Managers are not leader wannabes, says Marcus Buckingham. Their job is totally different and crucially important.

Can you give me an example of how an IT manager might play chess with his staff? Great managers talk about strengths — not things you can do well, but things that strengthen you. They’re appetites as much as abilities — things you’re drawn toward. A weakness isn’t something you’re bad at; it’s something that drains, bores or frustrates you. An IT manager ought to be able to find out, for example, that this person loves to pull together and stay till midnight to meet that deadline. That urgency, passion, camaraderie makes him feel alive. Others need to go step by step and see the timeline and stick to it very religiously — never get behind the eight ball.

In the IT world, where it’s “Do it for me yesterday,” it’s pretty important to know which of your people love that pressure and which are drained by it. If crunch time weakens you, you can’t learn to love it. You can do it once or twice and then you’ll quit — psychologically or physically.

You say this kind of management introduces a good kind of disruption into the workplace. Can you explain? When you don’t think of a pawn as waiting to become a queen, but as someone with a unique way of looking at the world, then you can be open to the insight a pawn has. You can think of each job as having a certain expertise and help people extend their contribution. Take someone on a help desk. The insights that can come from a really expert help desk pro — about what clients are really looking for, how the system works, where the bugs are — are the most valuable intelligence a company can collect.

A healthy amount of disruption also means new areas of prestige. Most companies have very little prestige, and a few at the top have it and lots at the bottom don’t. Much better to have many alternative avenues toward respect and prestige.

How might an IT manager learn a staff person’s strengths? Many ways. The most direct is to ask people: “What was your best day at work in the last three months? What were you doing, and why did you love it? What have you learned quickly?” Strengths are almost always picked up fast; it’s as if you already had it in your head. Strengths are satisfying. “What’s your greatest satisfaction at work? What do you love to do?” Watch to see what people are drawn to. Managers more often focus on weaknesses, but great managers know that will get you incremental improvement. If you invest in strengths, you get exponential improvement — a much better return on investment.

A manager also needs to be able to trigger a person’s best performance. How do you find that trigger? Observe and ask, “What was the best manager relationship you ever had, and what made it so good?” Let them ramble for a bit, and you’ll find out a lot. One of the best triggers is recognition, but people like different kinds: public, private, peers, customers. Ask, “What was the best recognition you’ve had?” Few managers bother to ask that question, so there’s an endless giving of plaques to people.

Finally, you write that a manager needs to understand a person’s learning style. How do you do that? Ask them, “When in your career have you learned the most, and why did you learn so much? In which classes did you learn the most and why?” It’s much easier to do than to talk abstractly. Then take those three dominant learning styles (see sidebar at left) and say, “Do you think you’re a doer, an analyzer, a watcher?” Use those three as keys. For most of us, one will dominate. Once you know their strengths, triggers and learning styles, you’ve got enough to start playing chess.