

## Chapter One

# Think Volume Control

## *Don't Overuse Your Strengths*

"A man must . . . stand in some terror of his talents.  
A transcendent talent draws so largely on his forces  
as to lame him."

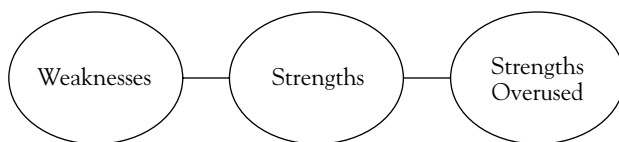
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

"What comes over a man, is it soul or mind,  
That no limits and bounds can he stay confined?"

—Robert Frost

We have all seen leaders go to counterproductive extremes: when devotion to consensus-seeking slows decision making to a crawl, when a leader's fertile mind results in repeated changes in direction, when a dedication to high-quality work turns a supervisor into a stickler for detail, when keen consideration for others degenerates into ineffectual niceness, when a willingness to go the extra mile leads to burnout. Yet somehow the fact of strengths overused does not have the same grip on leaders and assessment-and-development specialists that deficiencies have.

Consider the widely used phrase, "strengths and weaknesses." Since a weakness is a lack of strength, where in that construction is there a place for the overuse of strengths? Its hazy place in our language is matched by its tenuous position in leadership development. In most modern organizations, leaders have a much better chance of being assessed for, and getting help with, their deficiencies than their excesses.<sup>1</sup> Let's start by making room in the conception of an individual's positives and negatives for strengths overused (Figure 1.1).

**Figure 1.1. “Strengths and Weaknesses” Redefined**

Consider the case of a gifted senior manager I know well (actually, he's several individuals rolled into one here).

### **Rich Spire, Exemplary in So Many Ways**

Rich Spire has “leader” written all over him. He embodies everything that the word has come to mean in the business world. Leader, as opposed to manager. Someone who spearheads large-scale strategic change. As president of a sector of a large, fast-growing technology company, Rich possesses a stunning set of interlocking strengths.

One, he has an excellent strategic brain. He's extremely intelligent and quite adept at identifying where in the coming few years the big opportunities are likely to emerge. He also has a firm grounding in the business and the industry. A peer commented: “What's unique about Rich is that he understands so well how the business works, how the pieces fit together. And he has a very good ability to see the business from a much more

strategic level, based on a very good sense of where the overall industry is going. So he knows how to position the organization.”

Two, he has no problem making big bold moves. No one would accuse him of being risk-averse or slow to make high-stakes decisions. Not rashly: his major decisions are carefully thought out.

Unsolicited praise came from someone on Rich Spire's team: “Clearly his strengths are intelligence, strategic thinking, hard work, dedication to the success of the company, his ability to communicate, his desire to be the lead guy.”

Three, he has a gift for exciting people with his vision, his forward-looking, innovative ideas of strengthening the organization's hand in the marketplace. The people around him fairly gushed about what the CEO called "an uncanny ability to communicate—he is enormously articulate." Rich is especially good in front of an audience. The CEO credited him with being "a commanding presence in front of a group of people." Someone two levels down from him had this praise for his presentation skills: "He's excellent on his feet—a great speaker." Another facet of his visionary leadership is that he describes what he sees not just in broad terms but, as someone on his staff said, "with enough color and granularity that people can grasp onto their portion of the vision."

Four, he is a natural leader. Part of it is that he has an animal energy that is palpable to the people around him. "His eyes dance," someone said. Blessed with abundant leadership presence, there's an electric quality to him even when he isn't saying anything. A long-time lieutenant said about him: "He has a big presence, carries a lot of power, and people respond to power." Rich naturally takes the lead. When the game is on the line, he wants the ball in his hands. And he is "a great persuader," his lieutenant went on to say. "He can sell you anything. Not just goods and services but his viewpoints and ideas. He's an extremely persuasive fellow."

