



Strength-to-Strength: Improving Your Workplace Performance

By Barry K. Zweibel

If your boss is like most bosses, your year-end performance review probably focused more on your weaknesses than your strengths. Why is it that bosses think the best way to motivate someone is by talking about what they're NOT good at?

Don't take this to mean that all weaknesses should just be ignored. We can't let what we do poorly, undermine what we do well. But to truly take our performance to the next level, we need to focus more on what we're already good at - and less on what we're not.

You see, you quickly reach a point of diminishing returns when working on your weaknesses. And while learning a few new skills might seem to be a good place to start, the actual time, energy, and commitment needed to fix a weakness can be enormous. There's often too much work to be done and even more working against it. Besides, say Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton, authors of *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, "[focusing on your weaknesses] isn't development - it is damage control. And by itself, damage control is a poor strategy for elevating either the employee or the organization to world-class performance." As a result of their Gallup Organization study that interviewed more than 80,000 of the world's best managers, their conclusion was clear:

"Capitalize on your strengths, whatever they may be, and manage around your weaknesses, whatever they may be."

[Managing Around Your Weaknesses: A Case Study](#)

"Dennis" was an absolute programming genius, but almost every time he interacted with customers, they would complain about not being able to

understand him. It was a real problem, so his boss told him to sign up for some customer service skill training. He decided to ask me for some coaching on it first.

Through our conversation it became apparent that he much preferred solving problems to talking about them - especially with "people who can't help," as he would say. Too, he doubted any lasting improvements were possible because whatever he'd learn while away would be long-forgotten by the time he worked through the mess that was probably waiting for him upon his return. I had to agree - it often happened that way.

I decided to try and leverage his strength as a troubleshooter by challenging him to better define the problem he was facing. He quickly concluded that, "Each and every hour I spend on customer service, is one LESS hour I have to troubleshoot. And if my troubleshooting gets too far behind," he continued, "it costs the company real dollars because delayed implementations delay revenue, add costs, impact other project schedules, and ironically enough, cause customer service complaints - the very problem we are trying to address. It's classic lose/lose."

"Excellent, so what if you couldn't fix this underlying customer service weakness of yours?" I asked. "How would you neutralize it?" He thought about it. "Well, he said, "I'd have someone else handle the customer service work." He even had someone in mind - a coworker with average troubleshooting talent, but incredible customer skills.

The two went to their bosses. "Why have both of us been doing what we're NOT good at when if we just shifted around a few responsibilities, we could each do a much better job AND save the company money?" They explained the business rationale behind their plan and, after a bit of cajoling, the boss agreed to "conditionally approve" a 90-day test. Since then, troubleshooting turnaround has improved, and customer complaints have dropped.

Recognizing Your Strengths and Talents

What if you don't know what your strengths and talents really are, though? That's what a long-time client asked me while I was writing this article. So I gave her an assignment based on some questions posed by Buckingham and Clifton:

- What are you able to do almost perfectly every time?
- What types of things do you tend to learn faster than most?
- What do you naturally do to help out in a crisis situation?
- What do others say you do better than most?
- What makes you thrive?

You may want to try this exercise yourself, and if you do, be sure to actually write your answers down. You'll want to refer to them as you look for new ways to apply your strengths and talents to whatever you do - especially when it means changing what you do, or changing the way you do it.

In conclusion, the Gallup study showed that excellent performers were rarely well-rounded. To the contrary, they were typically quite sharp, having honed their strengths to a keen edge. But they could successfully manage their weaknesses and capitalize on their strengths.

You may want to keep this in mind as you look to improve your own performance throughout the coming year. If nothing else, it would certainly give the boss something else to talk about!

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