

# Can a Strength be a Weakness?

Solutions for Work and Life, 2 March 2007

Celebrate International Women's Day (IWD) on March 8. It is a global day connecting all women around the world and inspiring them to achieve their full potential. IWD celebrates the collective power of women past, present and future.

I will be participating in a number of events scheduled to coincide the International Women's Day here in Shanghai. The Global Talent Development Center of Shanghai University is kicking on a series aimed at globalizing women leaders, and I'll be part of the panel discussion on March 6. Businesswomen of Shanghai will be honored at the Businesswomen of the Year Awards Gala Event on March 10. Don't hesitate to contact me if you are interested in information on these events.

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## Strengths as Weaknesses?

Marcus Buckingham, author of such books as *First, Break All The Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently* and *The One Thing You Need to Know...About Great Managing, Great Leading and Sustained Individual Success*, argues that the best managers share one talent - the ability to find, and then utilize their employees' unique strengths. He has been [quoted](#) as saying, "The guiding principle is, 'How can I take this person's talent and turn it into performance?' That's the only way success is possible." With his book, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, co-authored with Donald O. Clifton, he kicked off the latest management trend - strength-based management. By focusing on strengths in every management practice, from hiring, assignment, development, motivation and promotion, managers apply the greatest leverage to business success.

Yet, with historical practices focused on strengths and weaknesses, challenges are sure to arise. Consider the standard (and dreaded) interview question, "name your top three strengths and weaknesses". What about the typical performance review where "areas for improvement" are required? Doesn't development planning normally focus on three areas "needing improvement"? What about the contention that our greatest strength can be our greatest weaknesses?

As the key proponent of the StrengthsFinder system from Buckingham and Clifton's book, the Gallup Management Journal touched on this topic in [Probing the Dark Side of Employees' Strengths: Can their talents actually alienate colleagues and hurt your organization?](#) They give as an example, Matt who has a top talent theme of Command. The question is whether this can result in being bossy (bad) versus decisive (good). Gallup falls back on their definition of strength "the ability to consistently produce a nearly perfect positive outcome in a specific task". If Matt is being bossy, he needs to learn to refine his talent so that it is used in a more productive fashion. In this way, a strength can't be a weakness. If not used productively, it is not a strength; though can perhaps be developed as one.

Turknett and Anderson in their article, [Aggressive Leadership: When Does Strength Become Weakness?](#) argue that aggressiveness, often considered a

strength in a leader, can be a weakness when it affects interpersonal relationships. A bit confusing, since if we apply the Gallup definition, the aggressiveness wouldn't be strength since it's not consistent produces a positive outcome. Turknett and Anderson argue for learning new behaviors that channel the aggression toward positive outcomes.

In a blog posting titled [Are Your Strengths Under Control](#) the theory suggested is that no one has weaknesses – they are merely strengths carried to an excess. In these examples, aggression carried to an extreme leads to bullying. Posited as an approach to having performance reviews with marginal employees, this could be the “softer, gentler” approach to the needed development discussion. When a manager says to you, “you’re so good at this, it’s a problem” I wonder whether the message is received better?

Chris Rodgers of [informal coalitions](#) agrees that strengths can be carried to an excess, with the resulting behavior being a problem. He disagrees with the assertion that there are no weaknesses, believing that this leads to a denial of weaknesses and a tendency toward mediocrity. He argues that we need to own our strengths and our weaknesses. With our weaknesses acknowledged, we should work to ensure that our “unavoidable weaknesses” are expressed in the most positive way possible and in support of our strengths.

Gallup recommends that we help people understand their nature patterns so they can be applied in a positive and productive way; therefore, strengths cannot be weaknesses. Turknett and Anderson argue for coaching to build the new behaviors that channel attributes into positive interactions with others. PainFreeLearning requests that we consider whether we have a tendency to overplay any of strengths. Chris Rodgers asks that we manage our “warts and all”.

It is intriguing to me that none of these articles speaks to the interaction of the behavior or attribute with the environment. A strength is neither good nor bad. A weakness is neither good nor bad. The only legitimate question is perhaps alluded to in the definition Gallup gives for a strength, “do the behaviors result in a positive outcome in the context in which they are used?” The commanding presence of Matt may be bullying in a small collaborative high tech company; it may be appropriately decisive in a privately held Chinese company. Without context, without measurable outcomes, the behaviors are neither strengths, nor weaknesses. Perhaps the focus should not be on whether there are strengths and weaknesses, but rather which behaviors are most appropriate when hiring, promoting, developing and motivating staff to support the desired business outcomes in the particular environment.

***Are your strengths weaknesses? What could you alter about the behavior or context that would change your answer?***

[Leave your comments](#)

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Spring has found Shanghai and will soon sweep the northern hemisphere. If this newsletter finds you in the southern hemisphere, enjoy the peak of summer.

All seasons bring their opportunity for refreshment and renewal. If you are ready to challenge the status quo, send me an [email](#) to arrange a complimentary coaching session and take on the challenge of using your strengths and weaknesses to their best advantage.

Make everyday International Women's Day. Do your bit to ensure that the future for women is bright, equal, safe and rewarding.

Have a great March!

Sherry Read  
[www.ReadSolutionsGroup.com](http://www.ReadSolutionsGroup.com)  
[Sherry@ReadSolutionsGroup.com](mailto:Sherry@ReadSolutionsGroup.com)