

Strengths, Fatal Flaws and Allowable Weaknesses – A Whole Brain Strategy for Success

If you want to be successful as a leader then build on what you do well. Stop doing things that will 'kill you' and make your allowable weaknesses irrelevant. Easy said!

The top and the bottom

Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman wanted to know what separated the top performers from the bottom performers. They discovered in their research for their book, 'The Extraordinary Leader', that you should focus most of your energy on developing strengths that fall within five competency clusters.

The differences clustered into five areas:

1. Character: ". . . integrity, honesty, doing what you say you are going to do, and predictability."
2. Personal competence: ". . . includes things like problem solving skills, technical proficiency, and being receptive to new ideas."
3. Driving for results: ". . . includes setting lofty goals, having a clear view of what needs to be accomplished, being very focused on that and taking responsibility to achieve those goals."
4. Interpersonal competency: ". . . inspiring and motivating other people; being perceived as a good team player; being a prolific and powerful communicator."
5. Leading change: ". . . having a vision of the future, having your antenna out to look at what is going on in the outside world."

What Zenger and Folkman found was that the presence of just a small number (3) of strengths could make the difference between an average and a great leader.

Allowable Weaknesses

One conclusion they came to from their research is that "...getting a little bit better at things that you are average at or bad at isn't going to do anything." There isn't much leverage associated with working on your average or below average skills. These we might call allowable weaknesses. We need to find ways of making these irrelevant – give them to someone else who does them better than you, ignore them and see if they go away – it's surprising the number that do - do them as quickly and as easily as you can, spend very little time on them etc.

Spending time on these isn't going to change your performance enough to push you up to the level where you will be considered "exceptional or strong" in the eyes of others. "The better tactic is to focus on the things that you are

somewhat good at and passionate about. You are more likely to get better at those competencies and raising those up will really make a big difference. "

Focus on strengths

Marcus Buckingham supports this focus on strengths. He describes as strength as His research with the Gallup Organisation

The Brain Profile

Sometimes its just obvious – but when its not consider doing a brain profile. As painful and invasive as it sounds it's not. 20 minutes on-line will give you a good handle on your thinking preference. It is in your thinking preference that you will identify your strengths, potential fatal flaws and those weaknesses you need to make irrelevant!

Everything we do starts with our brain - the way we react to others, make decisions, communicate, learn, choose careers, manage people, and bring up our families - they all depend on how we think! We all have preferred ways of thinking. Some people focus on facts, others look for relationships. Some like detail, others prefer the bigger picture.

Whilst our personal 'thinking preferences' can sometimes help us in certain situations, they can also inhibit our ability to function fully and effectively. So to improve our effectiveness - both personally and organisationally - we need to more fully understand our thinking preferences.

Which part of your brain do you like best and why it matters?

Brian is very precise and exact. He loves his work – especially the 'geekie stuff'. He is always right and comes across as a little arrogant. He is impatient with his colleagues and appears to be somewhat aloof. John, his manager really likes him because he is reliable and gives him the detailed reports that he likes. They have very similar ways. Both can be quite intimidating. Interaction in team meetings is quite limited and often negative. Tom gets frustrated by Brian, and John for that matter. He regards John as 'anal and nit-picky'. Tom regularly gets into strife for not completing jobs on time and submitting, in the eyes of John, sub-standard reports. His frustration boils over every now and then. He has grown to really dislike Brian and John and his performance is under review. The team has taken sides and its morale continues to decline.

Lets look at what is going on here. Take a look at he quadrants below.

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| • Likes working with facts | • Sees the whole picture, not detail |
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deals with facts / issues in a precise way • Looks at problems in a logical and rational way • Likes working with numbers • Interested in technical aspects • Performance is important • Prefers to analyse facts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Likes change and trying new things • Enjoys being busy with several things at the same time • Looks for alternative answers • Enjoys challenge and risk • Does not always do things the same way
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefers traditional thinking • Likes to be organised and orderly • Likes to work with detail • Prefers a stable and reliable work environment • Feels comfortable with procedure • The task at hand is important – will complete it on time • Prefers security and safety to risk taking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facts experienced in an emotional way • Sympathetic and intuitive towards people • Likes interaction • Problem solving is often and emotional, not logical, process • Shows enthusiasm when they like an idea • Talks to process learning

As you can see Brian's and John's thinking preferences are in the top left quadrant whereas Tom's are in the bottom right quadrant. Each is not going out of their way to upset the other – they just think and do differently and neither understands that. Or if they do neither knows what to do about it.

But what about fatal flaws?

We don't want to forget that their research also uncovered five "fatal flaws" or career derailers. These are behaviors that you should change or stop doing. "The fatal flaws include:

1. Inability to learn from mistakes
2. Lack of core interpersonal skills and competencies.
3. Lack of openness to new or different ideas.
4. Lack of accountability.
5. Lack of initiative

What is interesting about the five fatal flaws, according to Zenger, is that these traits reflect a "pattern of inactivity." "It is not the pattern of someone who is doing too much of something, but the pattern of someone doing way too little." In my experience, #4, not taking responsibility (or excessive defensiveness) and #2, inability to effectively relate to people are the most frequent issues I encounter with executives who are referred for coaching. And...of those, "not taking responsibility" (excessive defensiveness) is the most difficult to turn around because, I believe, it's a symptom of deep-seated insecurity. And, to make matters even more difficult, those folks frequently come across as super confident when in fact they are really

insecure. They overcompensate. How do you help someone who can't admit they need help? It's very difficult, if not impossible, to help someone who is so insecure that they have built up an elaborate defense system of "I'm right, you're wrong," and has climbed their way to the top over the bodies of others whom they've slain (so to speak) to get there.

Enough said...here's to building on strengths!