Is strengths based development weakening your talent pipeline?

a practical way forward for leadership wisdom

> *It's no surprise that the strengths-based approach gained its popularity amid the self serving decadence and delusional optimism that spun the global economy out of control.*

Rob Kaiser

Overview

Strengths based development is rapidly becoming the dominant paradigm for leadership development. At one level its appeal is powerful, and the benefits shouldn't be ignored. At another level, it may be a simplistic response to a complex set of issues, and in the process creating a new set of problems. Specifically:

- a leadership complacency that stays within the comfort zone and lacks the **versatility** to lead in an uncertain world
- a generation of leaders without the judgement and **wisdom** to make sense of the fuzziness of leadership life
- a leadership group which is vulnerable to challenge and adversity, lacking the **resilience** to adapt and redeploy its efforts to changing circumstances
- a **narrowness** of leadership outlook and homogeneity at senior levels which is holding back an agenda of greater diversity

For the most part, playing to strengths is sensible advice, but this philosophy needs to be positioned within an overall talent management strategy. For **some individuals in some organisations**, strengths based development is probably an efficient way to accelerate their leadership progression. For other firms, a reliance on this philosophy is hazardous, likely to weaken their overall bench strength.

This short article summarises the issues of an emerging debate to help you rethink your leadership development strategy and how you balance a strengths based perspective within the practical activities of recruitment, performance management and succession planning.

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The context

Nothing of course is new[1]. But Gallup's publication of "First Break the Rules: What The World's Greatest Managers Do" and Marcus Buckingham's "Now Discover Your Strengths" emphasised a shift in thinking. The idea resonated with a generation of talent managers, leadership developers and executive coaches, connecting as it did with the emerging positive psychology movement of the late 1990s.

Take up was rapid. Strengths-based development became incorporated within recruitment criteria and decision making processes, performance management reviews, the design of development centres and leadership programmes, and the tone of coaching conversations.

The position can be summarised as:

- our talents are pretty much hard-wired so don't expect too much change
- attempting to fix our weaknesses is hard work with limited returns
- it is our strengths that have the leverage to move us to exceptional levels of performance
- recruit, develop and manage around employee strengths to build an excellent organisation

> *We wrote this book to start a revolution, the strengths revolution.*
>
> Marcus Buckingham

[1] Arguably the StrengthsFinder and Values in Actions products are a rediscovery of the language of virtues, popularised by the ancient Greeks, but without the nuances of the original thinking

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Why this perspective is powerful

Intuitively most effective leaders recognise the limitations of human nature and personal change, and the need for robust recruitment and insightful and targeted development. But the Gallup message was an important reminder for organisations:

- praise usually works better than punishment
- celebrate successes rather than simply complain about shortcomings
- don't take others for granted; acknowledge the pluses rather than over play the minuses
- direct time to your best people; don't let the under achievers distort your priorities
- stop attempting to fix what is unfixable and build on established talents

And for individuals:

- don't beat yourself up about what you can't do; appreciate what you can do and find ways to do more of it
- leverage your talents to develop the level of proficiency that will move you into the zone of excellence
- find a career that allows you to give of your best and draw on your strengths

> *The revolutionary insight common to great managers: people don't change that much; don't waste time trying to put in what was left out; try to draw out what was left in; this is hard enough.*

M Buckingham & C Coffman

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Emerging problems with strengths based development

The strengths-based perspective was intended to be a paradigm shift and a fundamental rethink in how we manage processes for recruitment (identify strengths), performance (plan and coach on strengths) and talent planning (progress on strengths).

As always in life, for every action there is a reaction.

One reviewer on Amazon pointed out mildly that the evidence base was looking a bit light, largely limited to Gallup's internal programmes and not subject to the rigour of peer reviewed research. As Carl Sagan observed: "big claims require big evidence".

In 2004, in "Positive Psychology in Practice", the Gallup team announced a blossoming of research studies. But the evidence for strengths-based development isn't appearing in mainstream publications at the same rate as the marketing hype.

And a spate of articles, blogs and books, most notably, "The Perils of Accentuating the Positive" indicated that all is not well in the world of strengths-based development.

