

Opposite Strengths, Not Strengths and Weaknesses

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It is common assumption that people are an intricate and inextricable blend of strengths and weaknesses. We are taught early and often that our strengths define us; that our strengths motivate us; they guide our decisions and shape our future. At the same time, we receive subtle messages as children, and overt ones as adults that our weaknesses should be disguised, ignored, or delegated.

In effect, the message is confusing: to be successful, to be whole we need only half of our selves. We need only strengths.

Are we to believe that half of what we have to offer in this world is good and that the other half is bad?

Diane Halpern, psychology professor at California State University-San Bernardino, makes a crucial observation: “Beliefs that have been constructed over many years and the habits of mind that developed along with them will take multiple learning experiences, distributed over time and settings, before they will be successfully replaced with new ways of thinking and knowing about the world.” I believe that what Dr. Halpern says is true of how people have come to think unquestioningly of themselves in terms of strengths and weaknesses, which is that people believe they have weaknesses because they have had learned over time that they have them.

Marcus Buckingham, well-known author and a tireless proselytizer for the concept of strengths, himself stresses the paradigm that people have both strengths and weaknesses. In his book *Go Put Your Strengths to Work*, chapter 4, “What Are Your Most Dominant Weaknesses?” he states, “Like enemies, weaknesses are more dangerous when they are quietly corrupting your work and life.” Words with negative connotations such as *enemies* and *corrupting* when referring to a person’s uniqueness are disconcerting in themselves. Worse still, if people accept the message that their weaknesses—which make up half of who they are—actually corrupt their lives, defeat is impending. The message they hear is tantamount to telling them they are valueless. And then they become what they think they are.

Dan Sullivan, the founder of the Strategic Coach consulting firm, says it plainly: “Reinforce your strengths and delegate your weaknesses.” Although the delivery and strategy may differ, almost all executive coaches today proffer Sullivan’s idea.

The Executive Coaching Forum is composed of a group of some of the most seasoned and experienced executive coaches. The Forum publishes *The Executive Coaching Handbook*, a comprehensive guide to the nature of executive coaching. These seasoned professionals as well are guided by the concept of strengths and weaknesses: Executives are admonished to “admit your strengths and weaknesses to be able to deal with them effectively.”

If you believe the professionals who advise you to reinforce your strengths and delegate your weaknesses, you give up half of what you have to offer the world. You end up hiding your light under a bushel. You unknowingly try to do too much with too little. No wonder success is elusive for so many people.

What people consider weaknesses are actually strengths that they do not want to use; don't like to use; or don't see the value in using. However, these lesser valued strengths actually sustain the success that is created by what people consider to be their only strengths – the strengths that come easily to them, they like to do, or they value.

What is the alternative to creating a strengths and weaknesses mindset? The credible alternative is a framework of strengths and -- strengths. Instead of a strength having an opposite which is a weakness, the opposite of a strength is in reality another strength. *Occasional* success comes from using the strength that comes easily; *sustained* success comes from using those strengths in tandem.

Are you being unrealistic in reframing your weaknesses as strengths? No, not as long as you realize that expressing certain strengths is easy for you and expressing others requires more concentrated effort on your part. What you have done by reframing your weaknesses as strengths is accepted in a positive way all the aspects of yourself without creating parts of you that must be hidden, delegated, and given up on. When you do this, you automatically create twice as many strengths as you had under the “strengths and weaknesses” paradigm ... and you have given yourself the keys to unlocking your growth and potential.

How does this concept play out in the real world? Sports give us very visual examples. Athletes are most often coached to use all their skills. The most successful basketball players can dribble, shoot, and pass almost equally well with both hands. Delegating your weaknesses is like refusing to use your left hand because you are right-handed.

Michael Jordan is right-handed. Can you imagine his being coached to use his right hand to the exclusion of his left? Michael will be forever remembered as one of the greatest basketball players of all time due at least in part to his ability to play on all parts of the court equally well using all parts of his body.

Star athletes like soccer player David Beckham are facile with both right and left feet. You don't see David refusing to take a shot at the goal because he is on his less preferred side of the field.

Executives also succeed through their opposite strengths. So often I find that executives get themselves into predicaments precisely because they rely solely on what they consider to be their only strengths. Let me give you an example.

A small Oklahoma oil company had a big payday – they struck an oilfield worth \$30 million, and they received that cash in a very short period of time. Now the CEO of the company had an MBA from Harvard, and he perceived his strength to be his ability to think, plan, and analyze. After all, they had discovered the oil field by doing the kind of research and analysis that most explorers for oil do not do.

So, in order to make the most of the investment opportunity the \$30 million offered, the CEO hired three more people with Harvard MBAs – people just like him. To him, the ability to analyze was the strength that always led to success. But after two years of analyzing a multitude of investment opportunities, all four Harvard MBAs convinced one another that still more analysis was needed before the money was invested. In the meantime, opportunities that had come knocking were also going by the wayside.

The easy strength of thinking had become their roadblock to success. Instead of relying on their opposite strength of risking and taking action, they had truly experienced the “paralysis of analysis.” My job involved coaching them to express their opposite strength of risking by taking action. By guiding them through a realistic look at their inability to make a decision, I was able to guide them toward a solution that involved their opposite strength of risking but still relied on the fruits of their thinking. They took a week to further analyze their three best investment opportunities. At the end of the week, they took the plunge and invested in the best opportunity of the three. That movement into action started them on the path to making prudent investments with the remainder of the cash, and those investments paid off handsomely.

Now, as I have said, whether or not you have strengths and weaknesses or opposite strengths depends on your value system and your point of view. What you have is up to you to decide. Dr. Halpern suggests that it will take quite a bit of time to replace your strengths and weaknesses mindset with an opposite strengths one. But the reward is tremendous – you will gain back the other half of yourself that you had previously attempted to hide. And the success you jumpstart with what you perceive to be your only strengths will be sustained by your new-found strengths. The time to get started is now.