Five, he is an impact player who doesn't just strategize; he sees to it that strategy is turned into action. A peer running another sector had to hand it to him: "Despite the fact that we've had disagreements and differences of approach, he is a force for change for the better in the company. In short order he's totally revamped his division's go-to-market strategy and reoriented research and development to be tied

One of Rich Spire's direct reports said: "Every once in a while you run across a leader—and I've had only a couple—who is really able to inspire you and make you really work at your best. He can get you to make that extra effort and feel like it is good to do."

much more closely to the commercial side.” Everyone who had input to his assessment credited him with a bias for implementation. A lieutenant said: “He’s a driver, he makes things happen, he makes people follow him, and he doesn’t know failure and therefore he doesn’t fail.”

Other people, talented in their own right, are given to making glowing statements about him overall. Someone on his staff said: “In the twenty-five years I’ve been bumping into executives, he is one of the best I’ve ever run into.” And another: “He has more potential than anyone I know. Huge talent—intelligence, instincts, experience, strategic insight. He grasps the problem perfectly. He can deal with people. And it’s all wrapped up in a charismatic package.”

How could there be anything wrong with this impressive picture?

### ***Rich Spire’s Blind Spots***

Rich had only two liabilities, and both resulted from taking a considerable strength too far. One, as is often the case with natural leaders, he suffers the downsides of exercising power so readily. Second, his penchant for bold strategic action exceeds his organization’s capacity to keep up.

Just as power comes naturally to Rich Spire, so too he uses it too freely. The good news is that he is a strong leader, and that is the bad news too. In meetings he is too quick to state his position. He hasn’t learned to let other people offer their views first. “His default mode is to take the lead unless you wrest it away from him,” said a member of his staff.

As you might expect, his overly forceful ways have a dampening effect on his team and his organization. One subordinate voiced the concern that “his autocratic style kept him from getting the full story because he assumes he already knows the answer.” Yes, some of the people on his team have accommodated to his “style.” They have learned to stand up to him. They have learned that if you come back with facts you can change his mind. When he is hypercritical, they manage not to take it personally. But not everyone is

so fortunate. Someone two levels down from him reported, “If you don’t have the personality to deal with his strong personality or you don’t know him well, then there’s a tendency to be quiet and go sit in the corner.” In one-on-one’s with Rich, one dazzlingly astute, articulate man on his team literally became tongue-tied.

Remarkably, this was a blind spot. Rich was oblivious to his own power and impact. Hard to believe that someone who fairly bristles with personal power could be oblivious to that. Even when someone made the occasional remark, though, he couldn’t relate to it. For reasons of his upbringing, he actually had the opposite concern: he worried about not being powerful enough.

As to bold moves, Rich has always wanted to make a big splash, has always wanted to make the larger-than-life contribution. As a baseball player in Little League and right through college, he had swung for the fences. Home runs thrilled him. He loved trotting around the bases to sustained applause. A singles hitter he was not. A sacrifice bunt to move a teammate on first base into scoring position was completely absent from his repertoire. He admits he struck out a lot and could have hit for a higher average. But that was a price he was willing to pay.

In his forties, the same raw competitive instinct animates his leadership. He is not content to inch up his organization’s position in the marketplace. He wants to gain ground quickly. He wants to score big, impressive wins. The CFO observed: “Rich wants to make the aggressive move and capture territory. It’s useful to have vision, but he needs to implement it in a more measured way.” The historian Paul Kennedy calls this overstretch, a major reason for the decline of empires.<sup>2</sup> The CFO put it this way: “His vision outstripped our internal capacity. His strategic reach was too great to be executed with the bench strength we had.”

This was a blind spot too. Although he respected the CFO, whom he had selected, Rich had trouble taking his concerns about his strategic ambitions seriously. He couldn’t see how there could be anything wrong with being an aggressive expansionist in a growth industry.