More recently, one critic[1] turned up the heat to suggest the strengths-based movement was responsible for the leadership follies and excesses of the economic down turn: **"I am convinced that strengths-based leadership is a US bred contagion with negative implications for global business."**

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The emerging problems for strength-based development:

- it doesn't reflect leadership reality
- strengths are relative never absolute
- it ignores the vices of virtues
- it forgets that versatility is the name of the game
- it undermines the kind of resilience that overcomes adversity
- it makes the diversity agenda more difficult

[1] "Did our strengths lead us to this point of weakness" Randall White, Business Leadership Review, 2009

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Problem 1: it's not leadership reality

Play to your strengths is a strategy that, like other life philosophies, is great in principle but breaks down in the complexities and uncertainties of real life.

For individuals operating in narrowly defined roles in stable operating environments, play to your strengths is probably the best game in town. Here it makes sense to keep extending our levels of current expertise and skill and practice to the point of perfection. This is obvious.

But "play to your strengths" may not be the best guide for leaders who are faced with the pressing reality of "stuff". Stuff - the mess of events - can't be classified easily into the categories of "do it: it plays to my strengths" and "don't do it: it might expose my shortcomings".

If I don't have a signature theme in Empathy, how do I respond to a recently bereaved member of staff? Delegate concern and care? Or if my talents are limited in Inclusiveness, do I ignore the organisational agenda for improving diversity?

The strengths-based movement assumes a very different world to the one in which leaders operate: a world of stuff that has to be tackled and resolved.

> *The trouble is that management is like the decathlon, with a lot of events, and if someone is strong in eight events, but weak in two, that person will not succeed.*
>
> Brad Smart

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Problem 2: strengths are relative never absolute

"In the country of the blind, the one eyed man is king."

It isn't always clear how the strengths-based philosophy defines strengths and weaknesses. Strengths are "consistent near perfect performance in any activity" and weaknesses are "anything that gets in the way of excellent performance".

Pretty loose definitions, and what is missing is a sense of context, and an appreciation that success is always relative, played out in the context of others' strengths and weaknesses, the specific dynamics of the situation, and how important specific strengths are to the organisation.

The StrengthsFinder assessment might indicate my talent in Futuristic is at the 70th percentile. But if I'm working in a team of super-charged strategic thinkers, my strength is unlikely to be an asset.

Or if I lack a strength in Positivity, but my score is higher than the rest of my demoralised colleagues, perhaps as the Law of Comparative Advantage indicates, I can make a virtue of my relative shortcoming.

And if I'm high on the signature theme of Analytical, but this is becoming less important to my profession or sector (e.g. because of technological innovation), it isn't an asset. Even worse, it becomes a liability as I hold on to my "strength" in Analytical as the world around me is moving on.

Strengths are assets relative only to those of others, to the dynamics of the leadership situation, and within the market place of demand and supply. Strengths become liabilities when they are deployed at the wrong time or in the wrong way.

Wise leaders know this. This is leadership effectiveness as strategic self awareness, recognising the challenges of the task and judging when to push ahead based on current strengths and when to hold back because their "strengths" won't help.

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Problem 3: virtues have vices

Strengths draw on our talents. But human nature, being what it is, for every pro, there is a con, and for every gain, there is a drawback. Courage, for example, is a strength, and the absence of this virtue - cowardice - is a limitation. But over played, courage becomes the reckless boldness that is counter productive and damaging.

Just as organisations fail when they rely on the success formula that historically worked[1], leaders run into trouble when they assume their current strengths will always out trump their rivals. Strengths, over done, become the dynamics of derailment. Here the virtues of character can easily become the vices of caricature.

Executive coach Marshall Goldsmith points out: “the biggest reasons managers and executives fail is not because their strengths are not strong enough. It is because they were never fixed.”

Don Clifton, the Gallup pioneer of StrengthsFinder likes to tell the story of the Chinese table tennis coach.

“Here is our philosophy. If you develop your strengths to the maximum, the strength becomes so great it overwhelms the weakness. Our winning player plays only his forehand. Even though he cannot play backhand and his competitors know he cannot play background, his forehand is so invincible that it cannot be beaten.”

