MAXIMIZING STRENGTHS v. FIXING WEAKNESSES... WHY CHOOSE?

The book *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, by Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton, advocates that individuals should not focus on developing their weak areas. William C. Byham, Chairman and CEO of DDI, disagrees. In this article, he explains why effective leaders need to develop both their strengths and their weak areas.

Should aspiring leaders concentrate solely on building and leveraging their strengths, or should they, in addition to focusing on their strengths, try to develop their weak areas, as well? The question is generating much discussion in leadership development circles in the wake of a new book, *Now, Discover Your Strengths* by Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton (Free Press).

Buckingham and Clifton’s thesis is based on two assumptions (page 8):

> “A person’s talents are enduring and unique.” Individuals should develop inherent talents into strengths.

> “Each person’s greatest room for growth is in the areas of his or her greatest strength.” Weaknesses are hard or impossible to develop. Smart individuals learn to manage around their weaknesses. For example, they delegate those areas in which they are not strong, or leverage strengths to overcome or compensate for weak areas.

The book suggests that individuals ascertain their strengths (through a personality test provided on the Web to readers of the book) and then organize ways to develop those strengths.
While fully accepting the importance of emphasizing and building strengths, I can’t agree with ignoring weaknesses and not trying to fill in development gaps. I offer a number of reasons:

1. **Effective leaders must be strong in all key areas.**

   To illustrate how leaders can succeed by choosing to ignore the areas in which they are weak, Buckingham and Clifton point to golf superstar Tiger Woods and how he worked with his coach to focus on his “most dominant strength, his swing” (page 22) to compensate for his comparatively weak bunker play.

   While, in a professional golfer such as Woods, Buckingham and Clifton have found an excellent analogy, they overlook a critical reality. That reality is this: Woods might not be adept with his sand wedge, but, as an elite PGA golfer, he more than capably wields that particular club just as he does all of the 14 clubs in his bag.

   Just as a PGA or LPGA tour champion must be able to skillfully use—as dictated by specific situations on the golf course—all of the 14 different clubs at his or her disposal, effective leaders must be able to draw upon a wide array of capabilities in order to assume the many roles required of them (see box on page six for leadership roles defined in a recent DDI study).

   Most models that describe how leaders accomplish these roles divide the required underlying behavior into 12 to 16 units called competencies (e.g., Building Trust, Empowerment, Establishing Strategic Direction, Adaptability). And like professional golfers, who are better with some clubs than with others, effective executives have enormous strengths in some competencies while they are merely “proficient” in others—but they’re not poor in any of them because all the competencies are needed for them to successfully take on their daily challenges (executive roles).

   Without acceptable skills in all the competencies, just as Woods has no less than acceptable skills in using every golf club in his bag, executives can miss important opportunities or make major mistakes.

   Consider, for example, the leader who is a strong visionary but is unable to secure buy-in for his strategies because he is weak when it comes to involving others—especially those charged with bringing his vision to fruition. This weakness may cause many of the leader’s sound directives to fail to achieve their intended outcomes—an eventuality that serves to lessen the value of his strength as a decision-maker, and may even jeopardize the viability and success of the entire organization.

2. **The idea that strengths can compensate for major weaknesses is simply not true.**

   At lower organizational levels, it’s possible to put together a team of effective people with offsetting and compensating strengths. If their skills, relative to working on a team, are good, the strengths of the members can come together to accomplish the team’s goals. But senior executives who run departments or business units—jobs demanding a variety of competencies—must, at different times, play all the executive roles. They may receive a lot of advice but ultimately they have to make the final decisions, deal with the press, motivate their workforce, etc.
Successful leaders also avoid falling prey to weaknesses related to executive derailers, negative personality traits that can cause otherwise knowledgeable and skilled leaders to fail. Examples of executive derailers include being Approval Dependent, Argumentative (defensive), Arrogant, Attention-seeking (self-promoting), Avoidant (procrastinating, manipulative), Eccentric, Imperceptive (unable to read others’ behaviors), Impulsive, Perfectionistic (micromanager), Risk Averse, and Volatile. Derailers are the “Achilles’ heel” of leadership, and all executives can share stories about colleagues who seemingly had everything going for them but failed because of one or more of these derailers.

While derailers are personality factors (like many of the talents that Buckingham and Clifton discuss) and are hard to change, their negative impact can be minimized or diffused through coaching and other developmental efforts. Frankly, I don’t know of anyone who works with executives who would suggest that organizations should ignore derailers. To do so would place both the individual executives—and their organizations—at considerable risk.

3. **Strengths can be overused.**

Research has shown that executive derailers can occur because a leader overuses one or more strengths (Hogan, 2000). As such, it is not uncommon for a strength such as being detail-oriented to lead a manager to become Perfectionistic, or for an executive with strong presentation and communication skills to hog the spotlight (Attention-seeking) and not give credit to others involved in a project.

Effective leaders know when to use their strengths and when not to use them. The idea of growing strengths, without encouraging insight into the possible downside of overuse, can lead to personal disappointments and management havoc.

4. **Focusing only on strengths can overburden others.**

In instances where a leader is weak in a critical area, others, recognizing the leader’s weakness, may feel forced to manage around him or her. The other leaders will have to work harder and step in to do more than their share of projects—say, taking on a planning role to pick up the slack for a leader who is focusing on her strong suit, executing. This shifting of roles and misappropriation of responsibilities, which can result in leaders expending their time and energy on functions that should fall beyond the intended scope of their jobs, can cost the organization a great deal in terms of both efficiency and morale.

