



Genius File #5 - The Myth of Strengths and Weaknesses

By

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There is a myth about strengths and weaknesses, one which states that we all naturally possess them. In reality, we don't. What we *do* possess are natural talents and non-talents, but these are not the same as strengths and weaknesses.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not one of those that thinks it is too negative to tell someone they have a weakness and wants to call it "an opportunity for development". I actually hate this term because more often than not it supports the incorrect view that I can fix a weakness by developing a new natural talent. If one of my clients is suffering from a weakness I tell them so straight up, but the key is that this weakness isn't natural, it is *manufactured*.

Weaknesses and strengths don't exist naturally, only talents and non-talents exist naturally. It is only when I rely on a non-talent that I create a weakness for myself. Likewise, if I don't rely on my talents, they never become strengths.

In other words, you are ultimately in control of your strengths and weaknesses. You may be born with talents and non-talents, but you are in charge of whether or not those talents and non-talents are used to become strengths or weaknesses. When you allow your success to depend on your talents, you create strengths. When you allow your success to depend on your non-talents, you create weaknesses.

Most people buy into the myth that they naturally have strengths and weaknesses. They fail to understand that the power is theirs as to whether

these strengths and weaknesses exist or not. In reality, you only have *potential* strengths and weaknesses.

What controls these potentials is how you apply yourself. If you have a non-talent for strategic thinking and allow your role to depend on your ability to create complex systems or long-range plans, then you manufacture a weakness. If your role doesn't require strategic thinking, however, then you don't create any weakness for yourself. That non-talent remains only a potential weakness.

When you make this shift in perspectives and realize any weaknesses you have only exist because you manufactured them, you should also realize that you can correct it by removing that dependence. And that's the exciting part.

Just like Mom used to say, "I brought you into this world and I can take you out," so too did you bring your weaknesses into this world and so too can you take them out. But instead of trying to take them out by developing all kinds of new natural talents, you can remove your weaknesses by simply removing your dependency on non-talents.

Think of talents and non-talents like two boxes. The first box contains a gift (talent) and comes all gift wrapped with a bow. The second box contains trouble (non-talent) and is marked *Pandora's Box*. Regardless of the contents, however, each box only contains potential. The first box is only potentially good, the latter only potentially bad. Nothing happens until you actually open the boxes.

If you never open the gift box, you never receive the gift contained inside. Likewise, if you never open Pandora's box, you never suffer the consequences. Talents and non-talents work in very much the same way. If you never rely on your talents (open the gift box) then you never realize the strengths contained inside – and if you never rely on your non-talents (open Pandora's Box) then you never suffer the weaknesses contained inside.

The key is in how you apply yourself, and the impact of this understanding is incredibly important because once you realize that you create your strengths and weaknesses, you realize that you are in control. You realize that you don't have to suffer from weaknesses which were given to you and about which you can do nothing. You are in control because while you definitely have non-talents, nothing in the universe states that you have to depend on them and if you don't depend on them, then they aren't weaknesses now are they?

The most successful people studied in a recent research program understand this. Their control lies internally within them. They know that they are the only ones responsible for whether they benefit from strengths or suffer from weaknesses. They manage to turn potential strengths into actual strengths by relying on their natural talents and they manage to leave potential weaknesses as just that – potential.

They do not allow their success to become dependent on their non-talents. Their primary focus is on *maximizing* their dependence on talents and *minimizing* their dependence on non-talents. When Peter Drucker, the elder

statesman of management wisdom, spoke to leaders about increasing performance in their people he said, “your job is to make the strengths of your people more effective and their weaknesses irrelevant.” He didn’t talk about correcting their weaknesses by developing new natural talents, he championed making them irrelevant (by not depending on non-talents).

We are all very conditioned to following the conventional wisdom that you possess weaknesses and in order to improve you must fix – by developing new talents where they haven't existed prior. A great example of someone manufacturing a weakness can be found in the story of Beth, an executive coach.

