



Making Yourself Indispensable

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Idea in Brief

Good leaders can become exceptional by developing just a few of their strengths to the highest level—but not by merely doing more of the same.

Instead, they need to engage in the business equivalent of cross-training—that is, to enhance complementary skills that will enable them to make fuller use of their strengths.

For example, technical skills can become more effective when communication skills improve, making a leader's expertise more apparent and more accessible.

Once a few of their strengths have reached the level of outstanding, leaders become indispensable to their organizations despite the weaknesses they may have.



Artwork: **Vincent Fournier, *Space Project: MDRS #04, Mars Society*, 2008, U.S.A.**

A manager we'll call Tom was a midlevel sales executive at a *Fortune* 500 company. After a dozen or so years there, he was thriving—he made his numbers, he was well liked, he got consistently positive reviews. He applied for a promotion that would put him in charge of a high-profile worldwide product-alignment initiative, confident that he was the top candidate and that this was the logical next move for him, a seemingly perfect fit for his skills and ambitions. His track record was solid. He'd made no stupid mistakes or career-limiting moves, and he'd had no run-ins with upper management. He was stunned, then, when a colleague with less experience got the job. What was the matter?

As far as Tom could tell, nothing. Everyone was happy with his work, his manager assured him, and a recent 360-degree assessment confirmed her view. Tom was at or above the norm in every area, strong not only in delivering results but also in problem solving, strategic thinking, and inspiring others to top performance. "No need to reinvent yourself," she said. "Just keep doing what you're doing. Go with your strengths."

But how? Tom was at a loss. Should he think more strategically? Become even more inspiring? Practice problem solving more

intently?

Learn more about developing your strengths with this slideshow.

It's pretty easy and straightforward to improve on a weakness; you can get steady, measurable results through linear development—that is, by learning and practicing basic techniques. But the data from our decades of work with tens of thousands of executives all over the world has shown us that developing strengths is very different. Doing more of what you already do well yields only incremental improvement. To get appreciably better at it, you have to work on complementary skills—what we call *nonlinear* development. This has long been familiar to athletes as cross-training. A novice runner, for example, benefits from doing stretching exercises and running a few times a week, gradually increasing mileage to build up endurance and muscle memory. But an experienced marathoner won't get significantly faster merely by running ever longer distances. To reach the next level, he needs to supplement that regimen by building up complementary skills through weight training, swimming, bicycling, interval training, yoga, and the like.

So it is with leadership competencies. To move from good to much better, you need to engage in the business equivalent of cross-training. If you're technically adept, for instance, delving even more deeply into technical manuals won't get you nearly as far as honing a complementary skill such as communication, which will make your expertise more apparent and accessible to your coworkers.

In this article we provide a simple guide to becoming a far more effective leader. We will see how Tom identified his strengths, decided which one to focus on and which complementary skill to develop, and what the results were. The process is straightforward, but complements are not always obvious. So first we'll take a closer look at the leadership equivalent of cross-training.

The Interaction Effect

In cross-training, the combination of two activities produces an improvement—an *interaction effect*—substantially greater than either one can produce on its own. There's nothing mysterious here. Combining diet with exercise, for example, has long been known to be substantially more effective in losing weight than either diet or exercise alone.

In our previous research we found 16 differentiating leadership competencies that correlate strongly with positive business outcomes such as increased profitability, employee engagement, revenue, and customer satisfaction. Among those 16, we wondered, could we find pairs that would produce significant interaction effects?

We searched through our database of more than a quarter million 360-degree surveys of some 30,000 developing leaders for pairings that resulted in far higher scores on overall leadership effectiveness than either attribute did on its own. The results were unambiguous. Take, for example, the competencies “focuses on results” and “builds relationships.” Only 14% of leaders who were reasonably strong (that is, scored in the 75th percentile) in focusing on results but less so in building relationships reached the extraordinary leadership level: the 90th percentile in overall leadership effectiveness. Similarly, only 12% of those who were reasonably strong in building relationships but less so in focusing on results reached that level. But when an individual performed well in both categories, something dramatic happened: Fully 72% of those in the 75th percentile in both categories reached the 90th percentile in overall leadership effectiveness.

