



High Performers and Limitations

Why addressing your weaknesses can help you go from good to great

Tim Stevenson

LARRY SEEMED TO have everything you are looking for in a business leader. His professional competence was without question. He was intelligent, hard-working, and dedicated. He knew the business inside and out and was a major driver in the company's advances. Larry's character and values were also widely acknowledged.

There was just one problem. He grated on people, and some didn't want to work with him or under him.

Despite his unquestioned professional competence, Larry was stumbling as a leader. My job, when called in as an executive coach,

was to find out why. What was Larry doing or not doing that was undermining his ability to win followers?

Professional competence is not enough

If you ask executives why they are good at what they do, they will typically answer along the lines of "I know my stuff and I work hard." They list **knowledge and skills** that fall into the broad category of Professional Competence. But that is not the whole story. Just as important as Professional Competence is one's **Personal Conduct or Behaviors**.

In Sherpa Executive Coaching we use a model called **Impact On Business (IOB)** for short) to illustrate someone's *complete* contribution, plus or minus, to their organization. Your positive IOB is a combination of your **Positive Knowledge & Positive Skills plus your Positive Behavior**. "Behavior" obviously covers a lot of territory, everything from leadership ability, to listening and communicating, to team leadership and participation, to maintaining



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healthy professional relationships. These aren't side issues. They make a huge impact on the bottom line. Ultimately, it's the IOB of a company's leaders that determines its ROI, effectiveness, and profitability.

Why smart executives fail

Daniel Goleman rose to prominence with his popularization of the concept of **emotional intelligence**. He writes (emphasis mine),

When it comes to leaders, effectiveness in relationships makes or breaks. Solo stars are often promoted to leadership positions and then flounder for lack of people skills.

He goes on to explain that a major research study of executives in America, Europe, and Asia demonstrated that failed executives show a common pattern: They are typically hired on the basis of their drive, IQ, and professional expertise, but they are eventually fired because they lack emotional intelligence. He says,

They simply could not win over, or sometimes even just get along with, their board of directors, or their direct reports, or others on whom their own success depended.

In plain language, it's not just what you know and how hard you work. Business has always been about *people leading people*, cooperating with *people*, and serving *people*. The qualities often dismissed under the blah label of "people skills" turn out to be the critical factor in determining how high someone can rise and succeed.

The strengths vs. weaknesses debate

In the world of executive coaching, there is a perpetual debate over approach: Whether coaches should focus on their clients' strengths



or weaknesses. In my opinion, this issue is actually a red herring, and the two sides are shooting past each other. ***The answer depends upon what question is being asked.***

In Sherpa Executive Coaching, we zero in and address our clients' weaknesses. But one of my favorite writers, Marcus Buckingham, comes down heavily on the strengths side. In *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (co-written with Donald O. Clifton), he writes, "You will excel only by maximizing your strengths, never by fixing your weaknesses." In some passages, he sounds as if addressing weaknesses is a waste of time, but then he allows, "The people we described did not ignore their weaknesses. . . . They found ways to manage around their weaknesses, thereby freeing them up to hone their strengths to a sharper point."

If the question is, "How can I build a successful career?" I agree totally with Buckingham: Discover your strengths and passions and build your career around them.

However, the problem with that is that *all* of us have weaknesses — no exceptions! The best of us has weaknesses that will eventually cause our career to hit a plateau or ceiling, and possibly lead to decline or failure. Buckingham seems to agree with this, when he later writes:

The point here is not that you should always forgo this kind of weakness fixing. The point is that you should see it for what it is: damage control, not development. And as we mentioned earlier, damage control can prevent failure, but it will never elevate you to excellence.

I have disagree with Buckingham here. Working on weaknesses is much more than “damage control.” When you’re talking about proven high performers, addressing their weaknesses is where the most dramatic growth and improvement can take place. This is how they can truly transition from being good to being great.

The speedboat illustration

Imagine you are enjoying a ride in a powerful speedboat. You are racing across a lake with the throttle 95% open. But at the same time, you are carrying excess weight and dragging an anchor.

Question: Where is your greatest potential to pick up more speed?

By adding more power (increasing thrust)? How? You are already at 95%. How much more power is available? But what if you can throw overboard some of that excess weight (reducing drag)? Or, even better, cut the line pulling the anchor?

This is analogous to the strengths and weaknesses debate. The open throttle represents your strengths. When you are a mature executive, you have already learned to apply your strengths. How much more do you have? The excess weight and anchor, on the other hand, represent your weaknesses. If you can figure out how to reduce the drag they create, you can pick up more speed quickly.

If you observe the methods of world-class golfers you’ll see this dynamic in action. Differences at that level are so small (only an average difference of a stroke or two over the course of a season) that they work diligently on the weaker parts of their game. Just getting up and down from the sand more efficiently might move them into championship contention. So they work with a coach or teacher to make up that small difference.

Larry improved his IOB

Larry and I dug into what behaviors were limiting his success as a leader. As it is so often, it was the overuse of his strengths that were the problem. Larry lasers in on objectives and goals, and he is extremely fast in thought and action. That’s great; good qualities that account for so much of his success. They were also, however, causing him to run rough-shod over people as he pursued the objective of the moment.

By becoming aware of these tendencies, Larry was able to broaden his focus, take into account the people around him, and slow down to listen and lead. Through his honest desire and effort to do so, he made great strides. His positive Impact On Business grew steadily.

When you’re talking about proven high performers, weaknesses are most often found on the behavioral side: Leading, communicating, use of time, maintaining relationships, delegating, inspiring, coaching, teamwork, collaborating and so on.

If you want to improve your Impact On Business (IOB), look at your behavior. That’s where you’ll find the most fertile land to plow. **L**