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White Paper

Leadership Strengths Can Translate to Communication Weaknesses

By Stephen M. Dent



Introduction

It is human nature to rely on one's strengths, especially in times of change. This tendency is certainly prominent in leaders, as their strengths are often the character traits that caused others to recognize them as leaders. Nevertheless, sometimes our strengths—what we do best—are not the best behaviors to bring forth the desired outcome in particular situations; they may, in fact, impede successful outcomes. In such instances, the leader's strengths become weaknesses.

Partnership Continuum, Inc. conducted an international study in 2006 of the partnering behaviors and effectiveness of 22 individuals deemed leaders in their respective workplaces. Partnering—two or more people working together to accomplish a goal or task while building trust and a mutually beneficial relationship—is an essential leadership skill. In the study, each leader's effectiveness was rated by a group of the individual's peers, superiors, and subordinates (referred to hereafter as secondary participants) in three primary aspects:

- Strengths
- Challenges
- Suggestions for improving skills

The study clearly revealed that three particular character traits that are strengths of leaders are associated with specific weaknesses in communication.

Given the fact that the role of a leader is to inspire confidence, influence others as to the direction to pursue in initiatives, and motivate others to achieve goals, strength in communication is essential to leadership success.

This white paper discusses the study's findings in the phenomenon of strengths that become weaknesses in communication skills. It also provides suggestions for improving communication skills.

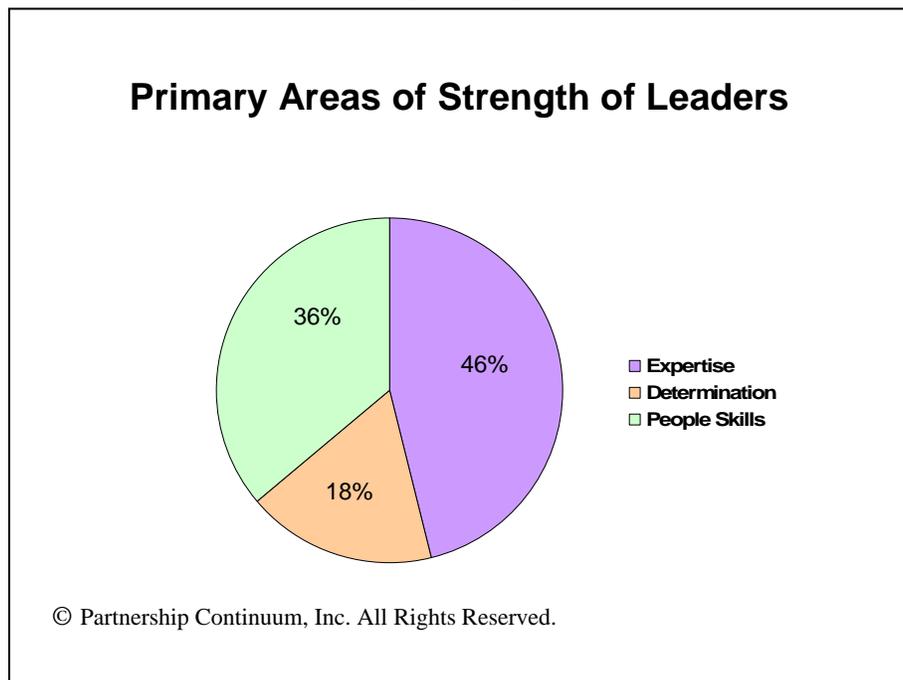
“A genuine leader is . . . a molder of consensus.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Three Areas of Leadership Strength

In every case, the study's secondary participants clearly identified the strengths of the leaders whose effectiveness they ranked in the study. The area of strength for nearly one-half (46%) of the 22 leaders was expertise and knowledge. As Exhibit 1 illustrates, a "determination to succeed" and "people skills" were the other leaders' areas of strength.

Exhibit 1



The study found that the secondary participants viewed only three of the 22 leaders as having more than one dominant area of strength. Of those three leaders with two areas of strength:

- Two were viewed as having strengths in the areas of expertise and determination to succeed
- One was viewed as having strengths in expertise and people skills.

The study also revealed that each of the leaders viewed their strengths as the same characteristics cited by the secondary participants about the leaders.

