



The Weakness Trap

by Garold L. Markle

What is the best thing to do with a weakness? According to the Gallup Poll data, the most successful managers don't normally try to fix an employee's weakness. Instead, they work around it. Ignore it, if possible. While this sounds counter intuitive to some, it actually agrees with what most of us have noticed in life. Consider coaching.

What would a football coach do with a short but fast player who has quick hands? Try to fatten him up and make him stronger? Of course not. The coach would place him in the defensive backfield where speed and agility are key. He would charge the small, fast guy with getting faster. Meanwhile, he'd take his biggest, strongest player and challenge him to become bigger and stronger.

"Markle! Don't put the ball on the floor!!" That's what my basketball coach used to scream at me. 40 years later, the words still echo in my ears. At six foot seven inches tall, I was not a very adept dribbler. When I tried to dribble, the ball would hit one of my feet almost as often as it hit the floor. On the other hand, I could rebound with the best of them. So what did the coach do with me? He asked me to stand under the basket and retrieve missed shots. Did he ask me to work on my dribbling? Are you kidding? He actually forbade me from doing it. I got benched if I dribbled the ball, even if I did it successfully. The coach made it clear that my playing time would be determined by my ability to rebound. If I wanted to maximize my contribution to the



team, I would not attempt to become some kind of well-rounded version of Michael Jordan. I would emulate Dennis Rodman – the ultimate rebounding specialist.

In *Catalytic Coaching* we ask managers to select four “Areas for Improvement” that they want a direct report to focus on for the upcoming year. Since we compel them to do this immediately after discussing “Strengths” it’s quite natural that people draw the wrong conclusions. Their mind thinks in parallel structure. They select four things that form the person’s competitive advantage and call those *Strengths*. They assume then that the next section is where they “write him up” for his shortcomings. If they follow this instinctual path, however, they will greatly reduce the effectiveness of the coaching process. They’ll fall quickly into *The Weakness Trap* spending good energy on a bad idea.

For a fully functioning employee, *Areas for Improvement* are more productively focused on *Strengths* that a coach would like to see more of. I can recall several years ago praising an executive assistant for her “Organization Skills” under the *Strengths* section only to request that she use these abilities more aggressively as an *Area for Improvement*. Rather than smile with bemusement at how I muddled my complicated travel plans, I challenged her to take them on as one of her responsibilities. Was she deficient in travel planning? Absolutely not. She had never been asked to do it. It was, however, a wonderful way for her to enhance her contribution.

No matter what I say to managers and supervisors in coaching training sessions, people seem to miss this point. When I work with them one on one (in a ritual we call “In-Flight Training”) it is often their biggest revelation. “I didn’t know we could ask her to do more of what she’s good at,” they’ll say, despite the fact that I made this point several times in class. Once they have this experience, however, the light comes on and they advance to a different level of coaching effectiveness.

When people tell me that coaching becomes redundant over the years, often the reason is that they’ve fallen into a rut of treating *Areas for Improvement* like *Weaknesses*. Here’s what someone told me recently. “I’ve written Thomas up as needing to work on his Analytical Skills for the last three years. I can do it again, but I don’t really think he’s going to improve.” When I asked if Thomas was worth keeping, the answer was both quick and unequivocal. “Absolutely! He produces a high volume of work.” The only thing needed here was for the coach to refocus his employee’s improvement efforts on things that were more realistic and valuable. Challenge Thomas to do more heavy lifting, just don’t assign him tasks that require heavy analysis.

The same ideas apply at home. When a child walks through the door with a report card showing five As, two Bs and one D, what do we always talk to her about? The low grade, of course. We tell her how the subpar subject matter is critical to proper growth and development and force her to spend more time focused on areas in which she’s potentially ill equipped to excel. Instead of lecturing our mathematically-inclined daughter on the merits of mastering English and Geography, if that’s where she’s behind, perhaps we’d be better served to encourage her to focus



the bulk of her attention on Physics and Calculus, where she sits at the head of her class. After all, who cares whether the nuclear physicist that designs the first truly viable electric car can write creatively or explain haiku? Her computer or secretary can clean up her misspelled words.

So how do we avoid *The Weakness Trap*? Consider taking the following actions:

1. **Design Around Weaknesses.** Whenever possible shift roles and responsibilities to give those who work for you a chance to focus on what they're good at and what they enjoy. Fit the job to the people and the people to the job. Not all accountants have to have identical responsibilities. The same goes for supervisors, managers and executive assistants. Few of us are universally talented. It is more important to create a team that wins through working together than to mandate that all jobs with similar titles are carbon copies.
2. **Shorten Improvement Cycles.** If you've got a direct report that has a weakness that you can't build out of her position (for example, a manager who can't delegate), give her a limited amount of focused attention to make the improvement. In general, if she can't start making demonstrable progress in a one to three month period, she is not worth spending additional time on. Great sports coaches move quickly when they determine that a player's aptitude is insufficient for a given role. Remember that "Catalytic" means speeding the pace of significant change. In business, time is money. Repurposing or replacing usually beat rewiring.
3. **Focus on Strengths.** Do your homework to determine what people are good at. Things they have a competitive advantage at. Identify activities that give them energy. Knowing someone's weaknesses is valuable information for selection and placement decisions. If they're not tall enough, fast enough, agile enough (in other words, a poor match for the position), consider making a change. If you're going to coach them where they're at, however, the key is to take what they're good at and make it better. Do that and someday the Gallup Poll researchers will be writing stories about you.



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