



Managing for Weakness - a mis-management myth -

The Myth

Managers spend a lot of time worrying about the weaknesses of their employees. “If only I could get her to perform better we would have a really great team.” And countless more along that line. Companies have performance evaluation systems that focus attention on how employees should overcome their weaknesses by additional training, supervision and mentoring, and, above all, more work on self-improvement by the employee. Perhaps this focus on weakness flows from an educational system that has always been more attuned to the “Cs” and “Ds” and what must be done to raise those scores, rather than building on the strengths. Our focus on overcoming weakness is reflected in a saying like, “You can become anything you want to be, if you just try hard enough.”

Debunked

In the management world, Peter Drucker, the great god-father of modern management, spoke clearly about this matter way back in 1966 in his still prescient and useful little book, *The Effective Executive* (still in print). He wrote, “The effective executive fills positions and promotes on the basis of what a man can do. He does not make staffing decisions to minimize weaknesses but to maximize strength.... Performance can only be built on strengths. What matters most is the ability to do the assignment.”

More recently, others have also come to see that when it comes to both people and organizations the only way to build for results is to build on strengths. One example of this is the work of the Gallup Organization and Marcus Buckingham and Donald D. Clifton in *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (Free Press, New York 2001) and Tom Rath, *Strengths Finder 2.0* (Gallup Press, New York 2007). Go to the website (<https://www.strengthsfinder.com/>) and check this out.

A Better Approach - Build on Strength

Focusing on strengths engages peoples' best attributes, skills, and experiences. Focusing on strengths engages people where they have the most passion, energy and success. Focusing on strengths focuses on the activities where people have already demonstrated results. Focusing on strengths creates a positive relationship because you a talking about activities that the employee is good at and has the best chance of producing good results.

Managers should focus their attention on how to be sure that every person is working on their strengths as much as possible.

There is another reason for this focus on strengths, it removes a crutch that managers use to avoid taking complete responsibility for their performance and the performance of the organization - the myth of lousy personnel - "If I only had better people, I could get my organization to really perform." I wrote about this recently in another posting, It's Always Your Fault - taking responsibility for your personnel".

Start With Your Strengths

To move us beyond this discussion, ask yourself:

"What are my strengths?"

The simplest way to answer this question is to look at the activities where you have had the most and best results. These are your strengths. You might enrich this line of thinking by asking which activities make you happy, put you into a state of flow where you really concentrate and loose track of time? An external, third party assessment can be helpful. I have used StrengthsFinder 2.0. It is good, adequate detail without overreaching. There are others.

Then ask this question:

"Am I spending most of my time working on my areas of strength?"

Make a list of your activities over the last two weeks. Do a large number of your strengths play a significant role in many of your day-to-day activities? If there are, great!! If not, you need to take action.

The most important step is to move your work day towards your strengths. Start by asking yourself how you can make changes. Many times my clients find that they are doing tasks out of their strength zones simply because they always have. Habits are made to be changed. Look around the organization to find someone whose strengths include these tasks. Off load them. Keep your eye on the results required, but, off load. Other

clients have realized that they need a new employee or business partner to take on the tasks that are in their weak zones.

One of the great side effects of moving to your strengths is that the tasks you shed will be performed better, in a more productive fashion, by somebody who feels good about exercising their strengths in carrying them out.

Look for Strengths in Others

Once you have identified your own strengths and acted to move towards them, you can turn to asking others in your organization, “What are your strengths?”. It is important that you empower them to answer the question for themselves. Then, together, you can act to move them towards their strengths. This is a task requiring more space and time than possible here. A hint is that you will need to build a matrix that displays all of the organization’s primary activities’ strengths requirements on one axis and the strengths of all personnel on the other.

What About The Weaknesses?

OK, so it is true. Everyone has weaknesses. It is true that inevitably these weaknesses show up in the results. The only useful answer to this quandary is the old saying, “Just take your lumps.” Whenever you find a bad result due to someone working in a weakness zone, ask yourself, as the general manager, “Could I have assigned someone else to do that job and have it in their strength zone?”

If you work seriously for yourself and those in your organization to focus on strengths, you will find that the results overall are much better and you and everyone else feels better because they are working in the strength zone.

Contact Mark Orton - Business Coach for more on this topic and for a no-obligation introductory telephone discussion.

mark.orton@businesscoach.us.com

617-312-8550