

Thought On

How Women's Strengths Help Firms in Volatile Environments



“ Investing development resources on employee strengths rather than only on their weaknesses can position firms for being exceptional.”



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Despite what one thinks about Tiger Woods, it is indisputable that he had been on track to become the most successful golfer in history. Part of that success is his commitment to play to his strengths. He has a powerful swing that allows him to drive the ball long distances and generally land it with precision. Most golf pros acknowledge that his swing is his most dominant strength. So why then does he spend the offseason rebuilding a swing that not only works, but works really well?

In the corporate world, companies invest heavily in talent development. Many firms have their own in-house corporate universities, and those that do not outsource leadership development to executive education programs at top business schools, or pay for employees to have one-on-one coaching. The typical

focus of each of these investments is helping employees to improve in the areas in which they are weak, or as HR professionals refer to as their “developmental opportunities.” Despite the attempt at using a positive moniker, the goal is the same—identify employee weaknesses and develop action plans to improve them. There is one glaring problem with that approach. Knowledge, skills, and behaviors that are categorized as weaknesses are less likely, regardless of the action plan, to yield stellar performance, at least not without extensive time, practice, and other resources. At best, improvement plans on an identified weakness may raise an employee’s performance in that dimension to average, but it is unlikely (although not impossible) that a weakness will truly become an asset in the same way that Woods’ swing has been an asset to his golf game. And what individual or company can remain competitive by being average? Like Woods, I believe that investing development resources on employee strengths rather than only on their weaknesses can position firms for being exceptional; and on that they can compete.

The idea of playing to one's strengths has been gaining momentum. New tools, research, and executive education programs, such as Darden's *Women Emerging in Leadership*, have been developed to facilitate this approach to talent development. Using feedback mechanisms such as *StrengthFinder* or the *Reflected Best Self Exercise*, employees are given an opportunity to identify those areas in which they have demonstrated proficiency and, like Woods, build on those areas in order to take their strengths to an even higher level. This is not to say that one should ignore developmental opportunities altogether. Rather, in a time of limited resources and growing demands, I believe that resources are better served by enhancing those areas in which one already has a natural aptitude so that excellence in those domains can be achieved, rather than improving on weaknesses that may only lead to mediocrity.

Although operating from one's strengths is important for everyone, I believe that it is particularly important for women, especially those working in organizations that have historically promulgated a command and control model of leadership—an approach generally inconsistent with women's strengths. The command and control model has served us well over the years; however, as business becomes increasingly diverse and interconnected, the need for collaboration, trust, and relationship building has become equally as important to organizational success. Once frowned upon as "soft" or even inappropriate in business, these skills, for which women have generally been more socialized to attain than men, are now seen as vital to organizations that are operating in volatile environments.

A survey conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) indicates that the more pressure and change an organization is facing, the more important a leader's soft skills become. Among the most important skills survey respondents identified were honest communication, listening, and demonstrating sensitivity when dealing with stakeholders. A 2009 *Financial Times* article reports that a comparison of French companies shows that firms with more women managers fared better during the global recession than firms with mostly male management. Likewise, among small- and medium-sized firms in Finland, those firms managed by women were 10

percent more efficient than those run by men. There was a time when women in business were encouraged to act like a man. Any hint of being soft was a kiss of death to her career, as she was perceived to not be tough enough to make hard decisions. Fast forward a couple of decades, though, and it turns out that the very behaviors that are believed to be central

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to the female constitution are now the precise behaviors that are helping businesses not only survive, but thrive in economic downturns and other challenging environments. Has the time finally come for women to showcase and be acknowledged for their leadership strengths? It seems so.

Executive Education

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