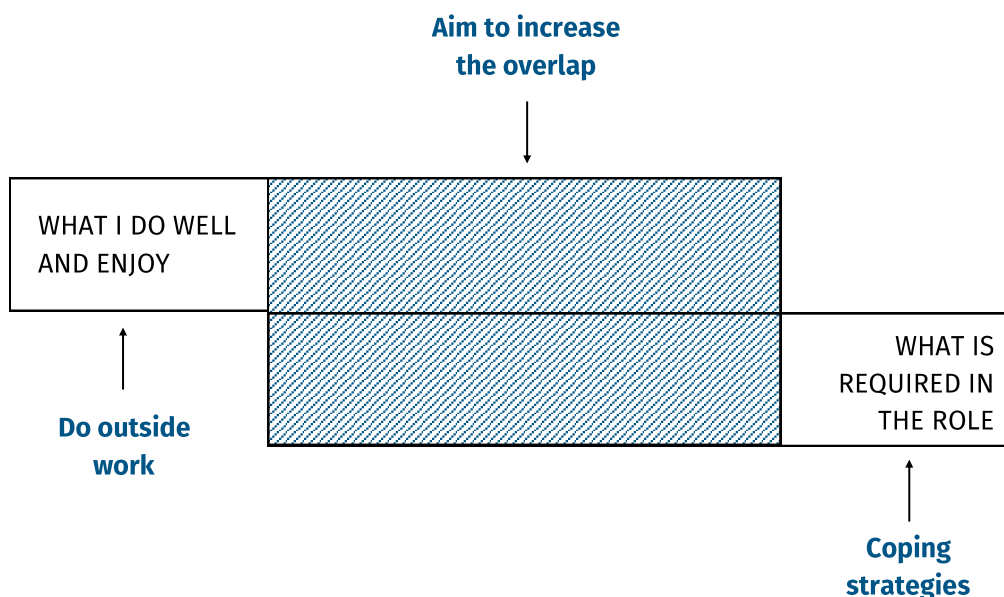
No one has all the talents and gifts necessary for

leadership. We are all limited. It isn't easy to acquire new talents. Whilst technically possible, it requires a lot of effort and energy. Yet in every role there are things required off us that we don't find it easy to do, and there are things we enjoy doing that are not required in the role. The diagram at the bottom of the page illustrates what we do with the two areas that aren't in the shading.

What we do well and enjoy (a strength) but isn't required in our current role Find an outlet outside of work. Traditionally this has been through hobbies.

What is required in the role and we don't enjoy or do well (our limitation) Find coping strategies. The first of these is to partner with people who bring what we don't have. Our limitation is their area of strength. This is why it is so important to have people on our leadership teams who aren't like us, who bring what we don't have. The second coping strategy is to just get a little better at something, especially if it is baseline requirement for the role i.e. we can't totally avoid them. There are two ways to do this.

- **Design a support system** Talk to others who are good at this stuff and find out if they have a process we can adopt to help. For example, if we aren't a great people developer, we can set up a line management system for our direct reports that helps remind us of the importance of asking developmental questions.
- **Use one of our strengths in a creative way to help us do something we're not good at** For example, I am not naturally pastoral, but I do have the ability to be incredibly focused. So I say to my team 'I won't always see things that you would hope I would see, I won't pick up on things that may be concerning you, but if you alert me to these things and ask for my attention, I can assure you I will give it. So please help me to help you by drawing things to my attention that I might miss'.



Grow Through Weaknesses

THINGS DO HAVE, AND DON'T WANT

I am using the word weakness here in a specific way. I don't mean the opposite of strengths. In fact what I mean by weakness is shaped by two ways the New Testament uses the word.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-10 – INFIRMITIES

Paul speaks here of his thorn in the flesh. Whatever it is, and no one really knows, it is something that prevents him from being as effective as he would like to be. That is why he asks God to remove it. This weakness is not an inherent inability to do the job (i.e. a gap or limitation) but something which prevents him from doing the job.

For some this is a physical illness. For others it may be a psychological illness. Many Christian leaders have struggled with depression. For others it may be a circumstantial difficulty.

Paul moves from praying for his infirmity to go, to being content with it staying because such a weakness leads him to depend on God, 'my grace is sufficient for you', and to ascribe glory to God, 'if I must boast I will boast of the things that show my weakness'.

When we are struggling with infirmities we may pray that God removes them, but if he doesn't, may God give us grace to accept them as a means of keeping us humble and dependent on God.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:26-31 – ORDINARINESS

In the second passage where Paul speaks about weakness he is referring to what we might call ordinariness. Here Paul reflects that God chooses the powerless, weak, lowly and despised, the ordinary. Paul sees this as a wonderful part of God's gracious activity, leading to a profound dependence on God for his 'choosing' and 'equipping'.

As Oswald Chambers put it:


'God can achieve his purposes either through the absence of human power and resources, or the abandonment of reliance on them. All through history God has chosen and used nobodies, because their unusual dependence on him made possible the unique display of his power and grace. He chose and used somebodies only when they renounced dependence on their natural abilities and resources.'

So when Paul writes about weakness he has two different things in mind, and he sees them both as means by which we can grow in dependence on God. Our infirmities and ordinariness help us to depend on him, his extraordinary power and grace that can do wonderful things.

Deal With Flaws

THINGS DO HAVE, AND OFTEN AVOID

Flaws are related to our character, not our life situation or personality. Flaws in our character, if not properly dealt with, are often the things that can derail our lives, no matter how successful or gifted we may be. They are a little like an internal Pacman, gobbling away at us from the inside until they eventually manifest themselves in our behaviours, normally when we are under pressure or not in the public sphere.



'ALL HUMAN BEINGS HAVE THEIR FLAWS, BUT NOT ALL OF US REALISE THEM, COME TO GRIPS WITH THEM, OR OFFSET THEIR NEGATIVE IMPACT. AS A GROUP WHOSE PRIMARY ENDEAVOUR IS INTERACTING WITH PEOPLE, LEADERS MUST ACCOMPLISH THE PARADOXICAL TASK OF MANAGING THEIR DARKER SIDES.'

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Dealing with our flaws involves openness to feedback from others who can see them more easily, and then courage to face them rather than avoid them. Normally flaws are best addressed in conversation with someone else. This may be a friend or colleague, a mentor or coach, a counsellor or therapist.

In Conclusion

A healthy commitment to development will involve all areas over time, but probably not all areas at the same time! Be sure to take the right approach to the specific area, otherwise it is easy to become very frustrated with the lack of change.

And in all of this we depend on the grace of God, remembering he loves us just as we are and he loves us so much he will not leave us just as we are.

'And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.'

1 Corinthians 3:18

What stirs you to the core of your being?

Passion

What have you learnt through questions and experience (yours and others)?

Knowledge

Skill

What are the skills you have and what are the ones you need to acquire?

What are your spiritual gifts? (Spiritual gifts inventory)

Spiritual gift

Talent

What are your talents? (Strengthsfinder)

Temperament

What is your temperament/personality (16PF5/MBTi)

Therefore

Build on your strengths.

Work on your gaps.

Manage around your limitations.

Grow through your weaknesses.

Deal with your flaws.