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THREE STEPS TO STRONGER LEADERSHIP

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When you think of a strong leader, what descriptors come to mind? Courageous? Commanding? Powerful? To be sure, these words convey a mighty image.

What about leader who is introverted? Compassionate? Humble? If these words seem soft or powerless, think again. Some of the world's most influential leaders (Gandhi and Mother Teresa come to mind) fit this portrayal more than today's popular icons of leadership.

The business world is replete with misleading stereotypes of leaders. Books by the dozens delineate common characteristics of leaders – as if all you have to do is emulate those who have been successful, and voila! Instant leadership. Unfortunately, the labels don't always fit. Trying to adopt a style of leadership mismatched to your *real* characteristics is like donning an ill-fitting suit. You will feel and look uncomfortable, if not downright silly. Although it may be possible to change your approach to fit someone else's image of a leader, it's much more powerful to find a model of leadership that brings out your best as an individual.

The strongest leader is the one who uses his or her strengths—whatever they may be.

True strength of leadership is based on who you are. To become a stronger leader, you need to discover your unique characteristics and develop them. In particular, you should develop your strengths so you can leverage them to become better and better *in the areas in which you will naturally excel*.

STEP 1: IDENTIFYING LEADERSHIP STRENGTHS

The process of developing your strengths starts with identifying those strengths. Below follows a variety of ways to do this.

360-DEGREE PROFILE

Perhaps the most comprehensive analysis available to leaders, a 360-degree profile is a process in which you ask other people around you—your boss, your co-workers, your direct reports, your peers—to give you feedback on your leadership so you get a full view (i.e. 360 degrees) of yourself from the *outside*, giving you a perspective you can't get any other way.

ASSESSMENTS

In contrast to 360-degree profiles, assessments give you valuable information from the inside. Assessments are quizzes you take that tell you about yourself—about your thinking preferences, behavioral style or personality. Common examples include Myers-Briggs, the DISC profile, and Emergenetics. There are dozens of these available, so it's important to choose the one that will give you the information you want.

REVIEWS

Any kind of performance review can become a chance to discover your strengths. If you don't have to participate in a formal review, either because you're a business owner or a solo entrepreneur, consider setting one up for yourself using the people who work with you, asking them to be your sounding board and to give you feedback for the express purposes of reflection and growth.

OTHER PEOPLE

One of the easiest ways to find out your strengths is to ask other people. Clients, co-workers, friends—they can easily tell you what you do well. You just have to ask.

INTUITION

Finally, you can use good old-fashioned intuition. Simply ask yourself, "What are my strengths?" Using your intuition, write down whatever comes to mind. If you're having trouble thinking of anything, try these questions to prompt some ideas:

- What role do you play in your social life – the organizer, the friend everyone goes to for advice, the shoulder to lean on? What does that tell you about your strengths?
- What role do you play in your work life?
- When you were in school, what did your teachers always say about you?
- What compliment do you hear most often?

You know yourself better than anyone. Chances are you will be able to identify at least three of your own strengths just using your intuition.

All of these approaches offer the opportunity to find out what your strengths are. Human Resources departments, consultants and coaches are usually well-versed in these strategies and can get you started, usually with just one phone call. You can even find resources online. Whatever approach you take, some kind of self-analysis is positively vital if you want to strengthen your leadership

Identifying your strengths is the first step toward developing them. The next step is to analyze your leadership.

STEP 2: ANALYZING YOUR LEADERSHIP

Looking at your list, ask yourself: how well aligned is my leadership with my strengths? If you're a natural organizer, are you using your strength of organization to your advantage? If you're naturally funny, are you using humor to support your leadership? If you generally have very close and long-lasting relationships in your personal life, are you using your personable nature to relate to the people around you—including the ones that challenge you most?

The idea behind this kind of analysis is to show you where you might be operating from an outdated, ill-fitting model of leadership, and where you might do better to realign your approach so that you are operating from your strengths.

That brings us to the third step in Developing Your Strengths:

STEP 3: INTEGRATING YOUR STRENGTHS AND YOUR LEADERSHIP

Once you understand your strengths using outside sources and your own intuition, there are two questions to ask yourself:

- What do I need to do more of?
- What do I need to do less of?

The more you align your leadership style with your strengths, the more efficiently and effectively you will lead.

When you develop your strengths as a leader—unlike when you try to fit into someone else's model—leadership comes more naturally. You become more effective. You feel more comfortable, and therefore, more confident.

So stop searching the bookshelves for the magic formula for leadership. The answers lie within you. Identify your strengths, analyze your leadership accordingly, and get to work developing those parts of your individual character that will make you the strongest leader you can be.



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