

Witold Gotowski

Witek Gotowski – Consulting

Academy of Leadership Psychology,

Business School at the Warsaw University of Technology

witek.gotowski@gmail.com

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-9618-6249

Elevating Leadership Effectiveness by Building Self-Awareness of Inner Dynamics

Abstract: By improving self-awareness, leaders can elevate their effectiveness. Focusing on one's inner dynamics constitutes a practical approach that offers a useful framework for leaders themselves as well as all the others who support them on their path towards better results for their teams or organizations.

The objective of this article is to outline two models that offer such a framework. Both models can be regarded as hypotheses that shed light on the key drivers of leaders' behaviors and show their impact on leadership effectiveness. These models are supported by observations, interviews with leaders and their associates, and, partially through statistical data derived from a 360 research tool.

One of the models, the Core Quadrants model created by a Dutch consultant, Daniel Ofman, can be applied by everyone who focuses on his/her self-development. In the case of leaders, its potential usefulness is amplified as their self-development affects the effectiveness of their teams and organizations.

The second model, the Versatile Leadership, was created by US-based psychologists, Robert Kaplan and Robert Kaiser, and focuses on a specific concept of leadership.

In both models, inner dynamics point to psychological pitfalls that are associated with leaders' strengths. If positive attributes are applied excessively, they become weaknesses that negatively affect leaders' effectiveness. Better awareness of mechanisms and/or triggers that are behind excessively used strengths help leaders minimize associated negative impact on their relations and communication with the people with whom they work on achieving collective and individual goals. This results in improved leadership effectiveness.

Key words: leadership, core quadrant, versatile, inner dynamics

Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes.

(Carl Jung (1973), *Letters*, Volume 2, Princeton University Press, p. 33)

Introduction

In a contemporary view on leadership, one of the key assumptions states that one cannot be an effective leader without a great deal of self-awareness. If you do not know what inner dynamics power you in your relations with other people and your organization, then you simply cannot be optimally effective in making things happen within the realm of your responsibility.

In this article, I will focus on two specific models that help leaders better decipher their inner dynamics and thus assist them on the path leading to more effective leadership. In other words, they both have their

practical ramifications and are applied by leaders and those experts, be it coaches, business trainers, and Human Resources specialists, who are involved in leadership development programs. Both models can be regarded as hypotheses that shed light on important drivers of leaders' behaviors and their influence on leadership effectiveness. These hypotheses are supported by observations, interviews with leaders and their associates and, partially through statistical data derived from 360 research tools.

In this article, a leader is someone who leads in a business organization. He or she is in a managerial position, not necessary at the executive level.

One of the models – the core Quadrants model – has a more universal use, though its potential impact is more significant in the case of those who are in charge of teams or organizations rather than those who do not hold such responsibility. While the latter may benefit from it as individuals (for their personal development and wellbeing), the former can benefit from it both as individuals and as organization influencers who are supposed to infuse others with the purpose, direction, energy, and skills that bring about organizational outputs that serve clients and the wider public. The model was created by a Dutch consultant, Daniel Ofman, based on his experience working with thousands of people, including numerous leaders.

The second model focuses on a specific concept of leadership, the Versatile Leadership, that is based on the dynamics among attitudes and skills that together explain, to a high degree, what leadership is all about. The model was designed by two US-based psychologists, Rob Kaiser and Bob Kaplan, who have tested it on tens of thousands of leaders and managers, gaining some valuable statistical insights that I briefly outline in this article.

