

Overusing Strengths Creates Weaknesses

By Merrick Rosenberg & Daniel Silvert

Here's a counter-intuitive idea: When it comes to using our strengths, it's sometimes better to ease up a bit.

Why? Shouldn't we focus on our strengths, capitalize on their impact, and apply them every chance we can? Perhaps, except that when our strength-obsessed blaze of glory prompts others to wear sun glasses to shield themselves, our strengths are now in overuse, and they have become our weakness.

Take optimism, for example. The ability to see the bright side, even in the face of adversity, is a very useful skill. According to studies conducted by Dr. Martin Seligman, former president of the American Psychological Association and best selling author, optimistic people recover from illness faster, enjoy stronger relationships, and even live longer lives, than those who struggle with 'reality based' pessimism.

So, how can optimism be bad? Well, consider the eternal optimist who is so upbeat that he only sees things as he wants them to be, not as they really are. We recently coached a project manager whose chronic optimism lead to unrealistic expectations for his staff, resulting in high stress, low morale, and poor performance. In his 360-degree feedback report, everyone agreed he was a great guy to be around, brimming with good cheer and optimism, but that he couldn't be counted on to properly plan and deliver complex projects.

How about the very useful skill of analysis? Surely organizations want people who can logically assess a project and create a system of processes and procedures that ensure quality and minimize errors. But once again, these skills in overuse often lead to unfortunate consequences: analysis paralysis, poor prioritizing, and the inability to factor in the big

picture vision that is often essential to motivating the troops.

As the Oracle at Delphi advised, "Everything in moderation."

Let's take a look at some core strengths and examine how they can be overused:

Strength	Overuse
Focus on results	Steamrolling over people
Directness	Insensitivity
Enthusiasm	Overly bubbly
Inquisitiveness	Nit picking
Independence	Poor team player
Patience	Complacency
Cooperativeness	Conflict avoidance

Creating Balance

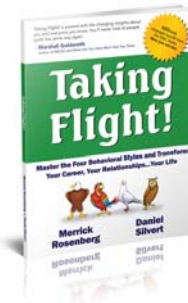
In our book, *Taking Flight! Master the Four Behavioral Styles and Transform Your Relationships, Your Career...Your Life*, we show how the ability to employ your strengths at a healthy, balanced level is critically important to our long-term success in whatever you choose to do. The first step is to identify your core competencies. You may wish to ask your coworkers or manager, "What do I do that allows me to be an effective contributor to the organization?"

After establishing a core strengths list, identify what each skill looks like at its healthy and overuse levels. Next, determine which situations prompt a balanced strengths response, vs. conditions where you are likely to veer into excess mode. Once again, feedback from your peers and manager may be helpful. Finally, identify behaviors that need to be "toned down" so that strengths are used effectively.

As Benjamin Franklin said, "Wasted strengths are like sundials in the shade." Consider the following behaviors that may need to be toned down and the accompanying strategies for improvement:

- Directness — Ask more questions, soften the tone of your words
- Reactive nature — Respond instead of react; think before you speak
- Conviction — The strength in which you convey your own ideas may cause others to believe that you are not open to their ideas
- Enthusiasm for ideas — Stay focused on the task, not just the idea of the task
- Desire to keep it positive — Be firm and direct in dealing with less favorable situations or inappropriate behavior of others
- Big-picture thinking — Provide details to others who need them
- Helpful nature — Assert your right to say 'no' when helping others interferes with your own productivity
- Seeking harmony — Recognize conflict as an opportunity for positive growth and change
- Overloading on responsibility — Delegate to others if your plate is full
- Dedication to work — Explore the benefits of play
- Desire for the 'right' answer — Develop a greater tolerance for constructive ambiguity, and human imperfection
- Rational nature — Recognize that others may react to situations from the heart, rather than from the head, and that neither is 'good' or 'bad'

Merrick Rosenberg and Daniel Silvert are co-authors of Taking Flight! Master the Four Behavioral Styles and Transform Your Relationships, Your Career... Your Life



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In Closing...

