



Play to Your Strengths

How often have you invested in a personal growth training to try to improve something you felt you were not good at doing? Perhaps it was personnel management, public speaking, marketing or sales. For most of us, trying to improve our weak areas in operating our business or managing our department comes with the territory. Whatever the area, we feel as if we are required to do battle with what we don't do well.

As it turns out, the majority of people around the world feel this way. In their groundbreaking book *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, authors Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton say that across all ages and cultures, people are more concerned about their weaknesses than their strengths. We believe that our weaknesses matter more in holding us back than our strengths matter in advancing us.

That's "nonsense," say the authors—widely held nonsense, but nonsense nonetheless. In their provocative theory, they suggest that the better strategy is to play to your strengths, building upon your core talents, and work around your weaknesses. You can work to add skills and knowledge to increase your performance in any area, but unless you are building upon one of your innate talents, your efforts won't produce exceptional results—some results, yes, but not dramatic improvement.

"Unless you have the necessary talent, your improvements will be modest," write Buckingham and Clifton. "You will be diverting most of your energy toward damage control and very little toward real development."

The expression "damage control" is their term for trying to minimize your weaknesses—the areas where your lack of talent actually get in the way of your performance.

"Managing Around" a Weakness

Instead of trying to overcome your weaknesses by brute force—and at the expense of putting the same energy into growing your strengths—they offer five strategies for what they call "managing around" a weakness:

Get a little better at it. In some cases, your weakness is only moderately impeding your peak performance in other areas. If so, then maybe damage control is the right solution.

Develop a support system. This is the proverbial string tied around the finger to remind you of something. Whether it is time management systems for those with a talent for adaptability but not discipline, or a scheduled walk in the park for disciplined folks who neglect self-care, you can often blunt the effects of your weaknesses through such structured inputs.

Study your prospects. If your skills tend toward the analytical and away from such talents as wooing clients or dealing directly with confrontation, then you probably ought not be spending a lot of time in sales. But when you do have to sell something—such as one of your ideas—approach the problem analytically. Rather than agonize over your lack of salesmanship, study your prospects, dig into what makes them tick and what ideas they've accepted in the past, and let your enthusiasm for your ideas do the talking.

Find a partner. This may be the best approach for small business people and "solo" practitioners. Go into partnership discussions with a clear-eyed understanding of the strengths you bring, and the strengths you need from your partner. Don't be shy about your strengths—the whole point of this is to create a world in which you get to do what you are really good at. And be open-minded about what a partnership looks like. For some solo practitioners, an administrative assistant or a marketing consultant could be all the partnering you need.

Just (Don't) Do It! Buckingham and Clifton recommend that you not do the things you are weak at doing! In a corporate setting you might get away with this, particularly if you are a high-performer in the areas of your strengths. If you're a small business owner and your organizational chart tends to have "me" written in most every box, *not* doing something may not seem like much of a choice. But keep it as a goal and continue to work toward the day when you can contribute to your business exclusively from the place of your highest strengths.



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