The Core Quadrant Model

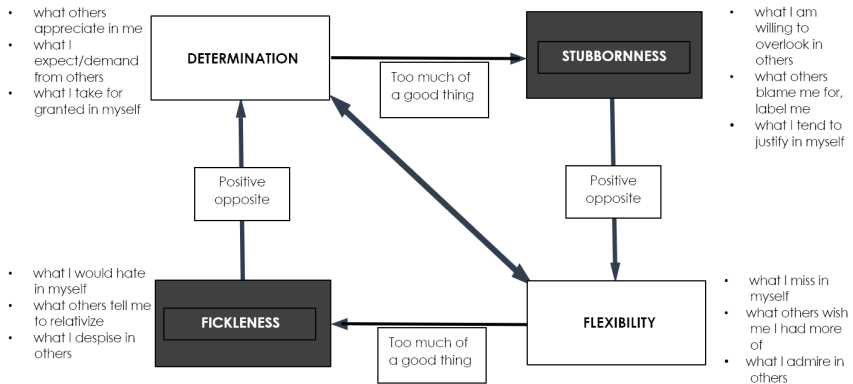
Let's imagine that a leader feels/thinks that there is a great deal of determination in her. She observes that this has been so from the times she could remember, i.e., from early childhood. She regards it as something natural and expects it from others. People who know her, appreciate this. The creator of this model, Ofman calls such a positive characteristic, a **core quality**. One has possessed several core qualities since early childhood; in a way, we are "born with them". On the other hand, we develop our systems of values over many years of being influenced by one's family, religion, education, various organizations, and society at large. Values are beacons in our life; with various degrees of success, we try to adhere to them in everyday life. In some situations, a **core quality** of one person may be the value of another one. For example, generosity or reliability could be either. Similarly, core qualities differ from competences that people learn at various stages of their lives. As in the case of values, sometimes a competence could sound much like a **core value**. One can for example possess creativity as his/her **core value** while someone else may learn certain creative thinking techniques and thus regard creativity as his/her competence (Ofman, 2015a, pp. 96–101).

Now the question is: do **core qualities** always serve the leader well? In **the Core Quadrant model**, one can apply it excessively, thus falling into one's **pitfall**. A leader himself/herself tries to find the most adequate word to describe his/her **pitfall**. Let's assume that, in our case, her (leader whose core quality is determination) choice is rigidity. While a **core quality** is regarded as something positive by people who co-operate with the leader, her rigidity is not well received by them. The leader may not be aware that her behavior reflects something more than her **core quality**. For her, this may still be (strong) determination.

While others admire a leader's determination they do not enjoy/like her rigidity and this may negatively influence their engagement, enthusiasm, energy, creativity thus hamper their effectiveness. The question is what positive would supplement a leader's core quality? People cooperating with our leader might for example think that she could benefit from using more flexibility in her dealings with them and, in general, with the circumstance she faces. In Ofman's model, this is an attribute that represents a positive opposite to **pitfall** and is called a **challenge**. In our case the leader may choose other words than flexibility to capture her **challenge** (this could be e.g., openness, creativity); for the sake of this example, I stick with flexibility though. A leader using this model would recognize that to be a more rounded person (and a more effective leader), she should apply more flexibility (or openness, creativity, etc.). Our self-aware leader thus aspires to have more of her **challenge** and realizes that her determination should be supplemented by flexibility. The last missing part of this core quadrant is **allergy**. When there is too much of a challenge, we arrive at the **allergy**. In our case, too much flexibility might be fickleness. Someone such as our leader with determination as her core quality abhors fickleness exhibited by other people; in other words, she is allergic to fickleness and she would hate to show fickleness herself.

The dynamics of the above core quadrant is summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. An Example of a Core Quadrant



Source: Based on Ofman (2007, pp. 20-113).

The model as described above could be applied to anyone, though as I put it, leaders could benefit from it the most.

Each of us could identify several core quadrants that form our inner dynamics from which we cannot escape. This means that each of our core qualities is accompanied by three other parts of the core quadrant: pitfall, challenge, and allergy. From that perspective, one could say that “we are as we are”.

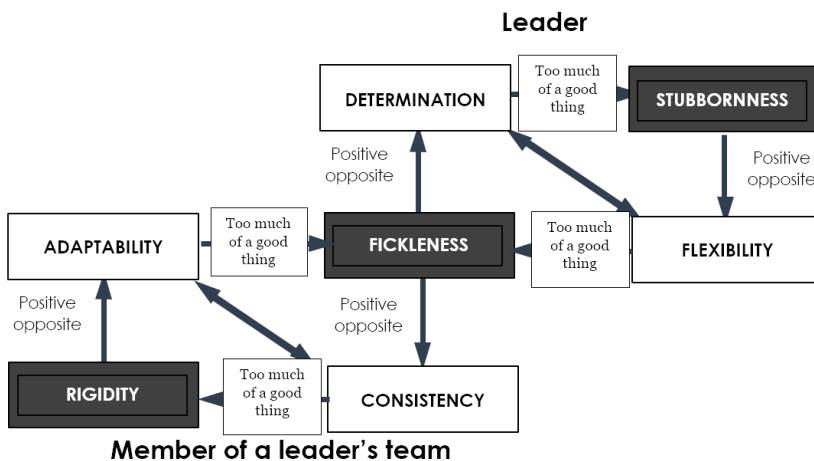
What is then the development of leadership in this context? According to Ofman, one can count on self-development, if he/she invest in awareness and self-knowledge: it will follow as a matter of course. There are some valuable benefits of this continues work.

