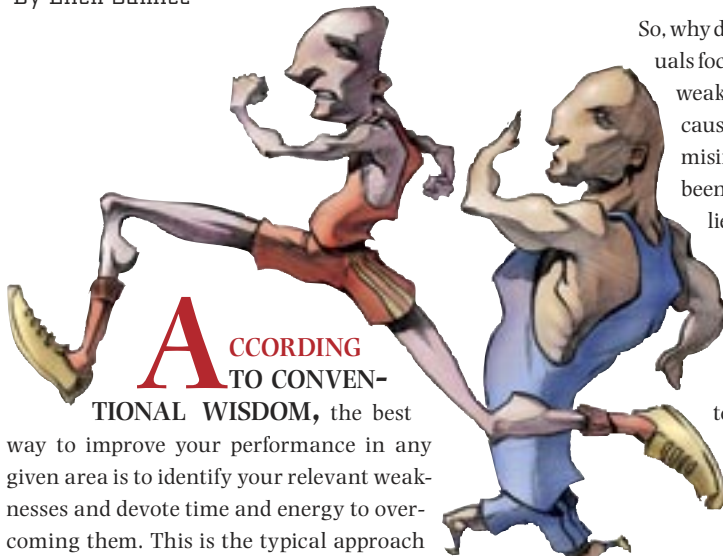


STOP WORKING ON YOUR WEAKNESS! LEVERAGE YOUR STRENGTH

By Ellen Samiec



ACCORDING TO CONVENTIONAL WISDOM, the best way to improve your performance in any given area is to identify your relevant weaknesses and devote time and energy to overcoming them. This is the typical approach most organizations use when developing the leadership potential of their people. It's also the common approach recommended in personal development books and seminars. But there is a serious problem with this approach: it doesn't work!

As explained in depth in the book *5-D Leadership*, focusing on improving your areas of weakness will most likely achieve only incremental improvement for a great deal of effort. In fact, this approach often ends up working against you. Focusing on overcoming weakness is usually a frustrating waste of time that drains your energy and enthusiasm and sends you 180° in the wrong direction.

One of the fastest ways to demoralize people is to force them to work on improving their areas of weakness. Such an approach can rightly be called "working harder, not smarter." Not only is it frustrating, but focusing on deficiencies often ends up shaking people's confidence.

For leaders, this can happen when they are seen as not caring about their people and sent to a seminar to develop empathy. For entrepreneurs, this typically occurs when they try to do things in their business they are not suited for, such as bookkeeping. For individuals, it can be a problem if they work to be super-organized when it is their nature to be creative spirits.

So, why do so many individuals focus on overcoming weakness? Largely, because we have been misinformed; we have been trained to believe that improving a weakness can turn it into strength. The truth is that if you are working to improve an area of weakness, the best you can expect is to be average.

5-D Leadership offers a

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better way to develop yourself and your leadership potential through a dynamic process that guides individuals to identify and leverage the strengths they already possess.

Learning how to leverage your strengths is the quickest and most effective way to develop your performance. The book uses the term leverage intentionally. A lever is used to multiply the effects of your effort. For example, a jack is a lever that allows you to use your physical strength to lift the weight of a car to change a tire. In a similar way, you can leverage your other strengths to maximize your performance.

This principle of leveraging your natural strengths defines the *5-D Leadership* approach to leadership development. The reason it is effective—in contrast to the typical emphasis on overcoming weakness—is that it allows you to work with the way your brain is wired, making your development fast, effective, and satisfying!

Take the case of Daniel, a company director, who was alienating people in the organization with his abrupt "no time to waste" ap-

proach. Until it was suggested to him, he had never considered using his sense of humour to alleviate the situation. He learned that he could adjust and leverage this strength by taking the time to break the ice. For example, by using his self-deprecating humour to set a more relaxed tone before assigning work he started engaging people he worked with to gain their cooperation. As a result there was an improvement in productivity. Where he previously had to chase people down for reports, reports were now coming in on time, allowing things to progress more efficiently. He was surprised to find that, by taking a little more time and using his humour, work was getting done faster and he was enjoying it more.



How do you identify your strengths? A series of tools is recommended in the book. The process begins with a self-assessment checklist. This directs you to consider numerous specific strengths (things you are good at and that come easily to you). However, if you are like most people, you don't even recognize your own strengths. You may think, "Everyone can do that," and not see your particular talents. Alternatively, you may simply be blind to your strengths.

There are additional specialized tools in the *5-D Leadership* book that you can use to identify your strengths, including a "past success stories" review in the Leadership Strengths Checklist which identifies areas you may not have considered as strengths, and a 360° feedback process (provides objective perspective). A free *Leadership Strengths Checklist* is available for download at www.5DLeadership.com.

Knowing your strengths—your hidden assets—is a key step in leveraging them to develop yourself and your leadership abilities.

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Ellen Samiec and Scott Campbell are the authors of *5-D Leadership: Key Dimensions for Leading in the Real World* (Davies-Black Publishing 2005) ISBN 0-89106-197-5. Available at all major retail and online bookstores. For online discount, visit www.5DLeadership.com