Responses in the study yielded profiles of traits among leaders within the three areas of strength. (See Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2

Leadership Traits within Areas of Strength

<p>Area of Strength: Expertise</p>	<p>Area of Strength: Determination to Succeed</p>	<p>Area of Strength: People Skills</p>
Intelligent		Open and honest
Organizational skills	Consistently delivers results	Warm; friendly approach; approachable
Depth and breadth of subject matter knowledge	Drive; enthusiasm	Good listening skills
Professional	Ability to identify the root of a problem	Ability to connect with different personalities
Applies robust knowledge to solve problems	Reliable	Outgoing nature
Knows how the organization runs	Sees things through to completion; does what she says she will do	Easy going
Dependable; responsible	Drives change forward	Concern for others' views; caring attitude
Strategic	Strong work ethic	Encourages others
Confident	Can-do attitude	Gets along well with everyone
Competitive	Persistent	Collaborative
Dedicated	Creative approach to solving problems; thinks out of the box for solutions	Maintains a positive attitude
Ability to overcome obstacles		

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Leadership and Communication

Bruce Mazlish, who authored “Leader and Led, Individual and Group,” in *Essays in Psychohistory*, wrote, “The organization created by the leader allows for the personal development of the followers.” Along the same vein, American activist Ralph Nader stated, “The function of leadership is to produce more leaders, not more followers.”

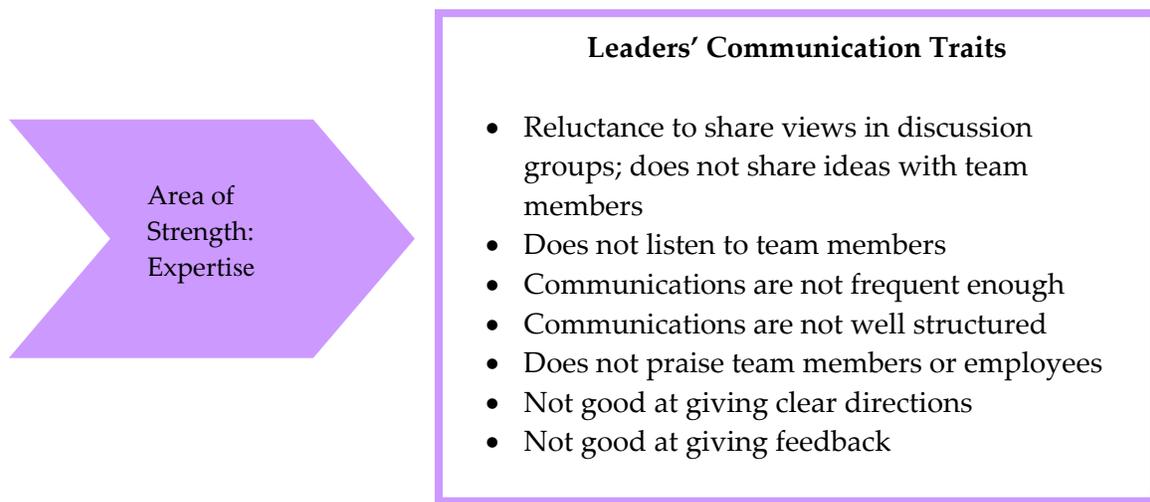
Leaders provide meaning and purpose in a given situation. They influence people to get on board and move in the same direction. Leaders are also agents of change, helping others decrease their level of resistance to change. Thus, having good communication skills is one of the most important qualities of an effective leader.

Profiles of Leaders’ Communication Traits

While the Partnership Continuum study’s secondary participants praised all 22 leaders in many respects, the study found that the secondary participants often perceived that effective communication is a challenge for the leaders.

The study findings yielded profiles of communication characteristics among leaders within the three areas of strength. Exhibits 3, 4, and 5 list the primary comments of secondary participants about the 22 leaders’ manner of communicating with others. As these exhibits illustrate, the study found that leaders who share traits in a particular area of strength also share similar communication traits.