Leaders can benefit from this awareness in his/her interactions with people. This may mean:

- Ability to departing quicker from his/her pitfall,
- Recognition that an allergic reaction to someone’s actions/ /behavior may result from this person’s pitfall (which, in turn, is based on one of this person’s core qualities!). For instance, the leader in our

case may be allergic to fickleness that is evident in her colleague and this, in turn, could be her colleague's pitfall as his colleague's core quality is adaptability. The leader may thus develop a more positive picture of his team members as he/she will seek core qualities that are temporarily hidden in the shadow of their pitfalls (See Figure 2).

Figure 2. An Example 1 of a Double Quadrant: When a leader's allergy is someone's else pitfall



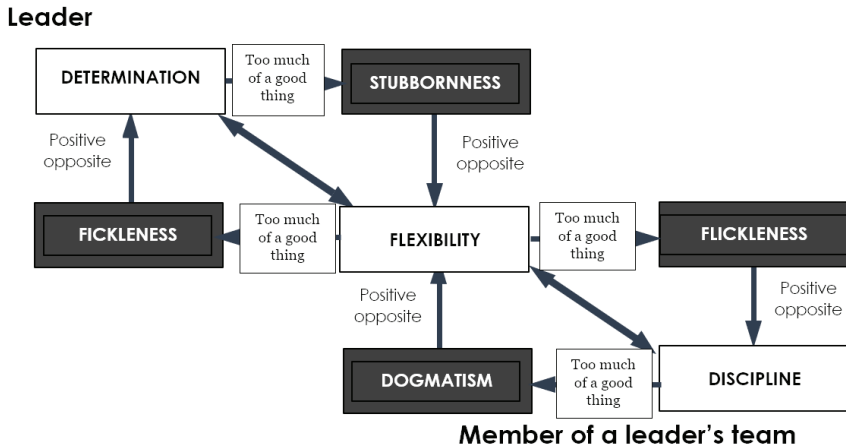
Source: Based on Ofman (2007, pp. 20-113).

• Better ability to drawing on his/her challenge. In fact, according to Ofman, this is the essence of the development for anyone who would like to benefit from his model. A recipe for a rewarding life (and more effective leadership) is to build an ability to balance one's core quality with his/her challenge. In the above-described example, this would be the ability to be both aware of the flexibility as the leader's challenge and the capability to drawing on this challenge whenever this is useful or appropriate. This might also mean that the leader would make sure that members of her team include people with flexibility as their core quality (see Figure 3). Often leaders surround

themselves with people similar to themselves as they are reluctant to work alongside those whose core qualities represent their challenges; leaders react allergically whenever such associates enter their pitfall. In Figure 3, we see two core quadrants: one created by the leader and the other by the member of his team. We can see that too much flexibility (leader's challenge) is fickleness (leader's allergy) which is, at the same time, his team member's pitfall.

At the team level, a leader may ensure that, in a professionally facilitated setting, each member creates his/her core quadrants and confront them with those prepared by his/her colleagues. Conversations that follow will lead to deeper mutual understanding and trust, improved communication within the team, and thus make it more effective.

Figure 3. An Example 2 of a Double Quadrant: When a leader's challenge is someone's else core quality



Source: Based on Ofman (2007, pp. 20-113).

