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Managing Your Weaknesses

How making the most of your strengths can play a key role

Much as we'd like to focus on our talents and strengths for 50 hours a week, we are constantly forced to cope with our weaknesses. Moving into a different job, taking on a challenging project, getting promoted into management -- situations like these often require us to confront either our own weaknesses or those of the people we manage. GMJ asked Kenneth A. Tucker, Gallup consultant, writer, speaker, and expert on helping others use their talents and strengths, to share strategies for using talents while managing weaknesses.

GMJ: How do you define talent?

Kenneth A. Tucker: A talent is a recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied. Talents are items that are always on your agenda, and they inspire your greatest moments of fulfillment. Using your talents is as natural as breathing.

GMJ: What is a weakness?

Tucker: If talents are patterns, then weaknesses are *not* patterns. They're not on your agenda unless someone puts them there or you're forced to put them there. You notice a weakness when you are faced -- voluntarily or involuntarily -- with a situation in which you have to use a pattern that's not naturally you. A weakness forces you to depend on or try to develop a pattern that is not innate for you.

GMJ: Let's say that I'm ready for a new challenge at work, so I've taken on a management role that I think will draw on my strengths. But I find that I have one big weakness that's crucial for success in my role. What should I do?

Tucker: Most successful managers or leaders whom we've studied know and understand their recurring patterns -- the talents that serve as the basis for their strengths -- so well that they use them to manage the non-talents. So in your new role, it would be absolutely essential for you to discover how to use the talents you have to overcome the non-talent.

But let's get specific. What is the non-talent?

GMJ: Time management.

Tucker: A highly organized and time-efficient person would be likely to have

significant talents in the areas of Discipline and Focus. But let's say you don't. You lack Discipline or Focus, but instead, you have many talents as an Achiever. You want to accomplish things. You may even be driven to make a mental or physical note of the things that you plan to accomplish, then go back to check those things off when you have accomplished them.

For example, I work with a manager who is driven by talents in his Achiever theme. Now, he knows he needs to interact with his people every day, but he isn't naturally inclined to go out and meet people, greet them, and be friendly with them. So he puts this task on his list of things to do every day. Four times a day, he goes out to the coffee pot that's across the hall from his office and talks to colleagues on the way. Yes, he makes sure he does this four times daily. This strategy works for him because he's an Achiever and because he's put it on his list of things to do.

So if you're not naturally organized, but you're driven to achieve, you could make up for your lack of organization by drawing on complementary talents. This is very powerful, because the flip side of that is conventional wisdom, which would send you to a time-management seminar to learn organizational skills.

GMJ: *Are there other strategies that managers use to manage around a weakness?*

Tucker: Just as you can use your own talents in a complementary manner, you can develop complementary partnerships that will make use of the talents of others. Imagine for a moment a manager who is very talented as an Achiever, as an Arranger, and as an Activator. She will be driven to accomplish things -- that's Achiever; accomplish them right now -- that's Activator; and she'll work on several things almost simultaneously -- that's Arranger. At the end of the day, you literally have to wade through what she did, because she worked on so many things, not necessarily in an orderly fashion. To help her keep organized, she partners with a highly focused and disciplined administrative assistant.

But there's a problem. Every five minutes, she runs to her administrative assistant and says, "Here's another thing I want you to do." Because she's an Activator, she's going to delegate the tasks as they occur to her. She could drive that highly disciplined, highly focused person nuts, because every five minutes she has a new idea or something new she wants done. And the way she presents it is, "Do this now, too." The best way for them to work together is to "own" or claim their talents, to be honest about their weaknesses, and to respect the other person in the relationship.

GMJ: *Managers often face the reality that an employee may have a weakness in an area that's preventing him from achieving excellence in his role. What are some effective strategies that managers can use to help employees manage their weaknesses?*

Tucker: When managers spot an apparent weakness, there are three points of intervention. First, the manager should ask the question "Does this person possess the talents needed to do the task he's being asked to do?" It may indeed

be a weakness if this person lacks the talent to do the task.

Next, ask the question, "Does the organization's process allow this person to use his talents?" Sometimes a weakness is a result of a process, of those seven deadly words: "We have always done it this way." Sometimes a process prevents an individual from using his greatest talents, resulting in what appears to be weakness.

Finally, the manager should examine this person's productivity. Is he underperforming? Or is he reasonably good at doing the task? I believe productivity measures may show if he has some degree of talent he can apply to the task or if he lacks the talents necessary to accomplish it. He may be able to manage the weakness using talents from another strength.

GMJ: *What are some of the best ways to manage a weakness through the lens of my talents?*

Tucker: When you're challenged with a weakness, clearly define the outcome you're trying to accomplish. A case in point: Let's say I am trying to close a sale. Now, I am a person with Woo and Communication, and I make my best sales using these talents. I'm faced with a potential customer who is highly Analytical -- which I'm not -- and she is somewhat cautious any time she's confronted with Woo. She doesn't want any sales hype. What she wants is to walk away knowing that she made the best decision, that she's chosen the best product or service -- she just wants the facts. So I have to manage that sale differently.

One of the ways in which people are most effective is when they are *intentional* in how they use their talents. They understand what their talents look like to others. They understand how they can use their talents to influence others, positively or negatively. In that situation, I should consider how I could use my talents without allowing them to interfere with the other person's talents. I need to think about how I can use my Communication talents to articulate the product benefits in a way that meets the customer's needs -- not mine.

GMJ: *So managing around a weakness not only requires me to know my talents, it requires me to be very conscious in how I use them.*

Tucker: That's right, and that's why I use the word *intentional*. A person greatly talented in Command, for example, might want to rush into her boss' office and have a face-to-face every time there's a problem. In fact, her coworkers know she will do this, so they tell her everything they think is wrong because they know she will rush into the boss' office, saving them the bother of a confrontation. To avoid this, she needs to become intentional in her use of her Command talents and understand how to use them appropriately.

The thought that really excites me is how absolutely liberating talents are. Our talents are our greatest potential -- our opportunity for strength. When people come to know who they are and learn how to use their talents intentionally, it's an amazing combination.

-- Interviewed by Barb Sanford

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