

When Strengths Become Derailers: Why Self-Awareness Matters More as You Lead

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I was getting coffee with Mark recently, a senior executive I've worked with for some time. He's built a strong career and is respected for delivering results that matter. As we settled in, he shared something that had been weighing on him.

"I feel that I've always been able to drive the right results," he said, "but lately I feel like my approach isn't landing the way it used to. My team seems hesitant around me lately, and I don't really understand why."

What intrigued me here was Mark's approach to this challenge: curiosity. Mark wasn't blaming his team or questioning his abilities. His keen awareness allowed him to sense a shift.

One reality of leadership is that what makes us effective early in our careers often becomes more complicated as our responsibilities increase. As you advance in your career, the stakes are raised, and the pressure feels much more tangible. Under these changing conditions, the way our strengths are perceived can also change.

I told Mark something I often share with leaders at this stage: leadership is always about impact. Sometimes, our greatest strengths become derailers when they're overused or activated under stress.

That's where tools like the Hogan Development Survey (HDS) can be incredibly helpful. Not as a list of what someone is doing "wrong," but as a way to understand how a leader's strengths may shift under pressure and how others experience those shifts.

Mark was interested but a little apprehensive, and some of that earlier curiosity dissolved. "So this is about what I'm doing wrong?" he asked.

"Not exactly," I said. "It's about understanding what happens to your strengths when the pressure is on and how that might be affecting the people around you."

When we reviewed his HDS results together, we noticed that Mark was highly ambitious, decisive, and known for setting high standards. Those traits had fueled his success and earned him increasing responsibility. Under stress, those same strengths could take on a different tone.

His ambition, when amplified by pressure, could feel intimidating. His decisiveness could be perceived as dismissiveness. His high standards could come across as perfectionism.

Mark hadn't changed. The way his leadership was experienced was changing.

As he took it in, he sat quietly for a moment and then said, "This explains a lot. I don't mean to shut people down, but I can see how it might feel that way."

We talked about the goal not being to dial back his ambition or lower his standards. Those qualities were part of what made him effective. We wanted to focus on learning how to hold those strengths intentionally, especially when stress was high.

We focused on small, practical shifts: adjustments that could alter how his leadership landed. Instead of making quick decisions on his own, what if he paused just long enough to invite input? What if he asked a clarifying question before offering a conclusion? What if his high expectations were framed more clearly as a belief in his team rather than pressure on them?

Mark decided to experiment. He committed to slowing his responses slightly in meetings, creating more space for others to contribute, and explaining the "why" behind high standards mattered, instead of it being an inherent expectation.

A few weeks later, we checked back in. "I've been more intentional about listening," he said. "I'm still decisive, but I'm not rushing past people. I think it's working. The team is more engaged, and I'm getting better ideas."

Then he added something important. "I still expect great results. But now it feels like we're working toward them together."

That's the shift.

The HDS didn't change who Mark was. It helped him see how stress could subtly derail the very strengths that made him successful. With that awareness, he made small adjustments that reignited his influence and re-engaged his team.

Before we wrapped up, I left him with a single question, one worth returning to often:

When pressure is high, which of my strengths might be getting in my own way?

Leadership challenges at higher levels often stem from misaligned impact. Strengths that go too far can erode your team's confidence. Without self-awareness, leaders can mistake compliance for commitment or silence for alignment.

Leadership is about noticing when those strengths begin to derail, and choosing to lead with greater awareness.

Sometimes the path forward isn't adding something new. It's learning to hold what you already have with more intention.