This is where his two blind spots came together to put the organization at risk. By being far too bullish, for example, he made a major forecasting error, over the CFO's objections, in this case never fully voiced. Facing into the headwind of Rich's forceful personality and his voracious appetite to have an outsized impact, some people on his team gave up trying to influence him. Not that it was impossible to do. It just wasn't worth it. "It takes too much emotional energy to keep confronting this guy," they'd say, throwing up their hands, "and he isn't going to listen anyway."

### The Many Faces of Overkill

Whether public figures or middle managers toiling far from the public eye, people in leadership positions are notorious for overdoing it.

Take a historical figure like Napoleon, a brilliant field general, who conquered most of Europe. Driven by a conviction that "a great reputation is a great noise and the more that is made, the farther off it is heard," he didn't know when to stop. In the end, the people of France cried out, "Assez de Napoleon!" [Enough of Napoleon!].<sup>3</sup>

In literature Ahab in *Moby Dick* offers a blatant instance of overkill. Early in the novel, Stubb, the third mate, respectfully asks Ahab, the ship captain, to be considerate of those sleeping below because as Ahab paces the deck, his ivory peg leg makes an incessant tapping noise. Ahab dismisses this reasonable request and to boot hurls an insult: "Down, dog, and kennel!"

Stunned, Stubb gamely tries to stand his ground: "I am not used to be spoken to that way, sir. I do but less than half like it, sir."

Ahab, while showering abuse, now lunges at him so violently that Stubb involuntarily retreats.

As he goes below deck, Stubb struggles to recover his dignity: "What the devil's the matter with me? I don't stand right on my legs? Coming afoul of that old man has sort of turned me wrong side out."

This is the first of three explosive encounters that get touched off when a mate persists in trying to influence Ahab on an important point. Each time Ahab does far too good a job of sticking to his position and guarding his prerogatives. In the second and third episodes,

as the stakes climb higher and higher, it is the first mate, Starbuck, who strives mightily to keep Ahab from going overboard.

In business, scandalous instances of the worst excesses are not uncommon. The former CEO of Tyco International, Dennis Koslowski, repeatedly crossed lines, ethical and legal.

At the time of this writing, he and Mark Swartz, the former CFO, were each found guilty of twenty-two counts of grand larceny and other charges for, among other things, awarding themselves \$143 million in compensation that was not authorized by the board of directors. They took the normal motivation to make money to a grossly distorted extreme.

The root of the word “evil,” which to my taste is used too loosely, derives from an ancient Teutonic word, *ubiloȝ*, that means “up” or “over,” in the sense of overstepping one’s bounds.

### Leadership Effectiveness—Skirting Deficiency and Excess

Even though overkill is big as life, it is somehow the forgotten child of leadership performance. A simple, practical way of thinking about performance makes a place for it. In this view, performing well is adjusting a given leadership skill to the right level for the situation, neither too low nor too high. Some individuals perpetually talk too loudly on cell phones or in conversations on an airplane or in a restaurant. Other people are chronically soft-spoken in a meeting with a large group of people or against a car’s background noise. You have to strain to hear them. Effective speakers know how to modulate their voices so the volume is neither too high nor too low for fellow participants or for bystanders.

In the words of one manager: “It is useful for me to think that a strength overused can be as ineffective as a strength underused. In other words, overusing a strength is underperformance.”

The idea of getting the volume right applies to practically any dimension of leadership—being detail-oriented, focusing on the big picture, being directive, being open to influence—you name it. The concept of adjusting the volume goes all the way back to Aristotle, who postulated that what is good, virtuous, and effective in thought and action is the mid-point between deficiency and excess.<sup>4</sup> His notion of what it means to be good in a moral sense or to be good at something was anything but static. As he stated in his *Ethics*, the mid-point or right amount varies with the circumstances. It is a moving target. In the practice of leadership you must continually adjust the setting of any attribute to the level that fits the circumstances immediately at hand. You must continually navigate the straits of leadership, steering clear of the shoals of deficiency on one side and the rocks of excess on the other.