What makes people fall in their pitfalls (and worse)

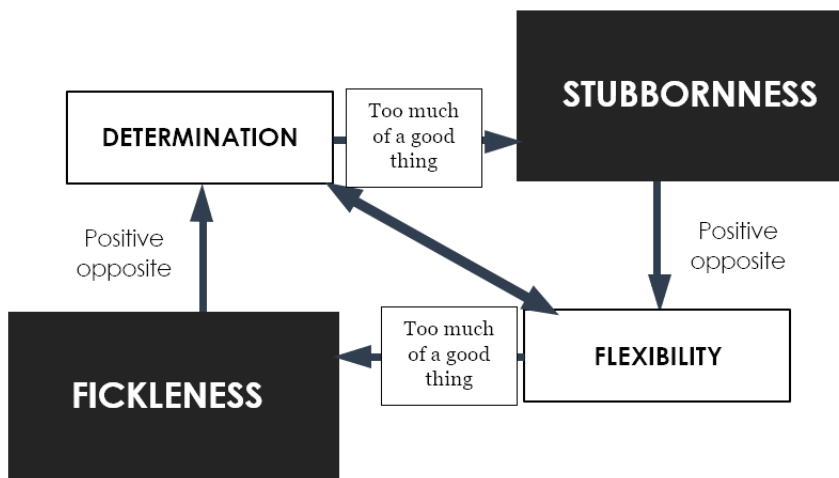
Whenever someone is under stress he/she can fall into one of his/her

pitfalls. For instance, if the leader from Figure 3 is under stress, she is prone to show more stubbornness in her behavior and actions. In this case, being aware of her inner dynamics may, for instance, lead to her taking a break in a board meeting so that her pitfall does not cloud her clarity of thinking and decision-making abilities.

Under severe stress, a person can start behaving in a way that is allergic to him/her when he/she sees it in other people. In the case of our leader, she may lose her determination entirely, instead of showing fickleness in her behavior.

If we are often under stress, our core quadrants are likely to be distorted and our behavior may be guided more by our pitfalls or we may even start exhibiting behavior that is allergic to us. For a leader, this will result in less effective leadership and this may, in turn, affect negatively the business results of his/her team or organization. If our leader's life were filled with stress, her inner dynamics would be reflected better by Figure 4:

Figure 4. Example of a Core quadrant distorted by stress



Source: Based on Ofman (2015b).

The above stress-induced dynamics indicate that, in addition to other psychological and psycho-physiological benefits, stress management may lead leaders (and others) to limit behaviors associated with pitfalls and allergies.

Versatile Leadership

“Practical Psychology” underlying the Versatile Leadership Model

According to Kaiser and Kaplan, their model is based on practical psychology that can shed light on the internal causes of some mystifying performance problems among leaders.

One of the key concepts of practical psychology is “sensitivity”. Sensitivities start the chain of causal reactions that result in leaders’ distorted actions, either overdone or underdone behaviors that are detrimental to leaders’ effectiveness.

Sensitivities are what we casually call people’s hot “buttons” or “issues” and more formally “a sensitivity is a set of emotionally charged beliefs and expectations generalized from experience that serve to protect the individual from repeating a painful injury—physical or psychological”. “Sensitivities work by matching stimuli in the present perceptual field with encodings from the past without us being aware of this process” (Kaiser, & Kaplan, 2006, p. 466).

Below, in Table 1, are some sensitivities (by no means all) of leaders’ underperformance that is manifested by deficiencies or excesses. When some features in the leader’s circumstances remind him/her of the past hurts, sensitivities are automatically triggered.

This leads to an exaggerated assessment of the situation and either overestimation of what is required to deal with it or underestimation of resources at the disposal that is needed to protect one's wellbeing. The perception of being psychologically threatened leads to a stress-induced response that resembles an instinctive "flight-or-flight" response and manifests itself in automatic, self-protective behaviors that are received as strange and peculiar by observers. If one takes a "fight" path, his/her behavior is regarded as aggressive overcontrolled reactions to given situations. If a "flight" path is taken, a person's reaction looks like avoidance and overcontrol. People with personalities oriented towards doing all to prevail will tend automatically to fight/overdone behavior while others whose focus is on not provoking and avoiding dangerous situations steer impulsively to flight/underdone behavior. Both patterns of compulsive behaviors that take place beneath the surface of awareness are represented by Figure 5.

