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Stronger Strengths or Weaker Weaknesses?

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“The strengths movement says that all we learn from mistakes are the characteristics of mistakes. If we want to learn about our successes, we must study successes.”

—Marcus Buckingham, best-selling author, researcher, motivational speaker and business consultant

Everyone has strengths and weaknesses. A balanced approach suggests that we improve upon our weaknesses to become more well-rounded employees, and overall individuals. While managing our weaknesses may help us to avoid similar pitfalls in the future, enriching our strengths is what will propel us to great success.

Business leaders need to be aware of and foster their own strengths, as well as the strengths of their teams. This article will cover the definition of a strength, how to recognize strengths and block weaknesses, how to perform a strengths self-assessment, and ways to effectively describe our strengths to others.

WHAT IS A STRENGTH?

“Most people think your strengths are what you’re good at, and your weaknesses are what you’re bad at.”

—Marcus Buckingham

Often people will assume that strengths are synonymous with being exceptional at a particular task, or being in possession of a certain quality. However, strengths should also be enjoyable—just because you are good at something, does not mean it is one of your strengths; you must also have a passion for it.

Ideally, a strength results in an activity that you look forward to, where you find yourself “in the zone,” and within which time seems to pass very quickly due to your engagement level. Upon completion of performing an activity related to your strength, you should have a sense of empowerment and fulfillment.

HOW DO YOU RECOGNIZE STRENGTHS?

“Some people believe holding on and hanging in there are signs of great strength. However, there are times when it takes much more strength to know when to let go and then do it.”

—Ann Landers, advice columnist

Strengths can come in the form of specific talents, skills, or even knowledge. A talent is a gift—innate, instinctive ability. A skill is a learned behavior that becomes easier with practice. Knowledge is being in posses-

sion of, or having a comprehension of, information, particularly as it applies to a specific situation.

The following two indicators may assist in revealing your own strengths, and assessing strengths that others possess:

1. Look for excitement.

When fully engaged in an enjoyable activity, the excitement is visible. You will feel alive, motivated, energized and may even speak faster or more fluidly than usual. By asking co-workers or friends to observe you over the course of a week and then provide feedback as to when you appeared to be the most animated, you can uncover strengths you haven’t fully recognized.

2. Consider uniqueness.

When displaying strengths, individuals move from being part of the crowd, or just in the background, to a prominent leading position. The unique strength pulls the individual into the forefront. For example, one who possesses solid organizational skills may act as a project manager across a team trying to meet a deadline, or rally former classmates to plan a high school reunion.

Within the book *Go Put Your Strengths to Work*, Marcus Buckingham shares four SIGNs to lead us to our strengths

Success = effectiveness in the activity.

Instinct = an innate draw to the activity.

Growth = learning and developing through concentration on an enjoyable activity.

Needs = a sense of personal fulfillment, despite the activity being draining.

If all or most of the above SIGNs are met, then you have stumbled upon a strength!

HOW DO YOU BLOCK YOUR WEAKNESSES?

“You cannot run away from a weakness, you must sometimes fight it out or perish.”

—Robert Louis Stevenson, novelist and poet

While we unfortunately cannot completely run away from our weaknesses, we can do our best to avoid activities we dislike. Just as we followed the SIGNs above to learn our strengths, Buckingham reveals four ways we can **STOP** our weaknesses—particularly in a work setting:

Stop = Cease the activity or behavior and see if it is missed.

Team = Swap tasks with a co-worker who enjoys the activity that you dislike, and vice versa.

Offer = Suggest tackling a different activity instead of the one you dislike.

Perceive = Change your outlook on your weakness and try to connect it to an activity you enjoy.

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where they are the weakest—what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, right? In reality, individuals have the most potential for growth in areas where they already possess core strengths. Emphasizing what you already do well and building upon it will typically result in greater success than dwelling on an activity for which you have no motivation.

PERFORMING A STRENGTHS SELF-ASSESSMENT

"You have power over your mind—not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength."

—*Marcus Aurelius, Roman emperor*

In order to discover your natural strengths (and weaknesses) without the influence of other people's opinions, take a week for self-observation. Keep a journal of activities that energize you or drain you. Simultaneously ask yourself the following guiding questions as you go through your day-to-day pursuits:

- Does it matter *why* I was doing the activity (i.e., was it a required obligation, or a personal choice)?

Many people incorrectly believe that individuals have the greatest ability to grow in areas where they are the weakest—what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, right?

- Does it matter *who* I was doing the activity with?
- Does it matter *when* the activity occurs?
- Does it matter *what* the activity is about?
- How do I feel before, during and after the activity?

The answers to these questions will steer you toward your strengths and away from your weaknesses. Also, they may lead you to the root of what is driving your enthusiasm for the activity.

DESCRIBING YOUR STRENGTHS

"Strength is the capacity to break a chocolate bar into four pieces with your bare hands—and then eat just one of the pieces."

—*Judith Viorst, children's author and journalist*

Typically, when asked about their weaknesses, people are likely to enumerate a specific list. On the other hand, when

asked about their strengths, people often respond in a vague fashion—such as "I work well with others" or "I am logical."

Strengths are unique. So, in order to truly capture their uniqueness, they must be described in a creative fashion. Using lively terms and provoking descriptors can better capture the essence of the strength. For example, rather than saying "I am detail-oriented," instead use vivid narrative such as "I am an investigator who puts together pieces of a financial puzzle"—the latter avoids all of the usual connotations associated with being detail-oriented.

As time goes by, your strengths may evolve and weaknesses may change. As actress Drew Barrymore said, "In the end, some of your greatest pains become your greatest strengths."

Our professional and personal situations may dictate when

certain strengths are relevant and even bring unknown weaknesses to light. Building upon our strengths is an ongoing process—as our strengths require subtle refinements to meet new situations. Business leaders need to foster the strengths improvement process—not only for themselves, but for their teams—in order to achieve continued success.

In the words of activist Eleanor Roosevelt, "With the new day comes new strength and new thoughts." ■

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