Leadership isn’t table tennis. In the world of leadership, no strength is invincible. Instead strengths incorporate the dynamics of weakness and failure.

[1] “Seduced By Success” Robert J Herbold

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Problem 3: virtues have vices

The strengths-based movement argue that “more is better.” Park, Peterson and Seligman suggest “if there is a concern about those who score extremely high on our character strengths, it should be reserved for those with too little of a strength.”

But maybe you can have too much of a good thing.

Hogan’s analysis of the dark side of leadership, Dotlich & Cairo’s study of CEO failure, and Finkelstein’s habits of unsuccessful people, and our own research[1] with executive selection firm Korn Ferry all point to the uncomfortable reality: strengths incorporate hazards. There are no leadership no-brainers; for each strength there is a shortcoming, and for every virtue, there is a potential vice.

Aristotle’s Golden Mean pointed the way to moderation, and the absence of excess. This isn’t moderation as mediocrity or blandness; this is moderation as walking the tight rope to balance the competing tensions of different leadership attributes and operating styles.

The stoics coined the term **antakolouthia** to highlight that “no virtue is a virtue by itself. True virtue requires the balancing of opposites.”

[1] “All in the Strategic Mind: the 8 Leadership Challenges every CEO should know about”

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Problem 4: versatility is the name of the game

Strengths based development focuses on excellence and the talents that will drive the level of proficiency that becomes exceptional performance. A focus on strengths is easy and that's part of its appeal. Its message is: "we've got too many challenges; we're being pulled in too many directions; stop doing so much to concentrate on what we do well" is reasonable advice for many leaders.

But as Jonathan Haidt found in his research, "it may be more fun to work on strengths but it might not be better for you"

In a world of uncertainty and complexity, strengths-based development may limit our leadership options. Bob Kaplan and Rob Kaiser argue in "The Versatile Leader" that a reliance on strengths produces a lopsided leadership outlook. And it is this lopsidedness that creates the blinkers that makes for poor strategic decision making and misguided implementation.

Versatility is that meta virtue that can deploy different leadership styles with the wisdom to know which is relevant to the challenges of the given situation.

"If the only tool we have is a hammer, every problem is a nail."

Strengths have the potential for excellence, they also have the potential to skew our overall leadership priorities in a particular direction. The challenges of leadership require a tool kit with a chisel, saw, plane, screw driver and lathe, not just a hammer. Versatility gives us the objectivity to read the situation and judge which tool will provide the most appropriate response to the task.

> *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.*
>
> Bob Kaplan and Rob Kaiser

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Problem 5: it makes it difficult to build resilience

Strengths development feels good. We get better as we practice. And our greater proficiency is rewarded, and we progress. And we keep repeating the same formula because it has worked for us.

But what happens when the rules of the game change?

What do we do if our leadership career has been built on the signature theme of Discipline when our organisation merges with a firm whose free wheeling and spontaneous culture is designed to encourage fast innovation not compliance against procedure?

How do we cope when our career success has centred on a talent in Harmony and we are asked to turn-around a department whose lack of business integrity has damaged the firm's reputation and financial performance?

A person of character finds a special attractiveness in difficulty, since it is only by coming to grips with difficulty that they can realize their potentialities.

Charles de Gaulle

Leadership is best judged in the face of challenge, struggle and adversity, not in the tranquillity and ease of the good times. In the burgeoning research on resilience, it is the dynamics of:

- courage and overcoming fear to take on difficult and demanding challenges
- confidence based on a breadth of life experience that can put issues into perspective
- versatility to call on different leadership styles
- coping strategies to draw on a repertoire of different tactics

that is key; not the reliance on the "one thing" of the strengths-based movement.

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Problem 6: it holds back a progressive agenda for diversity

> *The risk with the strength-based movement is that we create a leadership generation without the breadth of perspective and the repertoire of skills who can connect to the increasing diversity of our institutions and organisations to fully harness the potential of diversity.*

Professor Raman Bedi

At first sight the strengths-based philosophy seems well aligned to the agenda for greater diversity. Here the story runs: "we all have different strengths. Understanding and building on these strengths is the basis for celebrating our differences."