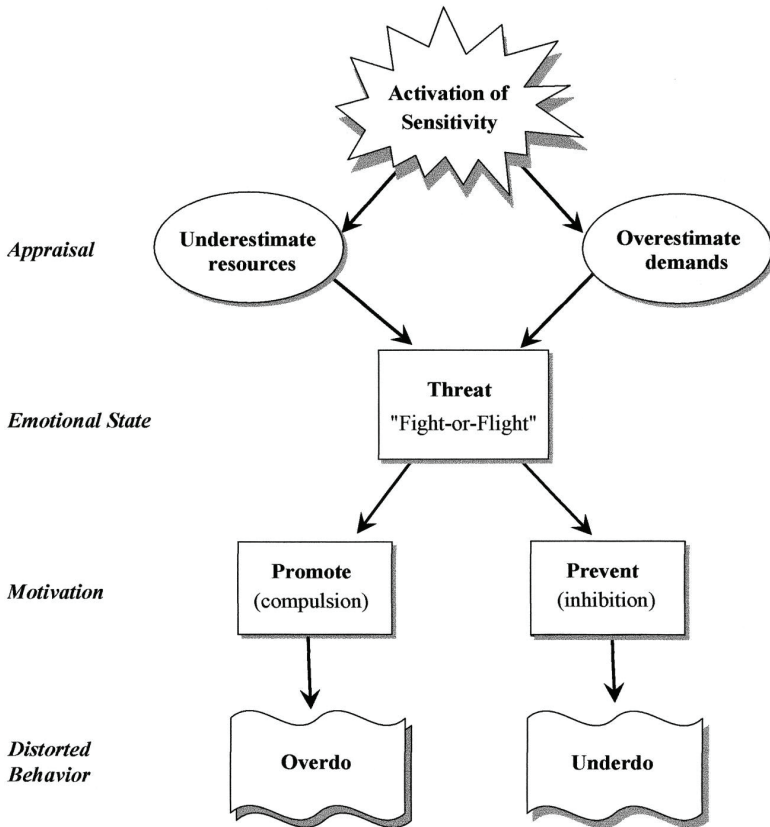
Here are some examples of sensitivities that may result in possible "underdo" and "overdo" leaders' behaviors.

Table 1. Examples of Sensitivities and Related Distortions in Performance

Impact on performance		
Sensitivity to...	Too little of a behavior – do too little	Too much of a behavior – do too much
Being/appearing weak	Doesn't delegate or empower Doesn't praise or give encouragement	Excessively talkative, "knows everything" Arrogance
Disapproval/rejection	Doesn't stand his/her ground Doesn't express dissatisfaction	Overreacts to constructive criticism Indiscriminate with praise
Depending on others	Doesn't delegate or seek help Reluctant to partner with peers	Micromanagement Too focused on own team/unit

Source: Kaiser & Kaplan (2006, p. 469).

Figure 5. Sequence of How Sensitivities Throw Off the Performance of Leaders



Source: Kaiser & Kaplan (2006, p. 468).

The Versatile Leadership Model

The Versatile Leadership model is based on the assumption that a leader's effectiveness is related to his/her versatility which, in turn, is based on the leader's ability to apply four leadership styles (also called types) in a manner that fits circumstances in which leader operates. "Versatility

— which is the absence of imbalance— is also most usefully defined in terms of pairs of opposing qualities and skills. Versatile leaders are able to continually adjust their behavior, deftly applying the right approach, to the right degree, for the circumstances at hand. These are people who can pivot readily from forcing a tough issue to fostering harmony, from holding a blue-sky session to digging into an immediate problem.” (Kaplan, & Kaiser, 2003, p. 22)

Two of the four leadership styles are defined by the way a leader cooperates with his/her subordinates.

The forceful style (Kaplan, & Kaiser, 2006) involves:

- **taking charge** which means that a leader assumes authority, gives direction, and steps in when problems arise;
- **declaring** defined by decisiveness; taking a position and defending it;
- **pushing** which means high expectations and holding people accountable;

The enabling style (Kaplan, & Kaiser, 2006) involves:

- **empowering** defined by giving people room to contribute and trusting others to handle problems;
- **listening** which means inviting others to participate; considering input from reports and being open to influence;
- **supporting** which means treating people well, showing appreciation, and being open to learning by mistakes.

The remaining two styles refer to the way leader functions in an organizational setting.

The strategic style (Kaplan, & Kaiser, 2006) involves:

- setting a **direction** that means looking ahead, taking a big-picture perspective, and thinking strategically;
- **growth** defined as being aggressive about growth, making change, and seizing opportunities;

- **innovation** understood as questioning the status quo; trying new things and encouraging creativity.

The operational style (Kaplan, & Kaiser, 2006) involves:

- **executing** defined by managing the day-to-day details of implementation and following up;

- **efficiency** understood as being practical about change and conserving resources;

- **order** defined as being consistent; organized and methodical and applying process discipline.