Aristotle's precept has mistakenly been taken to mean moderation in all things. Popularized as the "golden mean," it is a serious misreading of his thinking, a bastardization of it. What he called for was a response *proportionate* to the situation. In other words, turning the volume way up is the right amount when the situation calls for that. A mother who yells at the top of her lungs when her small child is about to chase a ball into a street where cars are passing has followed Aristotle's advice perfectly.

Going all out is frequently the only way to go. Rich Spire's boss applauded him for "taking over completely in a business crisis." Even great sacrifice is laudable when that's what the situation requires. Necessary losses may be brutally high. Machiavelli, who advised a prince to use force if that is what it took to lift a city state out of chaos, believed in committing only necessary harm. The trouble comes when, in whatever respect, you go too far, even for an extreme situation. The trouble comes when the losses are not necessary, when the price paid is much higher than it needs to be. It behooves all of us, even *in extremis*, to stay on the right side of the line, however far out it extends.



Parents who constantly yell at their kids over nothing are going too far. Likewise, Rich Spire confessed that, in meetings, “I jump in with both hands and both feet because I only have one speed.” The idea is to avoid having your behavior stuck at one setting. Just as a parent’s challenge is to raise his or her voice only when it is necessary, your challenge as a leader is to avoid habitually falling short of the mark on key leadership dimensions and likewise to avoid regularly overshooting the mark.

Nothing is enough for the person for whom enough is too little.

### **Assessing and Addressing Overused Strengths: Rich Spire’s Blind Spots Live On**

You might think that leaders who have a “development physical” could count on getting checked out for overkill. Is it not fair to expect a leadership assessment to indicate whether the reading on any important index is dangerously elevated? After all, like high blood pressure, going too far is a silent killer. But, in what makes for a curious disconnect between common knowledge and formal measures of leadership, standard assessment tools don’t capture excess.<sup>5</sup>

How has a basic truth about leadership eluded formal systems used to select leaders, evaluate their performance on the job or identify their areas for improvement?<sup>7</sup> The

A manager who read the recent article Rob Kaiser and I published in *Sloan Management Review*<sup>6</sup> surprised me by saying: “When I first read your article it was unsettling. It was the overdoing aspect. We managers spend so much of our time on development but we spend little time on strengths overused. It was chilling. I really mean that. I said to myself, I have work to do.”

explanation for this omission is, in part, purely mechanical. The rating scales most often used in assessment tools aren't designed to identify overuse.<sup>8</sup> Take the most common rating scheme, the frequency scale (how often. . . ?; to what extent. . . ?).

On a 360-degree survey that used a frequency scale, Rich Spire received a very high rating on "Comfortable with the power of the managerial role." That told him what? That he does it a lot. It did not, however, indicate that he does it too much. Likewise, his score on "Grows the business" hit the top end of the rating scale and could only leave the impression that he performed that function well. Rich Spire was in the dark with respect to using power and setting strategic goals, and the assessment tool left him in the dark.

That's the limitation of this type of scale. The highest rating, a 5, doesn't distinguish between doing a heck of a lot and doing too much. Exhibit 1.1 at the end of this chapter goes into detail on this rating scale and another frequently used one, the evaluation scale.<sup>9</sup>

If you have received feedback on a questionnaire that employs a frequency rating scale, take another look at those items on which you received ratings of 5 or close to it and ask yourself whether in any of those cases "a lot" could also mean "too much." For some managers this is a mind-bending exercise. They hadn't thought that way about high scores. Somehow, even though in the backs of their minds they know better, they have slipped into a point of view that says a 5 is an A. Why not: when 2s or 3s are bad scores, it is only logical that high numbers are good scores. One individual who got a perfect 5 on "Drives hard to meet organizational commitments" cried out, "I'd be happy if I got a 10 on this! I don't see how a high score could be a problem." The people who work for her might see it differently. Has she made impossible demands on them? Has she left bodies in her wake?

