

STOP OVERDOING YOUR STRENGTHS AND IGNORING YOUR WEAKNESSES

For the past 25 years I've emphasized the importance of leveraging your strengths to my clients--long before Marcus Buckingham got out of grade school. But the February 2009 issue of *Harvard Business Review* has challenged that conventional wisdom for personal development. Stop overdoing your strengths was Kaplan and Kaiser's message. This much needed message is right on.

There's a high cost to overusing your strengths. In the research, the authors found that taking a strength to the extreme was always detrimental to performance, and that on occasion, even a mild tendency to overdo can be harmful. For example, become a too forceful manager, and your team's output may improve some--but its morale and vitality will take a hit, eventually undercutting productivity. Be too enabling--the authors suggest--and you may help morale and vitality--but productivity will suffer over time, eroding morale.

Buckingham's more basic argument is that most Americans don't even know what their strengths are—and that they need to explore their strengths. Kaiser and Kaplan also recognize this. It's our strengths that will provide us the more pronounced opportunities to make a contribution to our organization and to our life. Nearly all we know about human development will support that conclusion. In contrast, over the years I have differed with their conclusions in one area. My mantra has always been: *Leverage your strengths. . . AND shore up your strategically significant weaknesses.*

The focus of Buckingham, and Kaplan and Kaiser upon strengths deals with its relationship to human and leadership productivity. I believe, like them, that this may well be where our best opportunities as achieving humans lie. But what I find frustrating is how much these writers circumvent the nature and impact of weakness, and how little they reveal about the nature of human learning. They avoid what are often the highly constructive organizational impacts upon our learning and development. Listen to Buckingham's introductory statement to *Now Discover Your Strengths*: "Suspend whatever interest you may have in weakness and instead explore the intricate detail of your strengths." Similarly, Kaplan and Kaiser stress the downside of overdoing strengths—certainly a legitimate emphasis. But even more poignant is their conclusion: "it's hard to overcome weaknesses." All of these writers work out of the overly strong emphasis upon weakness from the past. But they also fail to recognize the ongoing evolution of learning processes, as well as the

exceedingly helpful opportunities we are given from recent discoveries in neuroscience.

The perspective these authors bring is that repairing personal weakness poses a severe difficulty. And so, they suggest, let's ignore that subject. In fact, Buckingham argues that any job should be tailored to fit the person's strengths.

I argue instead, that a focus solely on strengths is simply inadequate for the complexities of today's market. We can no longer get away with "W's" glib patter: "I don't do nuance." An understanding of the work situation and human development demand a more well-rounded perspective. The reality is that the work of all organizations has ever-enlarging requirements and expectations. And inevitably, all of us will find that we have weaknesses in executing our jobs. Furthermore, there are going to be very, very few managers with the smarts, the moxie and the will to make it possible for an employee to play to their strengths all the time—even if that were feasible. The work world doesn't work that way.

Thus, there are always going to be tasks that surface our weaknesses. The issue for all of us is not only to play to our strengths, but to make certain we can manage those weaknesses that are going to severely and strategically impact our performance and our career future.

Indeed, there are two related issues that need to be surfaced regarding the "anti-weakness syndrome." First, a bit of balance. If we play our cards right, most of us end up with jobs that respond to our strengths. But all jobs have some things we don't like--often because we lack the expertise (call it a "weakness"). And we're going to have to resolve those weaknesses because our success and longevity depend on them as well as our strengths.

Second, a lot of the weakness business is also overkill. My rule is that if a person hasn't demonstrated a skill or competency, it's not because it's a weakness (even though everyone will call it that), but because there's no tool in the kit bag. More often than not, weaknesses are the result of lack of coaching, training or exposure, which are a matter of ignorance, not dislike or poor performance. Sometimes, a person simply needs help in learning. The old behavioral research is that if a certain behavior is needed, but not happening, there are three possible reasons: first, in 1% of issues the person is malicious (I don't see that very often); two, in 2 - 3% of issues, the person is thoughtless or careless; and three, in 95-96% of cases, the issue is simply not knowing—pure ignorance.

Whether or not the research is still valid may be at question, but I do know this: over the past 25 years I've developed millions of dollars of business based on that simple presupposition about weakness—AND my ability to assist people to leverage their strengths. Usually most of the time is spent shoring up non-existent strategic behaviors--that are labeled weaknesses. So, Buckingham, Kaplan and Kaiser, give me a break!