Calibrating our strengths in response to the people around us not only brings out our best, but maximizes the potential of everyone's growth. Master this art and you will become a magnet for talented people who grow smarter and more capable in your presence, which then delivers the best results for all.

The Hangover from Our Debt Binge

by Marshall Goldsmith

I was 18 years old. It was great to be in college, with Mom and Dad covering my debt and paying my bills. What a party we had! The booze was flowing. It was Saturday night. The music was loud. Everyone was in a festive spirit. It was time to celebrate! We kept on dancing—and chugging some concoction made from fruit juice, vodka, gin, and anything else we could find. I was so proud of my ability to be one of the top chuggers at our party!

Sometime later, I woke up lying on the kitchen floor. It was cold. I was shaking. I started crawling toward the bathroom. My head was killing me. My throat was dry. I was dirty, and I smelled bad. As I crawled bravely forward, I grew sicker and sicker. I was gagging. I barely made it. I could not stand up, but I feebly rose to my hands and knees, placed my head above the commode, and began to throw up in the toilet. The concoction that I had chugged the night before tasted a lot better going down than it did coming back up. Filled with regret, I wished for death—but my Sunday morning prayers were not answered.

An older—and wiser—friend had missed our festive celebration. He looked in the door, laughed at my pathetic posture, and yelled at some of the other guys, "Hey everybody. Look at Marshall. He is worshipping the porcelain goddess!"

Top Consumers in the World

Although I should have known better in the first place, I learned a hard lesson. When you overdo it, you eventually have to pay the price.

America was 231 years old. It was great to be the richest country in the world, with others countries buying our debt and paying our bills. What a party we had! The money was flowing. Everyone was offering us credit cards. If we couldn't pay one card off, we could just get another and borrow enough to make the payment. If we wanted a new home, we didn't even have to put any money down. Our credit was good—especially since no one seemed to check. Payments were amazingly low. Since house prices would always go up, we could just refinance later—and have money left over to buy more stuff. We were proud to be the top consumers in the world. We just kept on dancing, piling on debt, and drinking up the concoctions of credit.

Then something happened. House prices started plummeting. Instead of producing equity, mortgages went under water. The stock market started falling. Thousands of Americans quit even opening the envelope that showed how little money was left in their 401(k) retirement accounts. All of the toys that were purchased on credit cards don't seem like much fun anymore. The banks that gave away the easy money were no longer so accommodating. In fact, many banks were also broke. They were begging the government for a handout. Our government was asking countries from around the world for money.

Learning a Hard Lesson

Today, thousands of Americans are slowly waking up. They are lying on the floor. They have a throbbing headache. They are on their hands and knees. They are no longer dancing. They are crawling. America is getting ready to worship the porcelain goddess.

We should have known better in the first place, but hopefully we will learn a hard lesson. When you over do it, you eventually have to pay the price.

Years to Recover

America is facing an incredible load of debt. We are not going to have a small hangover. We are going to have a massive hangover. It is going to take years to recover from the celebration.

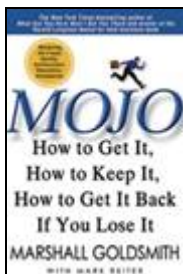
Somehow—some way—we are going to have to face up to our mistakes, recognize the error of our ways, and sober up. We are going to have to stop drinking from the fountain of debt. We are going to have to work hard and save money. The party is over.

We need to pay down our debt.

It's time to get back to work.

Dr. Marshall Goldsmith recently been named by the American Management Association as one of 50 great thinkers and business leaders who have impacted the field of management. His 18 books include the Business Week best-seller, The Leader of the Future and Global Leadership: The Next Generation. Marshall is a world authority in helping successful leaders achieve positive change in behavior: for themselves, their people and their teams.

Marshall's latest best-seller, **MOJO**, is now available.



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