Exhibit 3



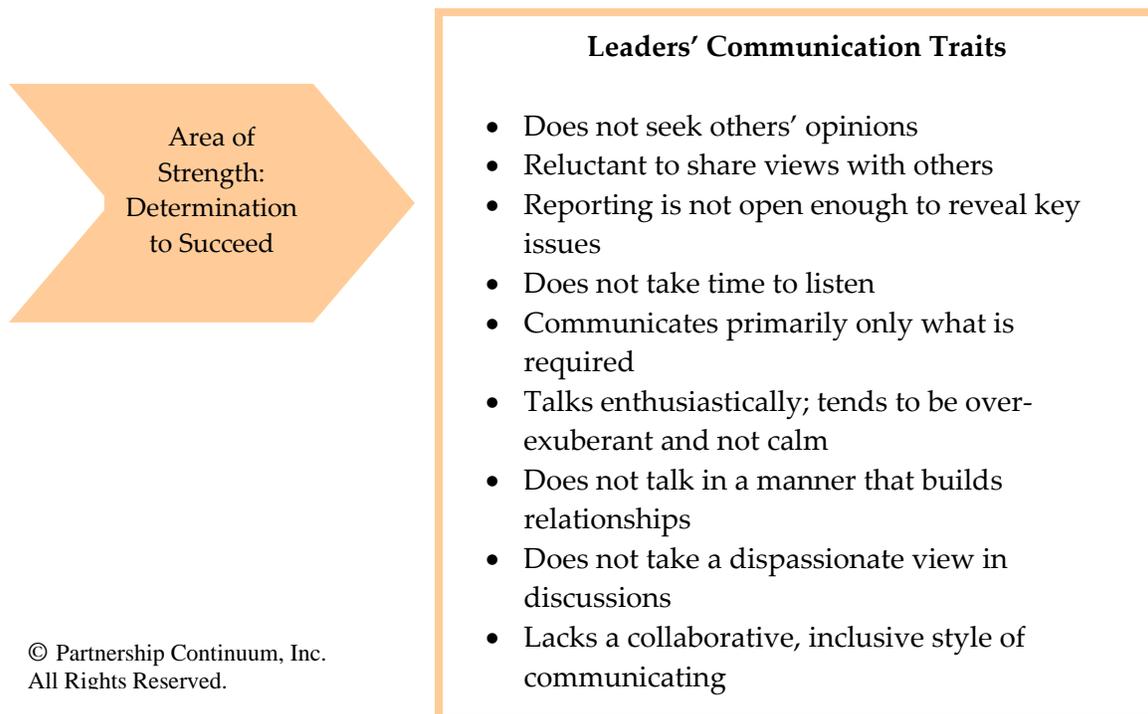
The communication traits for a leader whose area of strength is expertise reflect the outcomes of the leader's dominant traits in the area of strength: confident, competitive, and the ability to overcome obstacles. Although this type of leader possesses knowledge that is highly valuable to the organization and essential in developing expertise in team members, the leader's manner of communication can cause people not to follow the influence of the leader.

Additional responses of secondary participants describe leaders whose strength lies in expertise as displaying the following behaviors, which result in challenges for the team or organization:

- Communicates frustration with team members' differences in performance
- Does not influence staff on the fact that change will be good for them
- Needs to soften approach to team and express appreciation for effort even when results are not what was wanted
- Often too aggressive and overbearing in communicating with team members



Exhibit 4



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The communication traits for a leader whose area of strength is a determination to succeed reflect the outcomes of the leader's dominant traits in the area of strength: consistently delivers results, ability to identify the root of a problem, and a can-do attitude. While a determination to succeed is an admirable quality on an individual level, it can be a hindrance in leading others if it results in relying on oneself for performance rather than taking an inclusive, collaborative approach with others.

Additional responses of secondary participants describe leaders whose strength lies in a determination to succeed as displaying the following behaviors, which result in challenges for the team or organization:

- Can be overbearing
- Can be adversarial
- Not accepting of others' efforts when achievements do not meet expectations
- Lacks tolerance, patience, and diplomacy
- Does not take a trusting approach
- Does not communicate in a way that facilitates getting to know others on a personal level



Exhibit 5



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The communication traits for a leader whose area of strength is people skills reflect the outcomes of the leader's dominant traits in the area of strength: friendly approach, concern for others' views, and gets along well with everyone. While employees and teams tend to want to follow leaders who are personable, they still need a leader who will provide guidance in setting expectations, achieving goals, and working through conflict and change events.

Additional responses of secondary participants describe leaders whose strength lies in people skills as displaying the following behaviors, which result in challenges for the team or organization:

- Frequently reorganizes without explaining to staff the reason for change
- Not willing to push others to get the job done
- Frequently doesn't follow up to make sure decisions are acted upon
- Needs to be more succinct
- Doesn't say "no"
- Not forceful in knocking down barriers



Developing Effective Communication Skills

The answer to the age-old question of whether leaders are born or made is evident in this study. While the 22 leaders possess certain qualities (such as expertise, determination to succeed, and people skills) that caused them to rise to leadership positions, the way they apply these qualities is not always effective.