There is nothing wrong with using one or more of the four styles, if this suits the situation in which the leader operates at a specific moment.

A leader can use each style too rarely and/or with too low an intensity, optimally or he/she can overdo it, i.e., use it too often and/or with too much intensity. In other words, in addition to applying his/her leadership optimally, he/she can show some deficits or excesses in applying leadership styles either of which reduces his/her leadership effectiveness. Statistical data (based on over 20 thousand applications of the LVI 360® tool) shows a very high correlation between the versatility index and the assessment of a leader's effectiveness (based on LVI 360® report, first edition).

Let's assume that one of the leader's strengths is his ability to generate an attractive and convincing vision for his organization or team. This leader is preoccupied with building a long-term vision, talks to his reports about a place where the organization will be in the distant future. Everybody sees his ability to grasp a myriad of factors that may shape future developments. At the same time, they realize that his preoccupation with the long term distracts him and his associates from here and now. In other terms, they think that his being a visionary is excessive and this, in turn, is detrimental to organizational effectiveness.

In another case, a leader is regarded as very good in including his reports or associates in a decision-making process. Perhaps because of his value system, he thinks that everybody who may be a potential stakeholder here could have some relevant insight, deserves to be consulted. This approach works well in some situations; however, in some, it results in endless consultations that slow down the decision-making process so much, that when a decision is finally made, the initial root conditions that called for a decision have changed and the decision does not fit the new circumstance.

Measuring Leadership Versatility

The effectiveness of leaders can be assessed by their results, by expert observations, or by asking for insight from people who cooperate with the leader. Results may be influenced by so many factors that this method is regarded as untenable unless the leader is at the helm for an extended period and the organization continues to perform after his/her departure for several years. This happens surprisingly rarely as Jim Collins illustrates in his book “Good to Great” (Collins, 2001).

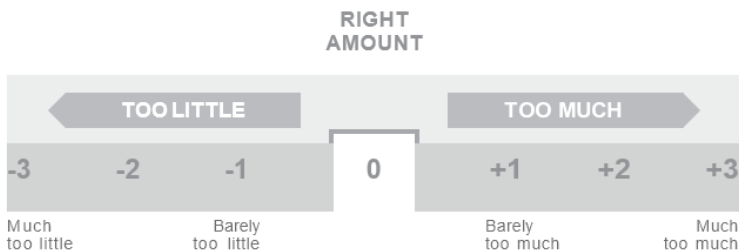
Often organizations yearn for a snapshot assessment of their leaders with the possibility of verifying the degree to which they benefit from development programs by a repeat assessment.

Observing how leaders function, even if this is done by experts, produces distorted results as leaders adapt their behavior to what is regarded by them as appropriate. In other words, when being observed, leaders are not “natural”.

One of the best methods to assess leaders' effectiveness is a good 360 assessment tool. Authors of the Versatility model designed a useful tool called Leadership Versatility Index 360® (LVI 360®). It measures the degree to which a leader's coworkers (superiors, reports, peers, and

other important associates) perceive 48 leaders' behaviors selected to measure the above discussed four leadership styles. For each behavior measuring one of the styles, there is a complementary one that measures an opposing style (forceful vs enabling or strategic vs operational). Each behavior is assessed on a rarely used scale where 0 is a measure of accurateness (i.e., regarded as perfectly calibrated by the rater), scores below indicate a “deficit” and scores above zero mean an “overdone strength” (see Figure 6 below).

Figure 6. The scale used in the LVI 360® Assessment tool



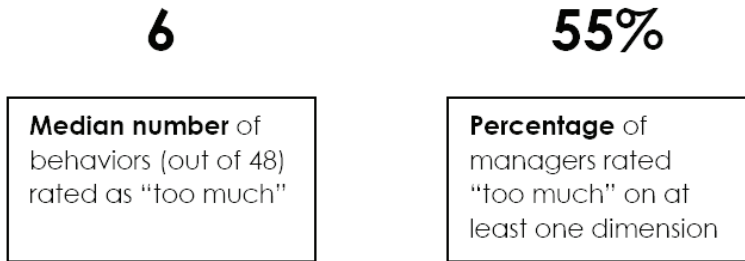
Source: Based on the LVI 360® report (2019, p. 4).

