

# TALENT

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## About *Talent Quarterly*

Our mission at *Talent Quarterly* is to make organizations more successful by providing their leaders with the science-based, insightful and practical information needed to make critical talent decisions.

We accomplish that mission by publishing serious, provocative and practical articles and interviews that raise the quality of dialogue about talent.

We believe the current dialogue on talent issues is bi-polar – either bloggy and sensational or academic and detached. We believe that serious dialogue requires more than 500-word stories. We believe that corporate executives and human resource leaders should take ownership for this dialogue.

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With such powerful science available to guide us, it's puzzling that catchy buzzwords, unvalidated research and "too easy to be true" solutions dominate the discussion about how to solve talent issues.

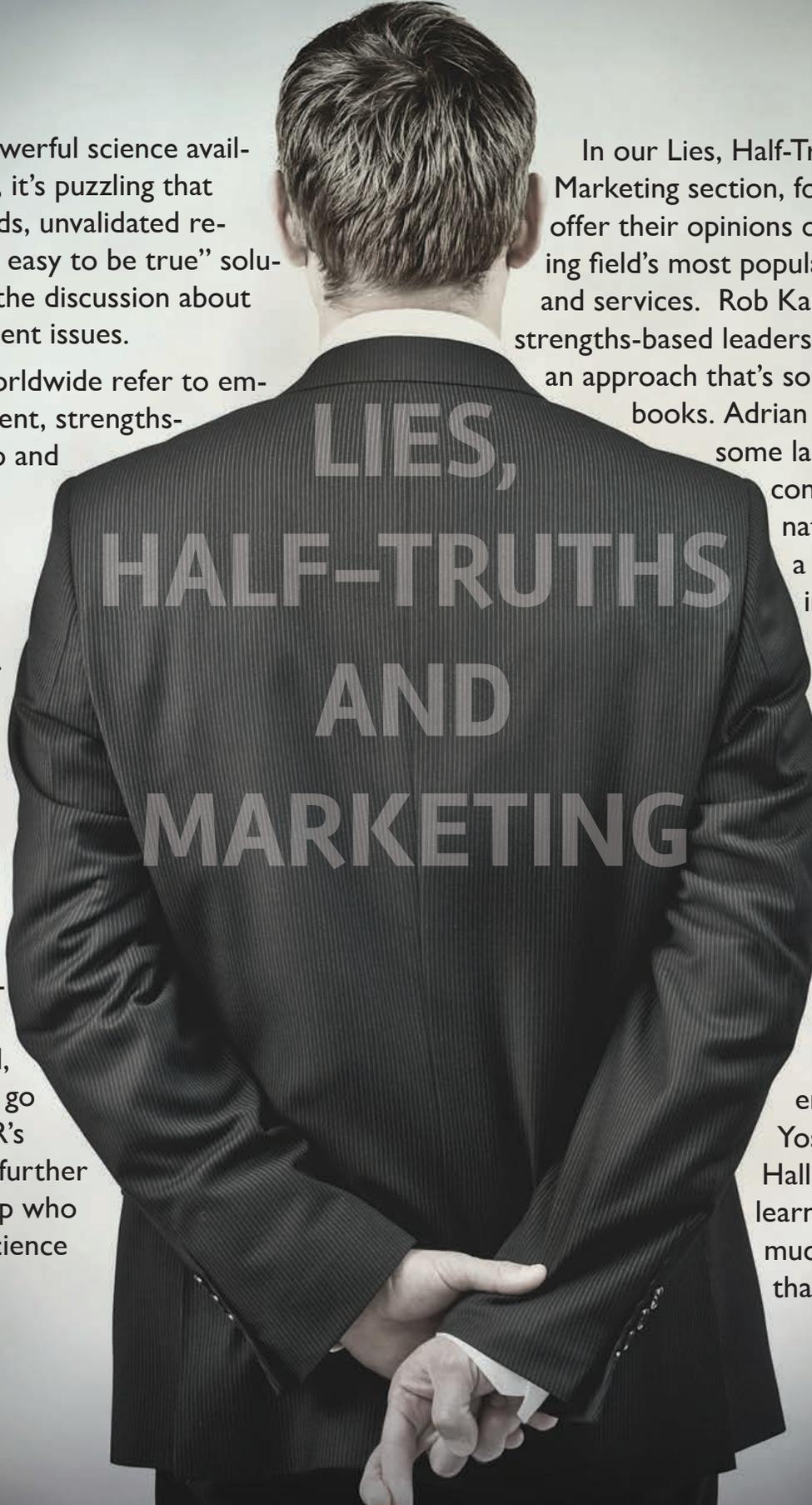
Executives worldwide refer to employee engagement, strengths-based leadership and emotional intelligence with the confidence that suggests they strongly believe in the validity of these concepts. At best, their support brings some much needed focus to the challenge of talent building.

At worst, millions of dollars are mis-invested, leaders' careers go off track and HR's reputation gets further sullied as a group who can't sort out science from shinola.