Great leadership, for example, creates momentum, enabling others to achieve more than before. It opens people up to possibilities, aligns them with others, and helps them commit to goals and initiatives. For the most part, the qualities and areas of strength the 22 leaders in this study naturally possess cause them to naturally communicate in a manner that decreases momentum, does not help others open up to possibilities, causes them to work more as individuals than aligned team members, and does not help them understand enough about goals and initiatives to commit to them.

Leadership skills are learned. More importantly, effective leaders understand that each situation is unique and they need to apply different skill sets to a particular situation. Effective leaders are able to adapt and are not locked in to an approach based on a dominant trait or skill.

A survey question asked secondary participants to indicate their suggestions for improving the leaders' skills. As Exhibit 6 shows, their responses yielded a significant finding: Although the leaders in the survey exhibit different communication traits according to their areas of strength, the suggestions for improving their differing communication skills are strikingly similar across the three areas of strength.

Exhibit 6

Area of Strength: Expertise	Area of Strength: Determination	Area of Strength: People Skills
Be more trusting that others will complete their part of the work	Adopt a more trusting approach with team members	
Broaden collaboration	Be more collaborative	Motivate others to contribute more of their skills
Delegate more; involve the team more	Delegate more tasks to stakeholders	Delegate more
Do more coaching and motivating instead of being actually involved in doing the work; be more hands off	Rather than being known as the star performer, aim to become known as someone whose teams are successful	Lead instead of getting too involved
	Gain team members' consensus on next steps instead of making the decisions alone to move forward	Take stock of how people feel before launching new ideas
		Be more outspoken with strong opinions instead of trying to get along with everyone
		Take a more forceful approach at leading the team with the current approach is not producing the desired results

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Recommendation for Leadership Development

As the study revealed, even though the 22 leaders for the most part received high praise from their peers, subordinates, and superiors, their qualities that are deemed their areas of strength translate into poor communication skills.

More than ever before, today's leaders need to guide others in new directions, especially toward innovation that creates competitive advantages. In addition to first building trust, highly effective communication skills are a prerequisite for leading others in new directions.

Partnership Continuum offers several solutions for developing highly effective communication skills as well as improving other leadership capabilities. Consider using the self-paced tools listed below; each includes:

- A component to help you become more aware of your capabilities
- Learning Guides with insights and action plans for improving skills

Leadership Quadrants Online Assessment

http://www.partneringintelligence.com/services_leadership_quadrants.cfm

Partnering Quotient Online Assessment

http://www.partneringintelligence.com/products_assessments_pq.cfm

Self-Disclosure and Feedback Assessment Workbook

http://www.partneringintelligence.com/products_books_workbooks.cfm

Change Resistance Online Assessment

http://www.partneringintelligence.com/products_assessments_cra.cfm

(includes information for leaders in managing peers' and subordinates' change resistance)

If you would like to know how your peers, subordinates, and superiors view your existing leadership and partnering skills, use our 360° PQ Assessment

(http://www.partneringintelligence.com/products_assessments_360.cfm).

About the Author

Stephen M. Dent, founder of Partnership Continuum, Inc., is a pioneer in Partnering Intelligence theory, research and application. His first book, *Partnering Intelligence: Creating Value for Your Business by Building Strong Alliances* (Davies-Black publishing, 1999), describes how Smart Partners build effective internal and external business alliances that create sustainable competitive advantage. This book was listed as one of the top 30 business books for the year 2000. His most recent book is *Powerhouse Partners: A Blueprint for Building Organizational Culture for Breakaway Results* (Stephen M. Dent and James H. Krefft, Ph.D., Davies-Black Publishing, 2004).

He has over 20 years' experience helping companies improve performance and operating margins through strategy, quality, process and partnership-improvement methods. Prior to founding Partnership Continuum, Inc., Stephen was a Partner and Senior VP for Six Sigma-Qualtec, where he delivered quality, process improvement and partnership workshops. He is a sought-after business consultant and keynote speaker.

About Partnership Continuum, Inc.

In the twenty-first century, businesses that develop, sustain and profit from partnerships faster and better will attain organizational success. At the core of any successful business are people. After all, businesses don't partner; people do. Developing the partnering intelligence of your people is what we do.

Partnership Continuum, Inc. mobilizes your relationships with employees, customers, suppliers, and even competitors in surprising and rewarding ways. Our unique and innovative programs and products lead to higher productivity and stronger relationships enhancing your partnering capability through building trust, positive exchanges, respectful interactions, beneficial outcomes, future potential, and leadership excellence.

**Discover how Partnership Continuum can
impact your organization's effectiveness.**

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