An Informal 360

Before you can build on your strengths, you need an objective view of what they are. Ideally, this comes from a formal, confidential 360-degree evaluation. But if that's not possible, a direct approach can work. Try simply asking your team members, colleagues, and boss these simple questions, either in person or in writing.

What leadership skills do you think are strengths for me?

Is there anything I do that might be considered a fatal flaw—that could derail my career or lead me to fail in my current job if it's not addressed?

What leadership ability, if outstanding, would have the most significant impact on the productivity or effectiveness of the organization?

What leadership abilities of mine have the most significant impact on you?

Do your best to exhibit receptiveness and to create a feeling of safety (especially for direct reports). Make it clear that you're seeking self-improvement. Tell your colleagues explicitly that you are open to negative feedback and that you will absorb it professionally and appropriately—and without retribution. Of course, you need to follow through on this promise, or the entire process will fail.

We measured the degree of correlation between overall leadership effectiveness and all possible pairings of our 16 differentiating competencies to learn which pairings were the most powerful. We also matched our 16 competencies with other leadership skills and measured how those pairs correlated with overall leadership effectiveness. We discovered that each of the 16 has up to a dozen associated behaviors—which we call *competency companions*—that were highly correlated with leadership excellence when combined with the differentiating competency. (For a complete list of the competencies and their companions, see the exhibit “What Skills Will Magnify My Strengths?”)

What Skills Will Magnify My Strengths?

Our research shows that 16 leadership competencies correlate strongly with positive business outcomes. Each of them has up to a dozen “competency companions” whose development will strengthen the core skill.

Character

Displays Honesty and Integrity

Shows concern and consideration for others

Is trustworthy

Demonstrates optimism

Is assertive

Inspires and motivates others

Deals well with ambiguity

Is decisive

Focuses on results

Personal Capability

Exhibits Technical/Professional Expertise

Solves problems and analyzes issues

Builds relationships and networks

Communicates powerfully and broadly

Pursues excellence

Takes initiative

Develops others

Displays honesty and integrity

Acts in the team's best interest

Solves Problems and Analyzes Issues

Takes initiative

Is organized and good at planning

Is decisive

Innovates

Wants to tackle challenges

Develops strategic perspective

Acts independently

Has technical expertise

Communicates powerfully and broadly

Innovates

Is willing to take risks and challenge the status quo

Supports others in risk taking

Solves problems and analyzes issues

Champions change

Learns quickly from success and failure

Develops strategic perspective

Takes initiative

Practices Self-Development

Listens

Is open to others' ideas

Respects others

Displays honesty and integrity

Inspires and motivates others

Provides effective feedback and development

Takes initiative

Is willing to take risks and challenge the status quo

Getting Results

Focuses on Results

Is organized and good at planning

Displays honesty and integrity

Anticipates problems

Sees desired results clearly

Provides effective feedback and development

Establishes stretch goals

Is personally accountable

Is quick to act

Provides rewards and recognition

Creates a high-performance team

Marshals adequate resources

Innovates

Establishes Stretch Goals

Inspires and motivates others

Is willing to take risks and challenge the status quo

Gains the support of others

Develops strategic perspective

Champions change

Is decisive

Has technical and business expertise

Focuses on results

Takes Initiative

- Anticipates problems
- Emphasizes speed
- Is organized and good at planning
- Champions others
- Deals well with ambiguity
- Follows through
- Inspires and motivates others
- Establishes stretch goals
- Displays honesty and integrity

Interpersonal Skills

Communicates Powerfully and Broadly

- Inspires and motivates others
- Develops strategic perspective
- Establishes stretch goals
- Deals effectively with the outside world
- Is trustworthy
- Involves others
- Translates messages for clarity
- Solves problems and analyzes issues
- Takes initiative
- Innovates
- Develops others