In our Lies, Half-Truths and Marketing section, four wise Ph.D.'s offer their opinions on the consulting field's most popular products and services. Rob Kaiser takes on strengths-based leadership, challenging an approach that's sold millions of

books. Adrian Furnham pokes some large holes in the concept of "alternate intelligences," a category that includes perennial favorite "emotional intelligence."

JP Elliott challenges whether engagement is actually a "thing" or just a dressed up version of old (but good) science. And, Paul Yost and Daniel Hallak show us that learning agility is much more state than trait.



## LIES, HALF-TRUTHS AND MARKETING



# The Fundamental Weakness of Strengths

A good friend of mine, a well-known pioneer of executive coaching, was recently reviewing the design for a high-potential leadership program with the global head of talent at a sexy Silicon Valley company. As he explained how the upfront assessments would identify strengths and weaknesses, the head of talent interrupted to say, “I’m sorry, we don’t talk about weaknesses here; we speak the language of strengths.” My friend asked, “So how do you refer to those skills and competencies a manager doesn’t do very well?” The talent executive answered, in all sincerity, “We call those lesser strengths.”

Ever since the publication of *Now, Discover Your Strengths* at the turn of the century, and the powerful marketing muscle behind it, I have had a nagging sense that the talent management field has been seduced by easy answers and the promise of a quick fix. More and more “gurus” are telling leaders and those who develop them to stop wasting time and effort trying to fix weaknesses and, instead, focus on maximizing strengths. There are some things you will never be good at, they comfortingly affirm as they advise you to focus on those things for which

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**Rob Kaiser, Ph.D.**, (rob@kaiserleadership.com) is the President of Kaiser Leadership Solutions, which develops and distributes cutting-edge tools for leadership assessment and development. His latest books are *Fear Your Strengths* (Berrett-Koehler, 2013) and *The Perils of Accentuating the Positives* (Hogan Press, 2009).

you have a natural born talent and the most potential for greatness. This point of view has been reposted so many times and by so many reputable sources like *Forbes*, SHRM, and ASTD that many people take it as an article of faith. It is also assumed—falsely—to be proven by breakthrough research from the new field of positive psychology.

In today’s complex business environment, where leadership talent is in short supply, the desire for simple solutions is easy to understand. But there is a difference between simple and simplistic. And that’s my main problem with much of the popular fascination with strengths: Proponents of a strengths-only approach often offer empty promises and oversimplifications for addressing talent problems. As if labeling bad people-skills a “lesser strength” will neutralize the demoralizing effect a leader’s boorish behavior has on employees.

My alarm first went off at a 2001 conference. In his keynote address, a leading spokesperson for the strengths movement made an impassioned case for focusing on strengths rather than fixing weaknesses. His major claim was that people don’t change very much, that scientific research had shown that the human brain is pretty much formed in early childhood. But I had been keeping up with neuroscience research, and the key discovery of the 1990s was neuroplasticity—how the structure and function of the brain actually continue to grow and change across the lifespan. It made me

## **It turns out that there is no published research in a peer-reviewed source showing that developing strengths leads to better performance than fixing weaknesses. Forget the hype, anecdotes, and self-published white papers. Not a single, objective scientific study supports the position.**

wonder just how much “research” support there really was for the strengths movement.

It turns out that there is no published research in a peer-reviewed source showing that developing strengths leads to better performance than fixing weaknesses. Forget the hype, anecdotes, and self-published white papers. Not a single, objective scientific study supports the position. To the contrary, Professor Jon Haidt, a well-known positive psychologist and author of *The Happiness Hypothesis*, conducted a study to compare the two strategies. Two hundred and six research participants were given a strengths inventory; half of them then followed a regimen of activities to utilize and improve their top strength, and the other half focused on improving a relative weakness. At the end of the study, the only difference between the two groups was that those who focused on building their strengths enjoyed the developmental activities more.

There were no differences in the two groups across nine other outcome variables, ranging from self-esteem, health, moods, and well-being. The study also did not report any differences in performance or skill development. The conclusion was summed up nicely in the title of the research article: “It’s More Fun to Work on Strengths than Weaknesses (but it May not be Better for You).”

That feel-good aspect probably has a lot to do with the popularity of the strengths movement: It’s an easy sell. On the one hand, managers are drawn to it because it lets them off the hook for their shortcomings and encourages them instead to focus on what comes easy and is personally enjoyable. On the other hand, it gives development professionals permission to avoid confronting managers with their performance problems or nudging them out of their comfort zones and into new and uncertain territory.

There is a world of difference, however, between an easy and enjoyable solution and an effective solution. The truth is a strengths-only approach is naively simplistic and ignores a mountain of research on how managers learn to become better leaders. It also neglects all the research about how and why leaders get derailed in their careers.