It is interesting that managers as well as specialists in leadership assessment and development (for a good long time myself included) unwittingly go along with the tacit assumption that on this ubiquitous rating scale higher scores are better.

This little-noticed failure to detect excess is indicative. It is further evidence that the idea of strengths overused hasn't taken root

in formal models of leadership or in formal methods for assessing and developing managers.

### Lopsidedness, Excess in Another Form

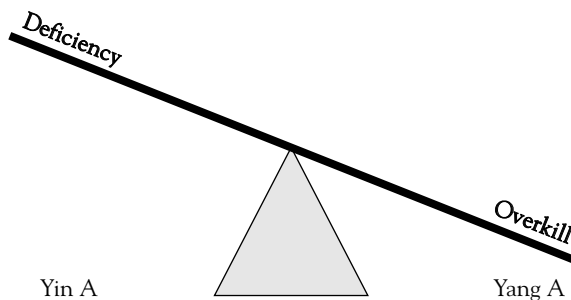
For every excess in your repertoire, there may well be a corresponding deficiency. You may not see the connection, but look behind you: in doing too much of one thing, seesaw-like, you might just be doing too little of the opposing, complementary thing. This is lopsidedness, with excess nested within it (see Figure 1.2).

This is lopsidedness, excess in another form.

The root of “complement” is “to fill.” The complementary function fills out the other. Together they make a whole. The problem with excess on one side is that it so often comes at the expense of the other side.

Lopsided was originally a nautical term. To “lop” is to lean. Years ago when boats were made by hand, all eyes were on a new boat as it was launched. It would not do for it to lean to one side. Likewise, you know a leader is in trouble if, metaphorically speaking, walking or standing he or she is not upright.

**Figure 1.2. Lopsidedness**



Rich Spire isn't just too aggressive strategically. He also neglects the operational counterpart of strategic leadership, which is to make sure that the organization has the capacity to absorb the rapid growth. Earlier I quoted his CFO as saying that Rich's instinct is to grab strategic ground. The CFO went on to say, "It's useful to have an expansive vision but let's make sure we execute in a measured way so it won't just be a flash of light and burn out." Rich was so caught up in his strategic aspirations that he lost sight of the execution issues, the capacity issues. It is more accurate to say that the one was writ large in his mind and the other appeared in small letters in the back of his mind. (See Table 1.1.)

Rich was also lopsided on the forceful-enabling opposition. Just as he went too far in his use of power, he did not make it easy for other people to influence him. The intellectual firepower, the charisma, the personal power that emanated from him all came together to make it an uphill struggle for many people attempting to hold their own in a conversation with him. A member of his team put it this way: "I think he stakes out his positions too early. Because what happens is that people then want to be in agreement with him, as opposed to bringing their best thinking. So it would be better if he disguised his opinions, especially for people who don't know him well. But beyond that, he needs to get much better at asking questions—elicit what you're thinking versus tell you what he's thinking: 'Tell me how that's going; tell me what's on your mind; tell me what our approach should be,' so the approach becomes, 'Let's figure it out' versus 'Here's what I think you should do.'" But guarding the potency of others was not at the top his mind, nor was enabling others to bring their "A game." And it didn't help that he had no idea how powerful he was.

