

## Sort out your “disabling weaknesses”: they may well be holding you back

*To be effective, concentrate on building on your strengths. Your weaknesses only matter if they prevent you from using these strengths. In the second of a series of short articles on people and organisations, **Dr Tony McNulty** discusses how to identify your disabling weaknesses and suggests some ways of addressing them.*

A brilliant technical innovator, Matt led a very successful start-up business. But rapid growth brought its problems. He had never really developed his management skills, and as workloads increased, so he found it hard to delegate. Inefficiencies crept into the business, and some major disasters with key customers were narrowly averted. Tempers were also getting frayed. One of the team told us: “Matt doesn’t want, ‘yes men’. When he says ‘no’, he wants us to say, ‘no’”.

Like Matt, most of us have got where we are because we have managed to deploy our strengths effectively. And also like Matt, what can hold us back are those disabling weaknesses that prevent us from using these strengths. If nothing is done, these weaknesses hamper us in our current roles and they can affect our future prospects.

So what should we do?

*Get to know your strengths.* Most of us have a fair idea of our strengths, although these can evolve as our careers progress. To help pinpoint your strengths now, ask yourself:

- At what do I excel?
- What do I do superbly better than other people?
- What do people tell me that I do exceptionally well?

*Build on these strengths.* Once you have identified your strengths, keep building on them. Follow the example of sports stars, and constantly rehearse and hone your skills. If you have fallen into bad habits or let your standards drop – and sometimes even the best of us do – get back to doing what you know how to do well. But be aware that some fields move so fast, our qualifications might as well have been written in disappearing ink. So keep up to date with current knowledge and best practice in your field.

*Try to identify your disabling weaknesses.* We are often our own best coaches, so start by examining your own performance, especially when things have gone wrong. If you are very good at sales, and an important sales meeting has derailed, ask yourself why. Perhaps you were too flippant, or you ignored a customer’s body language. Ask yourself what you could have done differently.

Remember that strengths overplayed can become weaknesses, and strengths in some circumstances become weaknesses in others. For instance, the ability to make decisions quickly, direct others clearly and firmly, and ensure that everyone does exactly as instructed is exactly what is required in a crisis. However, it becomes counter-productive when helping to brainstorm the future of the communications industry over the next five years.

And also remember that sometimes we can be unjustly proud of “strengths”, which our colleagues in fact consider to be amongst the more regrettable aspects of our personalities. We succeed despite these characteristics, not because of them.

*Get feedback from others.* No-one can do anything about a weakness they don't know they possess, so you may well need help and feedback from others. Check out your insights. Talk to your boss, trusted colleagues, and those who know you well. Rather than asking people outright about your weaknesses, it can be more productive to ask whether you ever do anything that gets in the way of *their* effectiveness. You can also ask if they have ever heard any feedback about you.

If you want to obtain more systematic information, then "360-degree feedback" can help. This typically involves your boss, colleagues, subordinates and external parties (which can include customers) completing a short questionnaire. As well as giving you a more complete picture, it often provides insights into strengths you didn't know you possessed. It has the further advantage of maintaining the anonymity of some of the respondents.

Look at the following links for a more detailed explanation and an example:

[www.mcnultymanagementconsultants.com/360info](http://www.mcnultymanagementconsultants.com/360info); and

[www.mcnultymanagementconsultants.com/360output](http://www.mcnultymanagementconsultants.com/360output)).

*Develop an action plan to address any disabling weaknesses.* In deciding the next steps don't get obsessed with endless lists of development needs. You'll just get frustrated and you'll never finish. Focus solely on what might prevent you from displaying your strengths. Most disabling weaknesses can be dealt with, and once you are aware of the problem you're often half way to solving it.

*Work with people who will compensate for what you cannot do.* Many successful executives surround themselves with colleagues who compensate for their own weaknesses. So if you have a talent for starting new ventures, but lose interest once they get off the ground, link up with a colleague who enjoys seeing them through. Similarly, if you are a CEO who hates routine administration, then hire a Chief Operating Officer and get back to what you do best.

*Consider a mentor or coach.* A Company Chairman, CEO or Non Executive Director can play this role, as can an external coach. Your mentor or coach can work with you to provide feedback and advice, and help you develop and implement a workable action plan.

Finally, just in case you were wondering about Matt, we're still coaching him. His business is back on track to meet its expansion targets. He has learned that it is possible to delegate without losing control. And whilst he'll never be Mother Teresa, it's going much better with his colleagues.

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