Inspires and Motivates Others

- Connects emotionally with others
- Establishes stretch goals
- Exhibits clear vision and direction

Communicates powerfully and broadly

Develops others

Collaborates and fosters teamwork

Nurtures innovation

Takes initiative

Champions change

Is a strong role model

Builds Relationships

Collaborates and fosters teamwork

Displays honesty and integrity

Develops others

Listens

Communicates powerfully and broadly

Provides rewards and recognition

Practices inclusion and values diversity

Demonstrates optimism

Practices self-development

Develops Others

Practices self-development

Shows concern and consideration for others

Is motivated by the success of others

Practices inclusion and values diversity

Develops strategic perspective

Provides effective feedback and development

Inspires and motivates others

Innovates

Provides rewards and recognition

Displays honesty and integrity

Collaborates and Fosters Teamwork

Is trustworthy

Builds relationships and networks

Practices inclusion and values diversity

Develops strategic perspective

Establishes stretch goals

Communicates powerfully and broadly

Displays honesty and integrity

Adapts to change

Inspires and motivates others

Develops others

Leading Change

Develops Strategic Perspective

Focuses on customers

Innovates

Solves problems and analyzes issues

Communicates powerfully and broadly

Establishes stretch goals

Demonstrates business acumen

Champions change

Inspires and motivates others

Champions Change

Inspires and motivates others

Builds relationships and networks

Develops others

Provides rewards and recognition

Practices inclusion and values diversity

Innovates

Focuses on results

Is willing to take risks and challenge the status quo

Develops strategic perspective

Connects the Group to the Outside World

Develops broad perspective

Develops strategic perspective

Inspires and motivates others

Has strong interpersonal skills

Takes initiative

Gathers and assimilates information

Champions change

Communicates powerfully and broadly

Consider the main competency “displays honesty and integrity.” How would a leader go about improving a relative strength in this area? By being more honest? (We’ve heard that answer to the question many times.) That’s not particularly useful advice. If an executive were weak in this area, we could recommend various ways to improve: Behave more consistently, avoid saying one thing and doing another, follow through on stated commitments, and so on. But a leader with high integrity is most likely already doing those things.

Our competency-companion research suggests a practical path forward. For example, assertiveness is among the behaviors that when paired with honesty and integrity correlate most strongly with high levels of overall leadership effectiveness. We don’t mean to imply a causal relationship here: Assertiveness doesn’t make someone honest, and integrity doesn’t produce assertiveness. But if a highly principled leader learned to become more assertive, he might be more likely to speak up and act with the courage of his convictions, thus applying his strength more widely or frequently to become a more effective leader.

Our data suggest other ways in which a competency companion can reinforce a leadership strength. It might make the strength more apparent, as in the case of the technically strong leader who improves her ability to communicate. Or skills learned in developing the competency companion might be profitably applied to the main competency. A leader strong in innovativeness, for instance, might learn how to champion change, thus encouraging his team to achieve results in new and more creative ways.

Building Strengths, Step by Step

As a practical matter, cross-training for leadership skills is clear-cut: (1) Identify your strengths. (2) Choose a strength to focus on according to its importance to the organization and how passionately you feel about it. (3) Select a complementary behavior you’d like to enhance. (4) Develop it in a linear way.

Identify your strengths. Strengths can arguably be identified in a variety of ways. But we contend that in the context of effective leadership, your view of your own (or even some perfectly objective view, supposing one could be had) is less important than

other people's, because leadership is all about your effect on others. That's why we start with a 360—as Tom did.

Ideally, you should go about this in a psychometrically valid way, through a formal process in which you and your direct reports, peers, and bosses anonymously complete questionnaires ranking your leadership attributes on a quantitative scale. You and they should also answer some qualitative, open-ended questions concerning your strengths, your fatal flaws (if any), and the relative importance of those attributes to the company. By “fatal flaws,” we mean flaws so critical that they can overpower any strengths you have or may develop—flaws that can derail your career.

