



Why Not Go With Your Strengths?

By Paul Knudstrup

Most managers attempt to determine what people's "weaknesses" are and then "fix" them. There is an underlying assumption that all managers need to become equally adept at the same things. We see this frequently in development programs based on competencies, where an effort is made to identify a set of attributes, attitudes, and skills that all employees at a certain level should possess.

While it makes sense to determine what those competencies are, it does not make sense to believe that each of us needs to – or can – become adept at all of them. This focus on weakness is not the province of management alone; we see this drive for perfection throughout our society.

- § Parents and teachers focus on a student's lowest grades, virtually ignoring those subject areas where the student is doing well.
- § The healthcare system is oriented more toward addressing current health problems than on preventing future illness and disease.
- § Managers focus most of their performance management time on the poorest performers in the group, unintentionally reinforcing poor behavior and demoralizing other team members.

This focus on fixing weaknesses will, at best, bring an individual or organization up to some sort of average or "normal" status. When that status is achieved, the support, intervention, or assistance is usually withdrawn; the focus shifts to other individuals or to other areas of weakness in the same individual.

We tend to assume that our innate talents (the gifts we are born with or that emerge very early in life) will grow and develop naturally – that they do not need much attention. Perhaps the only exceptions to this belief are in athletics and the arts, where we are much better at identifying and nurturing talent. We don't say to athletes, "You are a natural at baseball but you make a poor football lineman; you should focus on bulking up and learning how to block better." Instead, we encourage them to practice, grow, and develop their talent. Michael Jordan was one of the greatest basketball players in history, but his attempt to switch to baseball after his first retirement was unsuccessful.

How often have we heard (or said!), "You can do anything you want if you want it badly enough." As a consultant, coach, and mentor, I've said that frequently over the years. We seem to have the idea that success is simply a matter of concentrated hard work. Education, practice, and hard work are needed to turn a talent into a reliable strength. But that same amount of effort will not lead to the same result if it is applied to an area in which we lack talent.

Of course, there are weaknesses that need to be addressed in any professional development process. But it is important to understand the relative importance of the competencies required for various organizational positions.

For example, Ken is a middle manager in a manufacturing company. He has a talent for communication – for vividly conveying to others the vision and strategy of the company and his unit. Like most managers at his level he also has budget responsibilities, for which he has little talent or interest. Many development programs would send Ken through a series of budget or financial training programs, trying to improve his skills in this area. Over time he might become an average budget manager. Instead, Ken goes through a basic training program in the company's budget process, and then delegates most of this responsibility to a trusted subordinate who understands the process and enjoys working with financial data. This frees Ken to concentrate on doing what he likes and what he does best. He works hard at enhancing his communication skills, keeps up to speed on industry developments, and is seen as a high-potential candidate for movement into corporate planning and executive management. Ken focuses on one of his talents and works to turn it into a strength. He's building on his talents and managing around his weakness.

Have you ever wondered where your real talents lie? During the past several years some excellent tools have been developed for identifying individual talents. Our favorite is the Clifton StrengthsFinder™ created by the founder and chairman of SRI Gallup. For more information about this assessment, visit the Gallup Web site: http://gmj.gallup.com/book_center/strengthsfinder/

Identifying your particular innate talents is only the beginning. Once you have identified them, you need to answer several questions, such as:

- § How does each of these talents show up in my professional and personal life?
- § What experiences have I had that might help turn each talent into a strength?
- § What skills do I use when utilizing my talents? Do any of those skills need additional knowledge and/or practice in order to become strengths?
- § How well do my talents match up with what I am doing professionally?

Your answers to these questions should provide you with clues about development or growth opportunities. At the same time, it makes sense to look at your teammates with an eye toward identifying their particular talents and helping them turn those into strengths.

Using the StrengthsFinder™ in combination with other tools, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator™ and a comprehensive 360° feedback assessment, can bring about substantial improvements in your ability to understand yourself and other people. Why not consider exploring your strengths? We'd be glad to help.

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