5. **Weaknesses might be confused with inexperience.**

Sometimes development needs result from a lack of experience rather than from basic personality or behavioral factors. Take, for example, an individual who cannot swim. This person might not be able to swim for a number of reasons, including having never been taught, not having had access to a pool or body of water conducive to swimming, or perhaps because he or she may have a water-related phobia stemming from a traumatic childhood experience. Similarly, individuals may have leadership development
needs that came about because of a lack of challenge, a lack of opportunity, or from an early negative experience. These development needs often are fixable and, where latent abilities are uncovered, may even be transformed into major strengths. In such cases, it would be a shame for individuals not to address these “weaknesses” because they are not obvious strengths.

6. Focusing only on strengths can limit job options.

When individuals choose only to improve in the areas in which they are strong, they can end up underutilized in narrow jobs in the lower levels of the organization. An example might be an information technology professional who is very good at the technical aspects of his job and is constantly seeking to get better still, but does not attempt to develop his weak areas, which include managerial skills and business acumen. By further honing his technical skills and not pursuing development in those areas necessary for jobs at higher organizational levels, he does not position himself for advancement. Of course, this individual may be perfectly content to continue plying his technical skills indefinitely and has no designs on leadership positions. But, on the other hand, if he hopes to move up to jobs with greater responsibility, and have opportunities to lead people, participate in the formulation of business strategy, and generally increase his value to the organization, improving only his technical skills—his strengths—will potentially lead him to a career dead end.

7. Individuals are not always in tune with their own true strengths and weaknesses.

Many people feel that they’re worse than they really are in specific areas. Highly talented people often are hypercritical of themselves and view a relative weakness (Tiger Woods’ bunker shots) as an absolute weakness. On an absolute scale, they’re pretty good in all leadership competencies, but on a relative scale, of course, they’re better at some things than they are at others. These individuals usually get very concerned over their “weak” areas and devote quite a bit of time to developing them into something approximating their strengths.

Personally, I would very much hate to see individuals not try to maximize their effectiveness—and promotability—by boosting these seemingly weak areas and, instead, as Buckingham and Clifton recommend, engage in a misguided attempt to focus only on their strengths.

8. The true meaning of the 20 percent.

Buckingham and Clifton state that only 20 percent of employees believe that they are using their strengths every day. The statistic may be true, and if it is, it is indicative of a management problem—not a development problem. Managers need to do a better job of discovering the strengths of individuals and helping them maximize those strengths to the mutual benefit of both the individual and the organization just as they should also help individuals develop their weak areas.
9. **Weaknesses can successfully be addressed.**

Development of a leader’s weak competencies is a lot more effective than is suggested in *Now, Discover Your Strengths*. Buckingham and Clifton correctly point out some of the things that organizations do wrong without giving credit to effective and proven techniques (Phillips, 1994, 1997; DDI, 1999). For example, on pages 59-60, the authors imply that people have to be fully competent before a new behavior is satisfying and its use reinforcing. For years, good training practice has been to encourage individuals to set up measurable intermediate goals and to organize reinforcements for improvement (as measured by achieving the intermediate goals). The learner’s self-esteem and confidence are enhanced along the way. Participants feel that they are making progress (improving) even if they haven’t become fully competent.

After feedback from an assessment center or multirater instrument that helps them to determine their strengths and weaknesses relative to leadership competencies, individuals generally are able to use and develop their strengths while they also work on their weaknesses. In fact, at DDI we encourage them to do just that because working on strengths gives them confidence that they can be successful in their weak areas. People have a surprising ability to develop and grow—even as mature adults. Poor training is a waste of time and money, but effective training can result in big payoffs to individuals and organizations.

Successful professional golfers use all of their clubs and successful strategic leaders use all of their executive competencies. As Tiger Woods knows what club to use in different situations, effective leaders have the accurate insight necessary (e.g., roles to be played, people with whom they must interact) to flex their leadership competencies to address given situations. Some competencies can be stronger than others, but it’s hard to be successful with major competency gaps. The idea is not to throw away competencies people already have, but to develop those competencies along with others that will round out the set needed for success.

**REFERENCES**


NINE EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP ROLES

1. Strategist—Develops a long-range course of action or set of goals to achieve the organization’s vision.

2. Entrepreneur—Identifies and exploits opportunities for new products, services, and markets.

3. Captivator—Builds passion and commitment toward a common goal.

4. Talent Advocate—Attracts, develops and retains talent to ensure that people with the right skills and motivations to meet business needs are in the right place at the right time.

5. Mobilizer—Proactively builds and aligns stakeholders, capabilities, and resources for getting things done quickly and achieving complex objectives.

6. Change Driver—Creates an environment that embraces change; makes change happen, even if the change is radical; and helps others to accept new ideas.

7. Global Thinker—Integrates information from all sources to develop a well-formed, diverse perspective that can be used to optimize organizational performance.

8. Enterprise Guardian—Ensures shareholder value through courageous decision making that supports enterprise- or unit-wide interests.

9. Navigator—Clearly and quickly works through the complexity of key issues, problems, and opportunities to affect actions (e.g., leverage opportunities and resolve issues).