Not every organization is able or willing to conduct 360s for everyone. So if that's not feasible, you may be able to solicit qualitative data from your colleagues if—and this is a big caveat—you can make them feel comfortable enough to be honest in their feedback. You could create your own feedback form and ask people to return it anonymously. (See the sidebar “An Informal 360” for a suggested set of questions.) We have also seen earnest one-on-one conversations work for this purpose; if nothing else, they show your coworkers that you are genuinely interested in self-improvement. (Nevertheless, it's unlikely that anyone will tell you directly if you have fatal flaws.)

In interpreting the results, people commonly focus first on their lowest scores. But unless those are extremely low (in the 10th percentile), that's a mistake. (We have found that 20% of executives do typically discover such a critical problem in their 360s; if you're among them, you must fix the flaw, which you can do in a linear way.)

What makes leaders indispensable to their organizations, our data unmistakably show, is not being good at many things but being uniquely outstanding at a few things. Such strengths allow a leader's inevitable weaknesses to be overlooked. The executives in our database who exhibited no profound (that is, in the 90th percentile) strengths scored only in the 34th percentile, on average, in overall leadership effectiveness. But if they had just one outstanding strength, their overall leadership effectiveness score rose to the 64th percentile, on average. In other words, the difference between being in the bottom third of leaders and being almost in the top third is a single extraordinary strength. Two profound strengths put leaders close to the top quartile, three put them in the top quintile, and four put them nearly in the top decile. (See the exhibit “What Difference Can a Single Strength Make?”)

What Difference Can a Single Strength Make?

Raising just one competency to the level of outstanding can up your overall leadership effectiveness ranking from the bottom third to almost the top third.

PERCENTILE RANKING

LEADERS WITH NO OUTSTANDING STRENGTHS

34

LEADERS WITH ONE

64

...TWO

72

...THREE

81

...FOUR

89

...FIVE

91

In this context, a look at Tom's 360 results sheds light on the question of why he was passed over for a plum assignment. Tom

had no critical flaws, but he hadn't yet demonstrated any outstanding strengths either. With no strengths above the 70th percentile, he didn't score "good," let alone "outstanding," in overall leadership ability. Anyone in the organization with a single notable strength was likely to outpace him for promotion opportunities. But if Tom could lift just a few of his relative strengths from the 70th to the 80th and then the 90th percentile, his overall leadership effectiveness might go from above average to good to exceptional. Clearly, those strengths merited a closer examination.

Like many people, though, Tom was initially galvanized by the low bars on his chart, which evoked a mixture of guilt and denial. His relatively low score on building relationships called up uncomfortable memories of high school—something he didn't mention as he looked over the results with his boss. But he did say that he couldn't believe he wasn't scored higher on innovativeness, and he started to tick off initiatives he felt he deserved credit for. Maybe he was innovative, and maybe he wasn't. It's common for your self-assessment to vary sharply from everyone else's assessment of you. But remember that it's others' opinions that matter.

When Tom did turn his attention to his strengths, he wasn't surprised to see that he scored well in focusing on results and in solving problems and analyzing issues. Less obvious to him, and perhaps more gratifying, were his relatively high marks in developing strategic perspective and inspiring and motivating others. Now he could move on to the next step.

Choose a strength to focus on. Choices between good and bad are easy. But choices between good and good cause us to deliberate and second-guess. It may not matter which competency Tom selected, since enhancing any one of them would markedly improve his leadership effectiveness. Nevertheless, we recommend that developing leaders focus on a competency that matters to the organization and about which they feel some passion, because a strength you feel passionate about that is not important to your organization is essentially a hobby, and a strength the organization needs that you don't feel passionate about is just a chore.