First, the obvious: Weaknesses matter. Focusing on strengths and neglecting weaknesses might work for a specialist seeking to become the best in her area of expertise, but leadership is more of a generalist position. The many roles and requirements of leadership are not elective and if managers can’t or won’t perform them, organizational performance will suffer. The usual solution proffered by advocates of the strengths approach is to staff around weaknesses, but this is unrealistic. The

number one reason for executive derailment is relationship problems. Can you really appoint someone else the role of soothing the bruised feelings left in the wake of a brilliant business thinker who is strong with analysis and the hard side of management but is also abrasive and weak on the soft side? Ignoring weaknesses is both a lethal career strategy and a poor way to manage talent.

Moreover, the advice to staff around weaknesses is much harder than it sounds. People with complementary skill sets also often have divergent world views and value sets. Simply put, it is hard to respect and trust people who are very different from us. How much faith does the rough-around-the-edges analyst really have in the congenial people-person with a soft touch? Or how about the strategic visionary who struggles with the details and the functional expert who revels in them? They see business challenges from two very different points of view and usually prioritize things differently. This is not to say they can't learn to appreciate what the other person brings, but it takes a lot of time, effort, and success to get there. In my experience as an executive advisor, these arranged corporate marriages rarely live up to their potential.

Second, strengths can be a mixed blessing. Again, the work on derailment is relevant. A key lesson from this research is that strengths can become weaknesses when overused. For instance, we have all seen technical experts get mired in the minutia, unable to see the big picture and think strategically. Or consider the other classic example: aggressive, hard-chargers who come on too strong to the point of being overbearing and hard to take. In fact, in our research, we found that leaders were five times more likely to overdo behaviors related to their areas of natural talent. For instance, managers with "command" talent overdid forceful leadership; those with "harmonizer" talent overdid

enabling leadership; those with "discipline" talent overdid operational leadership.

Encouraging leaders to maximize their strengths plays into this all-too-human tendency and actually encourages overuse and misapplication of those strengths, often to the neglect of complementary skills and perspectives. This creates one-dimensional leaders with limited toolkits. The bigger their hammers, the more everything looks like a nail. Our research on versatility, however, shows clearly that one size doesn't fit all. Compared to leaders who rely on a limited number of strengths, those leaders who use a blend of forceful, enabling, strategic, and operational behaviors have higher performing teams and business units and are rated higher

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by their bosses, peers, and employees. The most effective leaders are not the ones who build a career around a few standout strengths but rather the ones who develop the broad perspective and wide repertoire needed to influence diverse constituents and handle an array of challenges.

Finally, playing to strengths can inhibit learning and development. Mike Lombardo, who did much of the seminal research for the Center for Creative Leadership on the lessons of experience and derailment, calls continuous learning the closest thing to a "silver bullet." Dealing with the unknown, untested, and untried and learning how to do what you don't know how to do is the key to success, especially in a world defined by rapid and persistent change. This is also undermined by playing to strengths.

Exploiting someone's strengths by repeatedly  
*(continued on page 33)*

*(Strengths continued from page 14)*

assigning the person to one type of job (for instance, a “fix-it” manager for turnaround situations) robs the individual of the opportunity to stretch and grow. Playing to strengths has a short-term benefit—managers capitalize on their extensive knowledge and well-honed skills. But easily overlooked is the long-term cost: missing out on the variety of job experiences needed to develop a well-rounded leader.

Basing a career around a few strengths is career limiting. The key idea behind the leadership-pipeline model is that the managerial job changes as you climb the corporate ladder. Trading on the technical expertise and strong people-skills that brought success in middle management at the expense of building up strategic thinking skills, business sense, and political savvy is a recipe for derailment at the top.

At every upward transition in a successful career, managers must confront the triple challenge of letting go of those skills that are no longer relevant, adding on those that now are, and refining those that continue to be. The strengths approach, with its emphasis on deep and narrow development, addresses the third challenge but neglects the first two, which are at the heart of adaptability.

To be sure, getting stuck in a rut dwelling on your weaknesses will not make you a great leader. At the same time, when practiced with a single-minded focus, the strengths approach can become a self-limiting exercise in short-term self-indulgence. It emphasizes what comes easy for you, what you enjoy doing, and what will bring you fulfillment. Ignored is what the organization needs from the position that your job is designed to provide, and what you will need to ensure continued mobility and career success.

Let me be clear: I have no problem with the

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notion of building on strength, and I agree wholeheartedly that greatness comes from natural talent shaped by concentrated effort and practice. I also agree, like a long line of human-development professionals going back at least to the 1950s, that the field tends to fixate on problems and correcting weaknesses. But trading one incomplete view—a deficit model focused on fixing weaknesses—for another incomplete view—a myopic obsession with strengths—will not advance practice.

The pendulum swings as fads and fashions come and go, but good practice usually involves a mix of complementary ideas. Unfortunately, absurdly simplistic views reduce this inherent complexity to wishful thinking and risk hobbling an organization in the race to build bench strength. A better approach to talent management recognizes that both strengths and weaknesses have an appropriate place in learning and development and the goal is to build versatile leaders who are able to engage people and lead them through the changes and challenges that define the modern operating environment. **TQ**