**Table 1.1. Lopsidedness in Rich Spire**

<i>Excess</i>	<i>Corresponding Deficiency</i>
Overly expansive strategically	Inattentive to the limits on his organization's capacity to grow
Too big on pushing	Difficult to influence

Rich Spire's lopsidedness pales by comparison to that of the cast of wildly overreaching executives at Enron in the 1990s. Of course, their excesses and accompanying deficiencies were abetted by the company's lack of checks and balances and by the failure of top management to install or enforce control mechanisms.<sup>10</sup> For example:

- Jeffrey Skilling, first the head of the trading operation and later the president of Enron, was a visionary risk-taker to a fault. He came up with business schemes that transformed Enron as well as the oil and gas industry, but his ability to implement was lacking and, when his brilliant theories collided with practical reality, theory won out.
- Rebecca Mark, a gifted, glamorous, and extraordinarily hard-working senior manager, brought an over-the-top can-do attitude to the job of heading Enron International, which struck deals to build pipelines and power plants in developing countries. Her optimism knew no bounds and, as time went on, her decisions on big deals in unstable locales came to be based less on facts and analysis than on her gut feel.

Enron might have survived the lopsidedness of hyperdriven senior leaders like Skilling and Mark if the CEO, Ken Lay, had reined them in. But increasingly Lay, lopsided in his own right, was an absentee landlord caught up in celebrity-seeking. And he favored doling out grossly lavish pay packages over enduring the unpleasantness of telling anyone no. So Skilling was allowed to introduce an accounting method that allowed the trading business to put a long-term contract's revenue on the books at the time the contract was signed. And Mark was allowed to use a compensation structure that paid her and her team a not-small percentage of the project's expected income as soon as the deal was done. No wonder Enron International rushed from deal to deal and did a spotty job of following through on projects.<sup>11</sup>

The chief operating officer, Rich Kinder, disciplined, focused on implementation, hardnosed to a fault, himself lopsided, filled in

Lay's gaps and acted as a hedge against the overheated ambitions of the folks around him. But Kinder left the company when Lay decided not to make him CEO.

Cases of lopsided leaders like those at Enron and like Rich Spire abound. In addition, our research has found statistical evidence, reported in Chapters 5 and 6, of the high incidence of lopsidedness in the managerial population.

Despite the prevalence of lopsidedness, leaders aren't assessed for it for the same reason that they are not assessed for overkill. Standard assessment tools are not designed to pick it up. There is also a second reason, coming up in Chapter 2.

### **Versatility, the Virtuous Flip Side of Lopsidedness**

What is also not measured by standard assessment methods is lopsidedness' virtuous counterpart, *versatility*, the ability to turn, as needed, from side to side on a pair of opposing leadership virtues. To do so means recognizing that both dimensions are good, desirable, and necessary. Work life *and* personal life: they're both important. Making decisions on the basis of full information and careful analysis *and* making decisions in a timely manner: they're both important. Being a thought leader *and* creating conditions for other people to exercise thought leadership: both are highly desirable. To be versatile is to draw on each side to the right degree for the situation.

What distinguishes versatile leaders is that they experience no contradiction between the opposing sides of a pair of leadership virtues. They see them as yin and yang. They can, and do, draw freely on either side as the occasion warrants.

Leadership is like basketball. The best players can go to the basket with either hand.

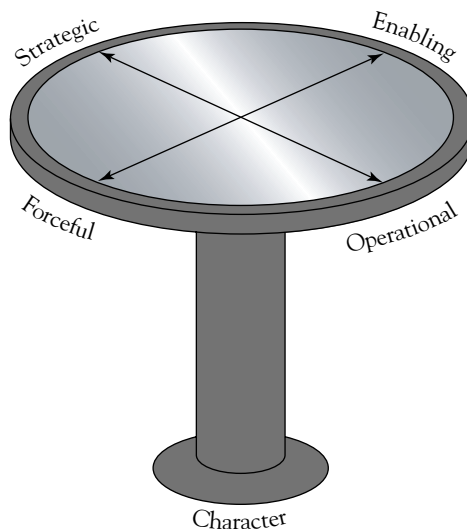
To be multi-versatile is to function effectively on both ends of multiple oppositions in leadership. For the purposes of this book there are two: (1) strategic and operational leadership and (2) forceful and

enabling leadership. As the “table model” in Figure 1.3 suggests, when your leadership behavior does justice to both sides of both pairs, it’s because that capability rests on a firm personal base. When the base is wobbly, the table’s surface tips to one side or another.