It's a good story, but not one that is evident in practice. Bob Eichinger, Guangrong Dai and King Yi Tang[1] hypothesised that a strengths based strategy would, rather than build greater diversity, create a more homogeneous organisation. And their research indicated that as individuals "hone their strengths the closer they move to a smaller group who had exactly the same strengths …everybody looked the same".

Homogeneity has its short-term benefits and the advantages of an immediacy of trust to speed up productivity. It also can create the kind of limited thinking that constrains creativity and flexibility of response in the longer run.

The strengths-based philosophy encourages us to develop expertise in specific areas. And in the process, by creating a narrowness of leadership outlook, it makes it more difficult to build that mind-set that is responsiveness to the diversity of our work colleagues.

[1] "The Perils of Accentuating the Positive"

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Strengths-based development: virtues and vices

The strengths-based movement has its **virtues**, not least the message that:

- outstanding talent makes a big difference and there is no steady incremental improvement from input to outcome. Instead there is a “tipping point” in which exceptional levels of proficiency drive outstanding results
- talents aren’t easily developable and building on what we can do is probably a better tactic than starting to fix what we can’t do
- organisations would be more successful if they encouraged a culture of praise and encouragement based on the positives rather than punishment of the negatives

Its **vices**:

- it’s better in principle than in reality; strengths-based approaches may be better suited to narrow technical or professional positions than to leadership roles of ambiguity and uncertainty
- it sets a leadership development agenda of specialisation rather than build the judgement, wisdom and versatility to tackle complexity and diversity
- it reinforces leadership complacency and runs the risk of career derailment

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An irony

It is an irony that the strengths-based movement is experiencing the dynamic in which its strengths are becoming short-comings. Like the leader who has focused on the “one thing” of the big strength, but become a caricature in the process, the strengths-based movement has over-played its hand and distorted priorities and practice in leadership development.

Oddly enough it is the leading advocate - Marcus Buckingham - who gave the game away.

Asked in an interview on the Today show if he had ever overcome a weakness, Buckingham said that as a child he stuttered. As a professional speaker, “addressing more than 250,000 people around the globe each year”, quite some weakness to have overcome.

What kind of career would he have had if he’d played to his strengths?

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Practical implications

If we believe our talent management philosophy, practice and processes have the potential to build sustainable success[1], what are the practical implications of the strengths-based debate for:

- recruitment?
- performance management?
- talent reviews and succession planning?

To square the circle we need to have a coherent model of the dynamics of leadership success, a blue print, to explain:

- why some leaders **emerge** as leaders and others don't
- why some leaders are **effective** and others struggle to make an impact
- why some leaders **sustain success** over time and others, despite their initial promise, derail

The AM Azure model of the Four Cs of leadership highlights the interplay of the factors of Credibility, Capability, Character and Career Management.

Drawing on a 360° feedback database of over 50,000 responses from individuals, their managers, peers, team members and stakeholders, Four C Leadership provides a robust evaluation with supporting on line resource to identify:

- gaps in the leadership repertoire that can and should be filled
- ways of building on existing strengths to move from effectiveness to excellence
- tactics to minimise the hazards of over-doing it

> *The most brilliant qualities become useless when they are not sustained by force of character.*
>
> Joseph Alexandre Pierre, Vicomte de Segur

[1] "10 Years On: Succession Management, Organisational Survival and Success"

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Four C Leadership: gaps, strengths and risks

Credibility is the bottom line of leadership and non-negotiable. Without it we will lack followers, and without followers we're not leading, whatever our formal title might say. Credibility isn't a weakness to manage around; it is fundamental to leadership emergence and effectiveness.

Capability maps out six critical skill sets in managing the big tasks of leadership life. Here the strengths-based philosophy is powerful in identifying priorities for development. Not every capability will be a source of leadership excellence, but it is risky to rely on only one area. Our analysis indicates that the combination of two to three areas can drive exceptional levels of contribution. Add, for example, the excellence of strategic thinking with proficiency in organisational influence and a powerful leader emerges. Or put team motivation into the mix of planning and implementation and outstanding leadership is evident.

