



## The George Costanza Approach to Fixing Fatal Flaws

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In my work on leadership development, the first thing I usually advise is to look past your flaws to your strengths, since no one becomes an extraordinary leader by becoming flawless. You become a great leader, our research shows (<http://hbr.org/2011/10/making-yourself-indispensable/ar/1>) , by having strengths so profound people forgive, if not completely overlook, your faults.

But about 20% of the time, I encounter a person whose flaws are so deep that no strengths can make up for them.

I'm not talking about run-of-the-mill, we're-all-human, flaws. These are fatal, career-ending flaws. I have, for instance, seen individuals squander extraordinary technical strengths because of a complete inability to communicate their expertise to anyone. I have seen people who have rendered moot an outstanding ability to deliver results and solve problems because they focus entirely on details and utterly fail to develop a strategic perspective. I have known brilliant innovators crippled because their people don't trust them.

This sounds dire — and it is, if unaddressed. But fixing flaws is a simpler matter than capitalizing on strengths. It may be too lofty to say you can turn so significant a problem area into a strong suit, but in most cases I've observed, a fatal flaw can be defused. And the path could not be more straightforward.

It's so simple, in fact, that we can take a page from my favorite *Seinfeld* character, George Costanza, a man with hilarious and obvious fatal flaws. In one particular episode (<http://www.seinfeldscripts.com/TheOpposite.htm>) , while reflecting on his many failures in life, George has a moment of poignant self-awareness and says to Jerry, Elaine, and Kramer, "It became very clear to me sitting out there today that every decision I've ever made in my entire life has been wrong. My life is the opposite of everything I want it to be. Every instinct I have, in every part of my life, be it something to wear, something to eat.... It's all been wrong." So George sets out to do the opposite of what he'd normally do at every turn. And what happens? He gets a great job with the New York Yankees. He finds that women are suddenly attracted to him. All of his fortunes are reversed.

This is not quite as far-fetched as it seems. The answer to addressing fatal flaws really is to do what George did — the opposite of what you'd normally do. But if the path is simple, mustering the will to follow through consistently often is not. Like a novice first starting to train as a runner, you will get better by simply going from being sedentary to starting to run, and then running longer and longer distances — but only if you do keep running longer and longer distances. And even so, you won't win any marathons that way. You won't become a champion, but you can go from bad to pretty good, which is all that's required on the path to becoming an outstanding leader.

Here are some specific examples of "doing the opposite" for some of the most common fatal flaws I've encountered with leaders. If your fatal flaw is.....

- **Listening effectively:** *Stop talking and pay attention to what others are saying*
- **Integrity:** *Do what you said you would do and don't make promises you can't or won't keep*
- **Interpersonal skills and relationships:** *Stop thinking just about tasks and outcomes and start focusing on your effect on others*
- **Strategic perspective:** *Stop thinking about immediate concerns and consider the long-term implications of your decisions*
- **Collaboration and teamwork:** *Focus less on yourself and your team and more on your division and the needs of the organization.*

These are broad examples, but you get the idea. Identify exactly what you're doing that's unacceptable and do the opposite. That won't make you a superstar in those areas, but you don't have to be. The idea is to reach the point where your weaknesses are not so glaring that they can't be outshined by your strengths.

When fatal flaws have been addressed, then you can turn to developing your unique strengths, but not a moment sooner. Because until then, it simply won't matter.