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LEADING WITH YOUR STRENGTHS

Originally published in Northern Nevada Business Weekly, July 2004

Most business people know that continuous improvement is vital. Leaders, employees, and whole organizations retain their competitive edge by constantly looking for new ways to be their best.

However, there are more effective and less effective ways to achieve that end. The less effective way is unfortunately more prevalent. This article discusses two routes to progress and provides strategies for improvement that are more likely to produce results.

Let's talk about the less effective way to get ahead first. In this approach, people focus on improving their *weaknesses*. The logic from this is intuitive: common sense says that if you do something poorly, you should improve it, and you'll get better. The problem is that what seems like common sense based on a common misconception.

The reality is this: You become what you think about most. So if you think about your weaknesses all the time, what do you become? Weak. If you think about your strengths all the time, what do you become? Strong. And yet, there's a continuous attention on what people are *not* doing well.

As a result, well-meaning leaders discourage employees everyday. They point out what's wrong and call attention to errors, thinking it will make people more productive. Instead, employees feel unappreciated, disrespected, and underestimated at best—and anxious and resentful at worst. They spend their time trying to *not* get in trouble, *not* make mistakes, and earn the tiniest morsel of appreciation that will give them the motivation and self-confidence to do things right. And they are nowhere near their best.

Learning and growing by attending to weaknesses may be a familiar path to advancement, but the effect can be demoralizing, and ultimately, counterproductive.

Fortunately, there is a better way—one that emphasizes *strengths* in the search for improvement. This approach involves focusing on the good in people in order to develop their potential. Continuous improvement from this perspective involves recognizing unique strengths and building on those to get better and better.

Importantly, a strengths-based approach to improvement does not overlook weaknesses. However, instead of taking strengths for granted and constantly trying to improve weaknesses, it involves finding ways to *manage* weaknesses and build on strengths. The result? People spend more time doing the things that they do naturally, easily and well. This raises their confidence and motivates them to do their best. Importantly, they must still attend their shortcomings, but they do so from a position of strength.

So we have two routes to improvement: one based on weakness that can be demoralizing and ineffective, and one based on strengths, that can be more efficient and significantly more effective.

Let's look at an example of how each approach might influence the growth of an individual. Imagine a person who tends to be inarticulate, but has a great talent for connecting with people. If he continually thinks about how poorly he speaks, he can become discouraged and self-conscious. He may even shy away from interaction—an area in which he excels. On the other hand, if the same individual attends to his strength in interacting with people, he may develop stronger relationships, build more confidence, and start communicating more easily. Focusing on weakness can impair even strengths; focusing on strengths can improve even weaknesses.

Overall, a strengths-based approach to improvement is about building people up by focusing on their strengths so that they become motivated and empowered to improve in all areas of their life.

But how does one cultivate strengths? Whether you want to build your own strengths or help others build theirs, the process is the same.

- **First, identify the strengths that are readily apparent.** Jot down your own ideas about what this person does naturally, easily, and voluntarily.
- **Then, grow your list.** Notice what this person does well in group interactions. Watch what tasks he or she volunteers for or takes on without anyone asking.
- **Notice when the person is having fun.** Joy and ease are clues that people are operating from their strengths.
- **Ask others what strengths they see in this person.** Different people can offer different perspectives on each other based on their unique relationship.
- **Finally, ask them.** People generally have a sense of what they do well. The information you seek may be free for the asking.

Once you've identified a person's strengths, make a conscious effort to help him or her recognize, use, and develop them to help them reach their potential.

How? The options are limitless, but here are a few ways to start.

- **Allow people to self-nominate for tasks.** Given the option, people will often choose to do things they enjoy doing and do well.
- **Invite people to do things their way instead of yours.** Someone whose strength is in technical skills will prepare a report very differently than someone whose strength is in organizing information. The product might be identical, but the process they use to get there may differ widely.
- **Appreciate people openly.** If you want people to focus on their strengths, draw attention to them by acknowledging what they do well, specifically. This may take the form of a phone call, an email, or a quick comment in daily interaction.

These are just a few simple ways to encourage people to improve that leverage their strengths. The key to progress in this approach is to keep it simple and emphasize strengths consistently, sincerely, and often.

There's no question that to do well in business, whether you're an individual, a leader, or a whole company, you must continually strive to be better. Those who will succeed most surely will be those who capitalize on their strengths.



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