Character outlines the values, principles and attributes to lead with integrity, resilience and distinctiveness. There seem to be some non negotiables here. The lack of trust, ethical grounding and courage are not weaknesses to manage around, but flaws to fix.

But character can be played out in different ways. For some leaders, individuality may be the best route, for example, to set a distinctive agenda; for others the deployment of personal enthusiasm and energy may be better tactics. Here a strengths-based approach is helpful in identifying which aspects of personality and talent can be cultivated to make most impact.

Career management is the assessment of the tactics[1] that help leaders navigate through competing stakeholder expectations, political gamesmanship and the uncertainties of change in leadership life. Without this factor, talented and effective leaders will be out manoeuvred by their more ambitious but less scrupulous peers.

For a leader who wants to sustain their career whilst making an organisational difference, again there are some non negotiables. Insight into political realities isn't one of a list of 34 signature themes that may or not be a strength, it's an imperative to survive at senior levels. However for other areas, again the strategy of play to your strengths is sensible. For some individuals, networking may be key; for others, success is sustained through the disciplines of personal organisation and time management.

[1] "The Psychology of Career Tactics: the drivers of success in the real world"

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Recruitment and selection

Gallup and the strengths-based movement hit the mark in their attention to robust selection. Excellence makes a big difference, and it's easier to build a leadership pipeline if we've recruited future leaders with the character and key capabilities in the first place, leaders who will go on to establish their credibility and manage their careers proactively. Robust processes in induction, training and development won't compensate for a flawed selection system that fails to zero in the requirements of the role and the factors that will drive future success, or muddles through against vague criteria, or relies on "show and tell style interviews".

But the strength-based philosophy gets it wrong at leadership levels. An analysis of the top five signature themes will not provide a meaningful analysis of the dynamics of the Four Cs of sustainable leadership.

For critical leadership positions we need to go beyond voodoo hiring to conduct robust interviews, preferably complemented by an in-depth psychometric assessment to work through the detail of candidate experience, capability, values, operating ethos and career aspirations.

Strengths-based interviews and tests will neatly point specialists to their area of optimum functioning. They won't however select the kind of leaders with the wisdom to juggle the short vs. the long-term, leaders who know when to be forceful or supportive, and to judge where to expand the business or where to cut back and divest unprofitable activities.

> *In looking for people to hire, look for three qualities: integrity, intelligence, and energy. And if they don't have the first, the other two will kill you. If you hire somebody without the first, you really want them to be dumb and lazy.*

Warren Buffett

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Performance management

In the world of strengths-based thinking, conversations and coaching, according to Charles Kerns, a Gallup affiliate, are easy: “let’s discuss and affirm your strengths, because this will you make you happier and more productive, and that will boost company performance.”

But how are these conversations played out:

- with a trainee doctor whose attitude towards a specific cultural group is creating problems with patients?
- or with the sales manager whose inappropriate sense of humour is antagonising other team members?
- or the project manager whose ethical lapses are alienating their peers in other functions?

The standard strengths-based ploys of: “compensate for a weakness by deploying a strength; side-step the issue by developing effective support systems; and build on the strengths of colleagues to fill the gaps” won’t cut the mustard in these three scenarios.

Strengths-based performance management rightly highlights how reviews need to shift from the “5 minutes thank you for contribution and the 55 minutes of working up a plan to improve shortcomings” to a conversation that affirms success, provides praise and agrees the tactics to build on current strengths.

But as well as focusing priorities on strengths it seems useful to review:

- what are the hazards of being over zealous in this approach?
- what gaps are there in your knowledge, expertise and skill, gaps that represent significant constraints?
- how might this constrain your current effectiveness?
- what are the implications for your longer-term career progression?

“”Broaden and build” was the vision of Barbara Frederickson, one of the early pioneers of the positive psychology movement. Here, positive emotions and confidence create the kind of curiousity that drives our learning and development and extends our capability to keep “pushing on”. This is right, but strengths-based development keeps development focused around

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Talent reviews and succession planning

The standard 9 by 9 grid of performance and potential isn't working[1]. After hours of debate to plot individuals against the matrix, a list of high potential priorities is drawn up, but not much happens. It's a list of names but rarely does it trigger an in-depth discussion of the specific recommendations that will drive career development.

