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Try This Game Plan: Play to Your Strengths

by Mark E. Green

We've all heard it before: "Play to your strengths." Yet in practice, few of us expend the time and energy necessary to identify and then meaningfully enhance our core strengths. Instead, we remain shackled by cultural patterns and habits that cause us to focus disproportionately on developing or "fixing" our weaknesses.

Before you call the men in the white coats to come and get me, you should understand that I'm not advocating that you ignore your weaknesses. Rather, my argument is for a more balanced approach that gives, at a minimum, proportional weight to developing your strengths. Before we can understand why, we need to shed some light on the overwhelming habit most of us have of focusing on our weak areas instead of on our strengths.

From a very early age, we are taught and conditioned to remedy our weaknesses, but not necessarily develop our strengths. For example, once you learned to balance on a two-wheeled bicycle (overcoming your weakness), how much time did your parents actively spend with you teaching you how to ride it better? Probably not much.

As we progress into the educational system, we see even more examples of single-mindedly pursuing perceived weaknesses—like in elementary school when we're asked to write misspelled words three times each after a spelling test. Were you ever asked to practice using the words that you spelled correctly on the test? Probably not.

As adults, many of us have been exposed to a variety of "assessments" of our performance, our behavior, our intelligence and our attitudes.

Think back to the last assessment you took. The action plan that resulted probably focused much more on helping you focus on and develop your "weak" areas than your strengths. Even worse, many of us have come to take our strengths for granted.

We pay a price for this approach.

Let's consider baseball player Barry Bonds of the San Francisco Giants for some additional perspective. Barry's core strength is hitting home runs and long balls. Statistically speaking, one of his weaknesses is bunting. What if, at the end of the season, Barry met with his manager who—after assessing Barry's performance and choosing to focus only on his weaknesses as most of us tend to do—decided that Barry needed to address his weakness in bunting during the off season? As a result, Barry might be sent to bunting school.

Fast forward to next year's spring training and, for sure, Barry will be a better bunter. But he'll only be an incrementally better bunter, certainly not of world-class caliber. Much more importantly, it is likely that his big swing suffered while he was so focused on learning how to bunt.

Barry's story illuminates the steep, stealthy price we pay for this approach: if we single-mindedly pursue our weaknesses, our strengths will suffer. It's not a matter of merely stagnating—our strengths actually begin to weaken. Although learning new things and improving weakness are important, it shouldn't occur in a vacuum, and certainly not at the expense of those things we already consider to be our strengths.



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CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Can you readily identify and list your strengths? In all likelihood, they are what enabled you to get where you are in life, both personally and professionally. So why not focus on them and try to improve them? After all, your core strengths will also be providing most of the propulsion to get you where you want to go. In addition, you'll have more fun when you get to do more of the things that you know you do well.

As you become more mindful of your own tendency to focus on weaknesses at the expense of your strengths, and come to understand the price you are paying as a result, it becomes easier to make choices to change your circumstances. For example, if you're a world-class actuary in a particular niche and you'd like to go into business for yourself, you might choose to find a partner who has deep sales and marketing expertise in the same niche. Too often, we try to "do it all," which forces us to focus disproportionately on our weaknesses (in this case, it's hard to pay the bills without sales!) instead of seeking to leverage our strengths in combination with the complimentary strengths of others.

Can you readily identify and list your weaknesses? Might it be possible to surround yourself with individuals who possess your weaknesses as their strengths? Could there be other, creative ways for you to overcome some of your weak areas without necessarily having to develop them formally?

Although you will ultimately deal with them differently, it is important to clearly understand your own strengths and weaknesses. We have blind spots, however, that often prevent us from seeing them as clearly and as critically as we should. For example, when there are no mirrors around, you might ask a friend how you look. Similarly, to better know ourselves it is often beneficial to ask those near to us for their input.

An assessment might be helpful as well, provided that you resist the temptation to only focus on your weak areas. If you have 10 minutes to spare and are interested in taking a free assessment that is solely focused on highlighting strengths, go to www.authentichappiness.com and take their VIA Signature Strengths Questionnaire (just click on the link from their home page). You might be genuinely surprised to discover what you have going for yourself!

As with so many other things, balance and perspective are important as you contemplate your strengths and weaknesses. Our culture and forces of habit, however often prevent us from finding the balance.

For most of us, the concept of "playing to our strengths" is just that—an idea. In truth, and by default, we most often focus on our weaknesses, which actually cost us some of our strengths. Why continue to focus, strive and work to become a mediocre bunter when—through some different choices—you can further enhance your world-class standing as a home run hitter instead? In other words, what's good for Barry Bonds' career in baseball—in word and in deed, playing to strengths—would be good for you and yours too. □