The LVI 360® report provides information on a perceived overall Leadership Versatility (LVI 360® overall index) as well as Versatility measures for each of the four leadership styles. The LVI 360® also provides a single measure of the overall leadership effectiveness which can then be compared to the LVI 360® overall index. It also allows comparing the leader's self-assessment with that of his/her raters.

Tentative conclusions based on over 20 thousand LVI 360® assessments

In additions to deficits, raters see many behaviors as overdone:

Figure 7. Overused behaviors by leaders - norm rather than the exception



Source: Based on Kaiser & Kaplan (2009, pp. 57-76).

Table 2. Most Commonly Overdone Behaviors are measures of the forceful style

**% rated
"too much"
by coworkers**

Forceful: Doesn't back down easily	36%
Forceful: Speaks up	28%
Forceful: Assumes authority	27%
Operational: Conservative about risk	26%
Forceful: In control	24%

Sample of N = 21,559 senior managers,

Source: Kaiser (2019).

More than half of the rated leaders overused behaviors related to their strengths and 90% percent of them neglected complementary leadership behaviors.

Figure 8. An overused behavior is usually associated with a deficit of an opposite complementary behavior



Source: Based on Kaiser & Overfield (2011, pp. 89-109).

Of those who overuse their strengths, many leaders are unaware of this and thus LVI 360® tool helps them face that reality. This is the first step on the road of building their self-awareness and introspection. Leaders who decide to continue on this path learn how to (among others):

- detect the signals (e.g., physiological) of the onset of the threat and triggering of sensitivity
- neutralize the fight-or-flight reflex
- manage one's energy
- take advantage of social support

If leaders are determined to achieve a profound and lasting recalibration of their leadership by making it more versatile, i.e., toning down their overdone strengths and/or reducing their deficits, they should uncover and explore the underlying values and beliefs, make behavioral experiments, systematically reflect on their experience and form an expert support system, i.e., work with coaches, mentors, or psychotherapists. All this for the sake of becoming more effective leaders.

Concluding remarks

Leaders can use their full potential if they have the awareness and willingness that drive them to gain deeper self-awareness. Of special values is gaining awareness of one's inner dynamics that cover not only so-called deficits in attitudes and/or skills but also traps that are related to excessive use of one's strengths.

In Ofman's core quadrants model, inner dynamics are built on ever-present core quality and associated pitfall, challenge, and allergy. According to Kaiser and Kaplan, leaders' versatility model alerts not only to possible deficits in Leaders' behaviors but also to potentially overdone strengths.

Leaders who are aware of their inner dynamics can be more successful if they decide on taking a self-development path that may result in mustering early warning systems and/or calibrating one's behaviors. On a deeper level, behavioral transformation can be achieved when the leader is assisted by coaching, mentoring, and – sometimes – psychotherapy.

Bibliography

Collins, J. (2001). *Good to Great*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

Kaiser, R. B., & Kaplan, R. E. (2006). The Deeper Work of Executive Development. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 5(4), pp. 463–483.

Kaiser, R. B., & Kaplan, R. E. (2009). *When Strengths Run Amok*. In R. B. Kaiser (Ed.), *The Perils of Accentuating the Positives* (pp. 57–76). Tulsa, OK: Hogan Press.

Kaiser, R. B., & Overfield, D. (2011). Strengths Overused and Lopsided Leadership. *Consulting Psychology Journal*, 63(2), 89–109.

Kaiser, R. B. (2019). *LVI v4 Global Norms* (Technical Report). Greensboro, NC: Kaiser Leadership Solutions.

Kaplan, R. E., & Kaiser, R. B. (2003). Developing Versatile Leadership. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, Summer, 44(4), pp. 18–26.

Kaplan, R. E., & Kaiser, R. B. (2006). *The Versatile Leader: Make the Most of Your Strengths – Without Overdoing it*. San Francisco: Pfeiffer.

LVI 360® report (2019). Greensboro, NC: Kaiser Leadership Solutions.

Ofman, D. (2007). *Fancy Meeting Me Here!* Utrecht/Antwerp: Servire, a division of Kosmos Publishers.

Ofman, D. (2015a). *Building Commitment and Enthusiasm in Organisations*. The Hague: Core Quality International.

Ofman, D. (2015b). Presentation at the TT Core Qualities Certification Workshop, October 21–22, Warsaw.

