



Go Put Your Strengths to Work

6 Powerful Steps to Achieve Outstanding Performance

by Marcus Buckingham

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Take-Aways

- If you focus on fixing mistakes, you will not learn how to become excellent.
- Use “positive deviance” to measure how your team performs.
- Negative thoughts can block your ability to perform.
- You should be able to list more strengths than weaknesses. But most people find it easier to list their weaknesses.
- Strengths are what you enjoy doing and do extremely well.
- Make your job more enjoyable by emphasizing tasks that use your strengths.
- Stop doing a part of your job that you dislike and see if it makes any difference. If not, you’ve made a cheap improvement.
- Swap those parts of your job that use your weaknesses with someone for whom those tasks are a strength.
- Enlist your colleagues and boss in a series of conversations to help you work toward your strengths.
- Use a defined process to monitor how you use your strengths. Build good habits.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
7	8	8	6

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Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract you will learn: 1) Why building on your strengths is smarter than trying to fix your weaknesses; 2) How to identify your unique strengths; 3) How to reposition yourself at work to use those strengths more fully; and 4) How to keep a fresh set of strengths in place as you grow.

Recommendation

Marcus Buckingham is passionate about helping you identify your unique strengths and unleash their power. As you read and work your way through the program in this book, you will become convinced that growing through your strengths is the ticket to your future happiness, effectiveness and success. He refutes the approach of improvement by fixing mistakes as a dead end that cannot help you discover how you can be exceptional. The book constantly refers you to its associated Web site for materials that will help you work through the exercises. Buckingham wants you to act rather than just read a theoretical tract. Nothing presented in this book will help you without action and implementation. However, if you take up the challenge, you will become empowered as you take charge of your work through your strengths. *getAbstract* recommends this book because it contains just a few simple ideas that could change your life.

Abstract

Strengths and Mistakes

People make mistakes. The real question is whether you would do better by learning from those mistakes or by focusing on building your strengths instead. Do athletes perform better by filling their minds with images of winning or images of losing? Research says it is the former. Are your workdays filled with tasks that let your strengths flow? Does your work engage your very strongest abilities? Or do you spend your days managing your mistakes?

Recent research has explored two approaches toward business success, “Appreciative Inquiry” and “Positive Organizational Change.” Both have the same fundamental principle: Managing mistakes can help you limit the range of negative outcomes you might incur, but will not contribute to great success. However, if you study what works in your organization and build on it, you can expand your “positive deviance” – that is, the good side of being out of sync with the ordinary. You may consider deviance a negative factor, but it isn’t. It simply indicates that which is out of the norm.

You know that great feeling of accomplishment you get when you have used your best efforts to do a great piece of work? How often do you feel it? For most people, it is about once a week. Is that enough? Why not reverse that and feel great four or five days a week? Are you really contributing all you can to your company, when most of your assignments do not use your best talents and skills? You can build positive deviance at work by capitalizing on your strengths.

The process of engaging your strengths more fully has six steps: 1) “Bust The Myths” by determining what is blocking your way; 2) “Get Clear” by assessing your strengths;

“The strengths movement says that all we learn from mistakes are the characteristics of mistakes. If we want to learn about our successes, we must study successes.”

“The radical idea at the core of the strengths movement is that excellence is not the opposite of failure, and that, as such, you will learn little about excellence from studying failure.”

“Consider the possibility that what’s stopping you is what you believe; that you are stopping yourself.”

“Your strengths are defined by your actual activities. They are things you do, and more specifically, things you do near perfectly.”

“You will not learn and grow the most in your areas of weakness. Instead you will learn and grow the least in your areas of weakness.”

“Our strengths are the very qualities that could make us look our best, and yet when asked to detail them we lack, well, detail.”

3) “Free Your Strengths” by using them the best way; 4) “Stop Your Weaknesses” by learning how to eliminate them; 5) “Speak Up” by building a solid team; and 6) “Build Strong Habits” by learning how to sustain your new approach.