Beth was an independent management consultant and executive coach, but as a sole proprietor she was also responsible for having to sell her services. The problem was that Beth was not good at selling – at all. It was a significant weakness for her. This weakness fed off the fact that her natural talents and non-talents were not ideally suited for aggressive selling.

She had been trying to fix her weakness for years by taking sales training programs, reading sales development books, and trying everything that all the other consultants she knew had said worked for them. No matter how hard she tried to put in what God left out, she just continued to manufacture a weakness for herself by trying to become a great natural sales person.

What Beth was missing was that instead of focusing on fixing her weakness, all she had to do was stop manufacturing it. If she stopped trying to be a great sales person, she wouldn't be creating that weakness anymore.

Beth had totally bought into the message that the whole world had sold her. From books on how to start your own consulting practice, to experts on growing your own business to lectures on being a successful entrepreneur, Beth had been told that in order to succeed in her role she would *have* to be a great sales person.

The only problem with that concept, though, is that not one of those sources telling Beth how to be successful knew anything about Beth’s natural talents. There was an entire world ready to instruct Beth on how to succeed by following the path they had followed, but all of them failed to appreciate that perhaps Beth had to take her own path to reach the same objective.

And there you have it. Beth had fallen into the trap that so many do. Like most of us, Beth was conditioned to assumed that there was *one best way* to fulfill her role, and with so many people telling her the same thing she was convinced that in order to succeed as a coach, she would have to succeed as a sales person.

The simple solution for Beth was to stop trying to be a sales person and instead just focus on being what she wanted to be... a successful coach. She had not asked herself, “How do I achieve my objective of growing my practice that doesn’t involve my having to perform heavy sales activity?” But, once she asked

that question, once she focused on the overall objective instead of the conventional path to it, she started coming up with all kinds of answers. It wasn't that the answers were terribly difficult to come by, just that she hadn't thought to ask the question.

She had never asked, "How do I become a successful consultant and coach without selling?" She just asked, "How do I become a better sales person?" I guess you could say that in a way her problem was in not asking the right questions.

Once the right questions were being asked, though, the answers started to come in. It turns out that most successful coaches do very little sales based marketing. Instead they follow the education-based marketing approach. Sales based methods may work fine when you are selling a commodity, but not so much so for professional services. Ask yourself, have you ever gone to a physician who called your house to ask if you were sick?

Once Beth was focusing her efforts in the right place she found a whole host of resources that helped her create an education-based marketing program that had her authoring articles, lecturing as an expert, and sharing a newsletter with a growing subscription base that had clients coming to her.

Was it any less work, technically no, but if you ask Beth she'll tell you that it felt like a whole lot less effort because she was relying on what she loved to do and did well (speak, lecture, educate). In doing so, her practice grew at the same time.

The most successful people don't have any more talents than anyone else. They are just as flawed and imperfect as the next man. They don't have fewer non-talents either, they just have fewer weaknesses because they are very aware of their non-talents and they do a damn good job of not depending on them.

To quote someone who has become extremely successful by not manufacturing weaknesses, Dr. Marshall Goldsmith, "There are a whole lot of things I stink at. I just make sure I don't have to do them to be successful."

The level of success the people in the study achieve is hard to argue with, so there is much we can learn from their view on strengths and weaknesses. They achieve significantly more success with less effort, while finding more passion, satisfaction and happiness. And they do this by maximizing their dependence on natural talents and minimizing dependence on non-talents.

What weaknesses are you manufacturing right now, and what non-talents are you depending on to manufacture them?

The Genius Files is a series of educational articles crafted from lessons learned in the recently concluded Genius Project (a seven-year, 197,000, twenty-three

country study of what drives individual excellence in the new knowledge worker economy).

The Genius Project is the foundational research behind the latest book from Innermetrix Inc Founder and CEO Jay Niblick titled, *What's Your Genius – How the Best Think for Success*.

To view the entire Genius series, or to learn more about how you can unleash your own genius, please visit <http://www.whatsyourgenius.com>.