To paraphrase F. Scott Fitzgerald, the sign of a first-rate leader is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in your head at the same time and still be able to function. As a practical matter, being intelligent in this dialectical way comes down to not placing excessive weight on one of the two ideas, not overusing your strength on that side. And to accomplish that requires that you resist the temptation of a more-is-better mentality.

As it stands, leaders like Rich Spire are implicitly encouraged in the notion that more is better. The best that standard assessment tools can do for him is identify his deficiencies. He would have to look elsewhere to learn how his gifts turn into too much of a good thing.

**Figure 1.3. A Table Model of Leadership**



## Developing Yourself, Coaching Others

### *Highlights*

1. Overdoing strengths is many a leader's undoing. Overused strengths pose no less a performance problem than weaknesses.
2. Overuse is overlooked, as is lopsidedness, which is overuse in another form. Most assessment tools don't have a way of detecting strengths overused or lopsidedness.
3. Your organization may be inadvertently breeding a more-is-better mentality in leaders. By not building into its performance evaluation system a means of assessing for overuse, a check against excess, the organization inadvertently colludes with leaders who go overboard.
4. Think volume control. The idea is to get the "volume" right, for example, neither pushing too hard nor not hard enough.
5. Aspire to versatility in the two-sided sense. More than having a wide repertoire, versatility is being good at both sides of a given yin-and-yang of leadership, for example, direct and sensitive to people's feelings. It's good to be good at both, but not too good at either.

### *Questions for Reflection*

1. Do you over-rely on any of your tried-and-true methods to the point where they don't fit the situation?
2. Take another look at the high scores on your 360-degree feedback. Could any of the high scores mask the fact that you go overboard in that area?



3. Have you noticed yourself assuming, as you fill out a leadership survey with a “how much” or “how often” rating scale, that since a low score isn’t good that a high score must be best?
4. Do you try as hard not to be excessive as you do not to be deficient?
5. Are you an equal-opportunity supervisor? Do you give each staff member’s excesses the attention they deserve?

**Exhibit 1.1. Rating Scales and Evaluation Scales**

Let's see how well standard assessment tools pick up Rich Spire's blatant overdoing.

An assessment tool's ability to identify overdoing hinges on its rating scale. One of the most common, a frequency scale, typically ranges from "1" to "5," as shown below:

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all	Once in a while	Sometimes	Fairly often	Frequently, if not always

Let's use this scale to assess Rich Spire on the questionnaire item, "Takes stands," a most basic managerial function. It probably goes without saying that most of his coworkers would give him a high score, probably a 5. The question is: What does a "5" tell us (or him for that matter)? Only that he takes stands a great deal of the time but *not* that he does too many of them. A top score of 5 on this scale is misleading. If only the scale kept going! It falls down by making the implicit, if inadvertent, assumption that more is better.

Let's try the also widely used evaluation scale, an example of which appears below:

1	2	3	4	5
Ineffective	Somewhat effective	Effective	Very effective	Outstanding

On this scale Rich would probably receive a rating on "taking stands" toward the low end of the scale—let's say a "2." Again the question is: What does the score indicate? Only that he doesn't do it very well, but *not* that the reason for that is that he takes it to an extreme. The low score is ambiguous: it could mean he doesn't do enough of it or that he does too much of it.

Neither of these standard scales, then, picks up overdoing. Remarkably, this is true of the leadership field in general. The

questionnaire-style nets that are cast in search of an individual's managerial strengths and weaknesses don't do a good job of capturing this type of fish. Leadership assessment has ways of working around the limitations of rating scales. Negatively worded items, for example, "Abrasive" or "Overly focused on short-term results," get at overkill, but that's catch-as-catch-can. Verbal descriptions will pick it up too, but again not in a disciplined way.

