

Too Much of a Strong Thing

By: Marti Benjamin

Doing What I Do Best

When I was first introduced to the idea that the greatest performance improvement could come from doing more of what I do well, as opposed to trying to overcome my weaknesses, it seemed inherently logical, like sailing with the wind rather than trying to fight it, or walking up the down escalator. When I describe the strengths-based approach to prospective business clients, they often react similarly, intuitively understanding that when we focus on building the future rather than deconstructing the past to find fatal flaws, we make greater progress and we make it faster.

As with most any conceptual model, the strengths-based material has come under attack recently by those who have seen it used inappropriately. Some people have used the information about one of their unique signature strengths as an excuse for treating others poorly or unfairly. The excuse, “That’s just the way I’m wired,” or, “That’s my strength; you’ll just need to get used to it,” represents an abusive use of the personal strengths concept. Regardless of the magnitude of a competitive trait or a take-charge talent, the owner must learn to use that trait to improve relationships, rather than tear people apart.

Supported By Strengths

Labeling these qualities as strengths or weaknesses passes a judgment that is not only unhelpful but most likely irrelevant. I have begun to think of these strengths as innate traits, some showing up more dominant than others, which can be enhanced, down-played, managed and exercised. I’ve noticed that the same traits that propel me to a positive outcome can get in my way and create a barrier to that same outcome.

The strengths-based concepts emerged from the field of positive psychology and its primary researcher, Dr. Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania.

“Positive psychology is a new branch of psychology which focuses on the empirical study of such things as positive emotions, strengths-based character, and healthy institutions...research has demonstrated that it is possible to be happier — to feel more satisfied, to be more engaged with life, find more meaning, have higher hopes, and probably even laugh and smile more, regardless of one’s circumstances.”

(www.authentichappiness.org)

Hampered By Strengths

Beyond the empirical study of positive emotions and strengths-based character, I’ve noticed that when my own innate traits are running amok, they often don’t feel like strengths. One of the traits identified in my profile is my constant need for achievement. It’s not that I push myself to achieve; it’s that my natural flow is to strive for achievement, sometimes to the detriment of a happy balance in life or my physical well-being. When that drive for achievement comes on as too much of a strong thing, I work a lot, feel tense and take on more than I can reasonably accomplish just because it all sounds so interesting. I forget that I can and would be served well by declining some interesting projects or opportunities. And then, in a state of overwhelm, I ask myself, “How did I get myself into this?” It is my innate trait hampering my logical decision-making process.

Tuning In To Strengths

It helps to have astute observers in my life who will tell me that I'm pushing myself too hard or simply ask me which of my strengths is in over-drive right now. My body will also speak to me to remind me that too much achieving is not necessarily the best thing for my health. It reminds me to manage this trait so it serves me well, rather than eats me up. Sometimes that reminder has to come at a high volume level in the form of tension, sleeplessness, frustration, headaches, muscle aches and other signs that I am pushing myself too hard for my physical reserves.

When I manage my achievement trait well, I shift the focus from accomplishing more work to achieving my goal for more relaxation and more renewal of my energy through sleep, exercise and fun. When I look for ways to make this trait work for me, I find I can use my drive toward goals that support my well-being in a more balanced way. It's just good management. ***Which of your personal traits is coming on too strong for your own well being?***

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