

FIRE YOUR WEAKNESSES; HIRE YOUR STRENGTHS

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The notion of strengths and weaknesses are widely center stage in our lives. This pattern starts during our primary and secondary schooling and continues into our work environments. Undoubtedly we have all been asked, or will be asked, to name our greatest strengths and weaknesses. More than likely our potential educators or employers are seeking to hear that our weaknesses will not be prohibitive, and that we have devised ways to neutralize them.

A candidate is marketing his or her competencies, knowledge, skills, and abilities throughout the entire interview process from cover letter to thank you letter. Everything that the candidate shares is expected to be a strength. The question where a candidate is directed to share his or her weaknesses is the only time that a candidate is expected to share something that makes him or her appear to be less than perfect. Consequently, that question is one of the most important and potentially pivotal of any questions that can be asked.

It is good practice to state a weakness and then demonstrate how that liability is actually an asset. Alternatively, one can state a weakness and then follow-up with a remedy to that weakness, usually through leveraging a strength.

Organizational fascination with strengths and weaknesses does not stop at interviews...it continues on into organizational culture through attitudes on training, development, and performance, as well as hiring, firing, and compensation. Within these outlooks, most organizations focus on eradicating weaknesses and ignore enhancing strengths. Now, *Discover Your Strengths* by Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton challenges this socially ingrained practice and offers a new paradigm. The authors write that "Strengths have their own patterns." They also write that "focusing on skills gaps is not development [but rather] damage control...and damage control will not lead to world-class performance."

According to Buckingham and Clifton, most organizations subscribe to two flawed assumptions:

- 1) Each person can learn to be competent in almost anything.
- 2) Each person's greatest room for growth is in his or her areas of greatest weakness.

Whereas the world's best managers subscribe to two better aligned assumptions:

- 1) Each person's talents are enduring and unique.
- 2) Each person's greatest room for growth is in the areas of his or her greatest strength.

After reading the book I totally brought into the concept of personal development strategies that build upon personal strengths rather than strategies that are deficiency focused. In my opinion, this construct can garner more success because of the improved basic psychology alone. A person who starts at a deficiency already has hurdles to overcome just to get to the starting line. That person

must overcome feelings of inadequacy, failure, shame, and ridicule. That person must exert energy to quell the thoughts and emotions that the negative feelings stimulate. Moreover, the person must expend more energy trying to remedy the weakness than he or she would have had to expend addressing a strength. This is because he or she is essentially being given a task to accomplish with the wrong set of tools.

Continuing with this metaphor, here is an analogy: Kevin is a manager and George is on his team. Kevin receives a new product kit and passes it along to George to assemble into a completed product. The suggested assembly time is 20 minutes. George has difficulty performing the given task because there are missing and extraneous parts. After 35 minutes, George becomes frustrated and recognizes that something is wrong. Kevin is also frustrated, his first thought is to find fault with George rather than to consider that the kit was flawed. The result in this analogy mirrors what happens in real life. The task performer feels poorly about his or herself and abilities, and the task giver finds first fault with people rather than products or processes.

This book challenged me to re-evaluate the expectations that I have for my own children and the tools and messages that I am providing them to rise to those expectations. I challenge you to check your kits before you pass them along. This can apply to yourself and your plans to achieve your expectations, as well as in terms of your children and those you manage.