Myths about Personal Growth

You know you are on the road to burnout when you find yourself spending more and more time chasing problems and analyzing failures. In a survey, only 41% of Americans thought that building on their strengths was a better key to success than focusing on overcoming weaknesses. You should not ignore a glaring mistake, but you can choose whether you emphasize learning from mistakes or building on strengths. You will not have time to become stronger and more successful if you are walking around with a dustpan and brush sweeping up after yourself.

The first myth is: “As you grow, your personality changes.” Everyone loves stories of transformation where a person changes through force of will or because of an extreme experience. The truth is that growth comes from discovering and building on who you are already. The story of Scrooge in Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* is not a story of transformation: If you read the story more closely, you will discover that the mean, cruel old man was a distortion. The Scrooge who blessed the lives of others was actually a development of who he was as a young man.

The second myth is that you have the greatest room for growth where you are weak, so it pays to seek growth there. Although you need to pay attention to weaknesses that can endanger your well-being, you will find that you have more ability to grow where you are strong. Using your strengths will help you create a positive feedback loop. You will experience greater growth by emphasizing what you already do well than by spending time and energy on something you are not motivated to do.

The third myth is that you should do “whatever it takes to help your team.” Everyone needs to step up once in a while and do something simply because it needs to be done. But if you are not spending your time on what you do best, ask yourself if you really are giving your best to your team. The answer is not just doing anything that needs to be done, but finding ways to give your strongest talents to the team effort.

Ask yourself these questions about the three myths: 1) How does investing in this myth help you get through the day? 2) If you stopped giving power to this myth, what would you lose? 3) If you instead believed the truth, what would you gain?

Clarify Your Strengths

Your strengths are your talents, skills and knowledge. Talent is your innate aptitude for an activity. A skill is something you learn and become more adept at doing through practice. Knowledge is your understanding of what needs to be done in a specific situation.

If someone asks you about your weaknesses, you are likely to recite a long, specific list. However, if someone asks you about your strengths, you may list a few vague ideas, such as “being good with people,” or some general characteristic, such as “being competitive.” Instead, think about those things that give you a feeling of glowing strength. Write them down in a specific sentence. Your goal is to “capture, clarify and confirm” these strengths. When you find yourself in an activity you particularly dislike, write that down, too. Ask yourself these questions to clarify which aspects of your job matter:

“Start with your own life, and to paraphrase Mahatma Gandhi, be the change you want to see in your team.”

“Your teammates need to know where they can rely on you the most. The most responsible thing you can do is tell them.”

“You are not entirely at the mercy of your company, your manager or a rigid job description. You can take many actions to mold this job description so that it calls on your strengths.”

“If you’ve accurately captured the activities that weaken you, the chances are high that you are never going to love doing them.”

1. Does the reason why you do your work matter?
2. Do the people you are doing it with or for matter?
3. Does when you are doing it matter?
4. Does the nature of the activity matter?

Use the “yes” answers to create a general statement of what your strengths are. Before you commit yourself to enhancing your strengths in front of other people, confirm your analysis of your skills and assets by checking them against the “SIGNS” of strengths:

- “Success” – Do you do the activities successfully?
- “Instinct” – Do you intuitively feel like doing these activities?
- “Growth” – Do these activities come easily to you?
- “Needs” – Do they make you feel satisfied and true to yourself?

Note that building on your strengths is an ongoing process. Your strengths will change over time as you grow. You will add new ones, while previous strengths will drop away because they cease to be relevant to your situation.

Use Your Strengths

Look at your top three strengths and consider how well you have been using them. The task is to make them more prominent in your work. Too often, people think their first option is to change jobs to one that is a better match for their strengths. That may be a valid choice, but ask these four questions first:

1. Do you understand clearly how a strength helps you in your current situation?
2. Have you missed opportunities for using any of your strengths?
3. Would additional skills put an even finer edge on these strengths?
4. Can you redefine your job to cater to these strengths?