Our recommendation is to segment the target population in ways that are more illuminating than dividing "High Po's" from the rest. Here talent reviews identify leadership groupings based on strategic skill sets to map out the breadth, depth and diversity of the succession pool.

Within this pool some individuals will be identified where strengths-based development is the right strategy. These are the individuals where a focus on specialist expertise and/or a specific capability is best for them and the organisation. But for other likely successors in the talent pool, strengths-based development can only create "lopsided leaders" and succession exposure.

For these potential successors, a career development plan that incorporates the "difficult stuff" to take on unfamiliar challenges outside the comfort zone of the top five signature themes of talent may be more effective in preparing emerging leaders, and in opening up succession options.

[1] Nuts and Bolts: Succession Management Practicalities"

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Next steps

It is worth taking stock to check how far the strengths-based philosophy has shaped talent management practices and processes and what impact it is had on the breadth, depth and diversity of the work-force and in particular its leadership population.

In **recruitment**, do we need to rethink our criteria and how we evaluate candidates and make final selection decisions? There may be facets of character that are non negotiable , however exceptional the candidate's strengths or impressive the track record.

For **performance management**, are we having "authentic conversations" about contribution and results, or are we allowing a strengths-based philosophy to "duck the difficult discussions"? Does our 360 feedback system identify the risks of over-doing it as well as highlighting exceptional strengths?

Do our **training and development** activities provide an insight into the dynamics of leadership success and failure, and are our on line learning resources positioned to provide the tools and tactics, not only to build on strengths, but to manage the hazards?

What message do we send out in our **career development** processes? And, how is this is shaping leadership progression and the confidence we have about **succession** coverage? If we're dependent on a handful of individuals for coverage across many roles, maybe we're lopsided and lacking leadership resilience and versatility.

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What happened to the wisdom word?

It is significant that in the listing of Gallup's 34 signature themes there is no mention of "wisdom". Wisdom, after all, is fundamental to leadership; it is also the complex interplay of life experience and the dynamics of intelligence and personality.

Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman in "First Break All the Rules" suggest that "during the first 15 years of life, the carving of the synaptic connections is where the drama unfolds....the carving of these pathways is the carving of character." Possibly, but probably not. As Goethe observed, "character is best formed in the stormy billows of the world", i.e. in the adversities of real life experience.

It's unlikely that we will recruit, develop and progress the wise leaders we need for the future based on an analysis of their top 5 signature themes (however well carved the synaptic connections). We need a more balanced perspective to guide our priorities in resourcing, development and succession planning.

Brian Brim and Heather Wright, strengths enthusiasts, report "an executive once told us that the strengths "buzz" around the organization was so strong and so positive that moving in any other direction down the strengths path would cause an uproar."

Obvious marketing hype. But also the words of an executive who is describing an unthinking exuberance that will trigger the organisation's decline.

We don't agree with Randall White that the strengths-based philosophy was the dynamic of the economic turbulence of 2008, but he makes the valid point that "mining the pre-existing strengths of individuals often succeeds with amazing short-term gains but just as often crashes in a cloud of conflict, miscalculations, and at times, questionable ethics."

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About us

Established in 1994, AM Azure Consulting works with a broad portfolio of clients – in the UK and internationally - in the design and implementation of online services in recruitment and selection; management assessment, development and career management; online leadership tool kits, 360° feedback; performance management and talent and succession management.

If you are interested in our approach to talent management, our consulting expertise, assessment tools and talent planning software:

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We:

- summarise complexity to provide solutions that are pragmatic and build and maintain momentum for our clients.
- help trouble-shoot the messy organisational problems to see the key issues, identify options and put in place actionable plans that make progress.
- cut to the chase to focus on the distinctive challenges of our clients. We enjoy the innovation that results from our clients with ideas and we help translate them into practical applications.
- draw on an extensive research base, library of resource and range of tool kits, and up-to-date thinking to help design and implement practical solutions quickly.

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