You can use your colleagues' importance ratings from the 360 assessment to get a somewhat objective view of organizational needs. But the prospect of following his passions alarmed Tom, who didn't know how to begin. Answering a series of questions made the notion more concrete. For each of the 16 competencies, he ran down the following list:

- Do I look for ways to enhance this skill?
- Do I look for new ways to use it?
- Am I energized, not exhausted, when I use it?
- Do I pursue projects in which I can apply this strength?
- Can I imagine devoting time to improving it?
- Would I enjoy getting better at this skill?

Counting his "yes" answers gave Tom a solid way to quantify his passions. A simple worksheet showed him how his skills, his passions, and the organization's needs dovetailed (see the exhibit "Narrowing Down the Options"). When Tom checked off his top five competencies, his five passions, and the organization's top priorities, he could see a clear convergence. He decided to focus on the strength that, as it happens, we have found to be most universally associated with extraordinary leadership: "inspires and motivates others."

Narrowing Down the Options

The strength you focus on should be both important to the organization and important to you. A simple worksheet (like Tom's, below) can help you see where your strengths and interests and the needs of your organization converge. Choose five competencies in each of the three categories.

	YOUR COMPETENCIES	YOUR PASSIONS	ORGANIZATIONAL NEEDS	TOTAL
1. DISPLAYS HONESTY AND INTEGRITY				
2. EXHIBITS TECHNICAL/PROFESSIONAL EXPERTISE	X			1
3. SOLVES PROBLEMS AND ANALYZES ISSUES	X			1
4. INNOVATES		X	X	2
5. PRACTICES SELF-DEVELOPMENT				
6. FOCUSES ON RESULTS	X			1
7. ESTABLISHES STRETCH GOALS				
8. TAKES INITIATIVE		X		1
9. COMMUNICATES POWERFULLY AND BROADLY			X	1
10. INSPIRES AND MOTIVATES OTHERS	X	X	X	3
11. BUILDS RELATIONSHIPS			X	1
12. DEVELOPS OTHERS		X		1
13. COLLABORATES AND FOSTERS TEAMWORK		X		1
14. DEVELOPS STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE	X		X	2
15. CHAMPIONS CHANGE				
16. CONNECTS THE GROUP TO THE OUTSIDE WORLD				

Select a complementary behavior. People who excel at motivating others are good at persuading them to take action and to go the extra mile. They effectively exercise power to influence key decisions for the benefit of the organization. They know how to motivate different people in different ways. So it was not surprising that Tom already did those things pretty well. He scanned the list of competency companions:

- Connects emotionally with others
- Establishes stretch goals
- Exhibits clear vision and direction
- Communicates powerfully and broadly
- Develops others
- Collaborates and fosters teamwork
- Nurtures innovation
- Takes initiative
- Champions change
- Is a strong role model

You should choose a companion behavior that, like a good strength, is important to the organization and makes you feel enthusiastic about tackling it. But at this point it's also constructive to consider your lower scores. In talking these points over with his manager, Tom decided to work on his communication skills, which didn't score particularly high but were high enough that raising them a little could make a significant difference.

Develop it in a linear way. Having settled on a competency companion, Tom could now work at directly improving his basic skills in that area. Strong communicators speak concisely and deliver effective presentations. Their instructions are clear. They write well. They can explain new concepts clearly. They help people understand how their work contributes to broader business objectives. They can translate terms used by people in different functions. Tom saw lots of room for improvement here: No one would ever call him concise; he didn't always finish sentences he'd started; and he found writing a challenge.

We would have recommended that he look for as many opportunities as possible, both inside and outside work, to improve his communication. He could take a course in business writing. He could practice with friends and family, in his church or his community. He could volunteer to make presentations to senior management or ask colleagues to critique some of his memos and e-mails. He might volunteer to help high school students write college application essays. He could videotape himself making speeches or join a local Toastmasters club.