Determine ways to bring your strengths to bear at work. Evaluate how well you are abandoning your weaknesses. Filter out tasks that distract you from what you are trying to accomplish. To focus on your strengths, work through the four “FREE” areas: “Focus, release, educate, expand”:

1. Focus – Understand how, when and how often you use a specific strength at work, and the feedback you get when you use it.
2. Release – Assess where you are underutilizing each of your strengths. Try new things, see things differently and bring what you do best to bear.
3. Educate – Beef up your skill set. Become more adroit at using your strengths.
4. Expand – Redefine your job around your strengths. Your proficiency helps the whole team.

Stop Doing It

You are probably strongly motivated to stop doing tasks and activities you dislike. Of course, an apt acronym for figuring out how to do this is “STOP: Stop, Team Up, Offer Up, Perceive”:

- Stop – Cease the activity you dislike and see if anyone notices. Sometimes people do irrelevant tasks that aren’t connected to anything. Simply ending them frees up time for yourself, lowers your stress level and allows you to contribute more to the team.
- Team up – Consider who on your team actually enjoys this activity. Can you swap part of your respective jobs? Does this person know a trick that could help you do the job in a more enjoyable manner?

“To reach outstanding levels of performance, you must stop tiptoeing. You must learn how to express what strengthens you and what weakens you.”

“You’ve always known what your strengths are. You’ve always known what lies within you. So trust your strengths, be proud of them and take your stand.”

- Offer up – Substitute using one of your strengths to get the job done or offer to do a different task instead.
- Perceive – Look at your weakness with fresh eyes. Can you learn to see it differently? Can you connect it to something you enjoy doing?

Build a Strong Team

You can change your team by changing your role within it. Of course, you have to talk to your manager first, but you can prepare for that by having a series of conversations with your colleagues or friends. Have a half-hour talk about your strengths. Base this chat on the strengths you have identified, backed up with a couple of clear examples from your recent work. Explain why these strengths are important to your work. Encourage your colleagues to ask questions and offer feedback. Then ask another friend or two to go through the same process.

When you feel comfortable with your material, meet with your boss. Plan as much of the meeting as you can in advance. Writing a plan will help you keep the meeting on track. Your goal is to move your job definition toward your strengths, not to change everything overnight. Talk about your strengths, as you did with your friends, and then ask for his or her thoughts. Plan some action items together and set some timelines to make the commitment more concrete. Go through the same rehearsal process with your weaknesses. The goal is similar, but after several weeks of positive performance, you will want a “how you can help me” chat with your boss. Working through this process will help your boss become more receptive to your goals.

If you are the boss on the receiving end of these conversations, it is important to hear and validate what your employee says. However, you have to handle the realities of running the team, so you will have to be firm about what needs to be done as you work through building a strengths-based team. Sometimes you will need to have reality-check conversations with people who think they have strengths that they have not demonstrated. Be open to re-evaluation and you might be surprised. However, you cannot accept poor performance or accommodate unrealistic desires.

Make Your Strengths Last

Develop a method of continuing to identify, use and build your strengths, or the effects will dissipate quickly. Make it a daily routine to evaluate the three strengths you are using to change your job into a strengths-based experience and the three weaknesses you are trying to shut down. Each week, identify two actions that will strengthen your strengths and weaken your weaknesses.

Close the books each quarter on what you have been working to accomplish, and evaluate your strengths and weaknesses for the next quarter. Go through this process regularly to clarify and confirm your strengths. You will be growing and your job is likely to change, so be sure of what you want to accomplish as you multiply your strengths. Keep your long-range goals in focus.

About The Author

Marcus Buckingham is the author and co-author of several best-selling books, including *First, Break All the Rules; Now, Discover Your Strengths* and *The One Thing You Need to Know*.