Tom decided to seek the advice of a colleague whose communication skills he admired. The colleague suggested (among other things) that because writing was not a strong point, Tom should practice communicating more in person or over the phone. This turned out to be challenging: Tom found that before he could even begin, he had to change his approach to e-mail, because he was in the habit of constantly checking and replying to it throughout the day. He couldn't always substitute the phone, because he couldn't make calls while he was in a meeting or talking to someone else. He started to set aside specific times of the day for e-mail so that he could reply by phone or in person—a small change that had unexpected consequences. Instead of being interrupted and distracted at random moments throughout the day (and evening), his staffers had concentrated, direct interactions with him. They found these more efficient and effective, even though they could no longer choose when (or whether) to reply to Tom's cryptic e-mails. Tom found that he connected better with people he talked to, both because his attention wasn't divided between them and his BlackBerry and because he could read their tone of voice and body language. As a result, he absorbed more information, and his colleagues felt he was more attentive to their views.

Tom also started to pay more attention not just to how he was communicating but to what he was saying. His colleague suggested that Tom start to keep track of how often he issued instructions versus how often he asked questions. Tom also took note of how much of what he said was criticism (constructive or otherwise) and how much was encouragement. Increasing the proportion of questions and encouragement had an immediate effect: His team began to understand him more quickly, so he didn't have to repeat himself as often. Several team members actually thanked him for allowing them to express their points of view.

Like Tom, you should expect to see some concrete evidence of improvement within 30 to 60 days. If you don't, what you're doing is not working. That said, complementary behaviors improve steadily with practice, and Tom's progress is typical: Fifteen months later, on taking another 360, he found he'd moved into the 82nd percentile in his ability to inspire. He wasn't extraordinary yet, but he was getting close. Our advice would be to keep at it—to improve another competency companion or two until he reaches the 90th percentile and becomes truly exceptional at inspiring others. Then he can start the entire process again with another strength and its complements, and another—at which point he will be making a uniquely valuable contribution to his company.

Can You Overdo It?

Everyone knows someone who is too assertive, too technically oriented, too focused on driving for results. Many people cite examples like these to argue against the wisdom of improving your leadership effectiveness by strengthening your strengths. Our research does in fact show a point where balance becomes important. The data suggest that the difference between having four profound strengths and having five is a gain of merely 2 percentage points in overall leadership effectiveness. Thus leaders who are already exceptional should consider one more variable.

You will note in the exhibit "What Skills Will Magnify My Strengths?" that the 16 differentiating competencies fall into five broader categories: character, personal capability, getting results, interpersonal skills, and leading change. People who have many strengths should consider how they are distributed across those categories and focus improvement efforts on an underrepresented one.

But we cannot think of a less constructive approach to improving your leadership effectiveness than treating your strengths as weaknesses. Have you ever known anyone who had too much integrity? Was too effective a communicator? Was just too inspiring? Developing competency companions works precisely because, rather than simply doing more of the same, you are enhancing how you already behave with new ways of working and interacting that will make that behavior more effective.

Focusing on

your strengths is hardly a new idea. Forty-four years ago Peter Drucker made the business case eloquently in *The Effective Executive*: “Unless...an executive looks for strength and works at making strength productive, he will only get the impact of what a man cannot do, of his lacks, his weaknesses, his impediments to performance and effectiveness. To staff from what there is not and to focus on weakness is wasteful—a misuse, if not abuse, of the human resource.” Since then a body of work has grown up supporting and advocating for Drucker’s approach. Our own research shows how big a difference developing a few strengths can make. It is distressing to find that fewer than 10% of the executives we work with have any plan to do so. We are convinced that the problem is less a matter of conviction than of execution. Executives need a path to enhancing their strengths that is as clear as the one to fixing their weaknesses. That is the greatest value, we believe, of the cross-training approach: It allows people to use the linear improvement techniques they know and understand to produce a nonlinear result.

Often executives complain to us that there are not enough good leaders in their organizations. We would argue that in fact far too many leaders are merely good. The challenge is not to replace bad leaders with good ones; it is to turn people like Tom—hardworking, capable executives who are reasonably good at their jobs—into outstanding leaders with distinctive strengths.

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