

# A Strengths Approach to Work

by Ben Rawal

**We are all facing new challenges as a result of COVID-19: restrictions, managing and working virtually, balancing work and home, staying productive, and most importantly, trying to protect our loved ones, ourselves and our communities. Ben Rawal explains how our strengths can both support and hinder us in achieving our best, and what we can do if we allow other factors such as pressure, emotion or uncertainty to impact our performance.**

We frequently hear the phrase 'strengths and weaknesses' when describing our own or others' skill set, mindset and behaviours. Furthermore, at times we may also adopt a 'black and white' view that strengths are always a positive, whilst weaknesses are as the name suggests, something that may hold us back. However, as we discover in this article, sometimes the opposite can be true.

## The Strengths Dilemma

From an early age we are introduced to the concept of strengths and weaknesses, and appear to increase our awareness and interest once we move into a professional environment. Such phrases are commonly reinforced at work, being discussed during interviews, appraisals and also arise when giving and receiving feedback.

This is further complicated by the fact that our perspective on what constitutes a strength or weakness is likely to vary across individuals. For example, whereas one person may view an individual's behaviours as a sign of confidence, others may interpret the same actions as arrogance. Although we could consider ways of assessing whether an individual is confident or arrogant based on criteria, we still have three problems to deal with:

- Applying the criteria in a consistent way, without allowing our unconscious biases or beliefs to provide a distorted perspective;
- Whether the individual displaying the behaviours actually feels confident, arrogant or something else; and
- Accepting that for some individuals,

'arrogance' may in fact be interpreted as a strength!

It can be tricky therefore to determine what is actually a strength in many respects. An alternative approach could be to accept that we all have strengths and areas for improvement (depending on individual perspective), and the objective is to use our strengths:

- At the right time;
- In the right way; and
- With the right individuals.

In effect, this means that what works for one person in a particular situation, might not work for someone else. This doesn't mean that your strength is invalid. It simply means that you may be under or over doing your behaviours according to the context.

## Overdone strengths

At times, we all overplay our strengths. This could be in the form of confidence (which appears to be arrogant), assertiveness (or coming across as aggressive), or even friendliness (and being overtalkative!) If we regularly overdo our strengths, it is more likely that others will perceive these behaviours as weaknesses and focus on the negative impact we have at these particular times.

It is important therefore to remember that achieving the right balance when using our strengths is key to ensuring that we don't under or over 'sell' our abilities. In reality, this means that the majority of our behaviours lie on a scale between under and overdone. At times, we may even be aware when we have tipped the scales too far – perhaps we

don't receive the response we expect, or maybe we are given feedback on how we've behaved. This self-awareness and perspectives of others enables us to learn, develop our behaviours, and look for signs in the future that we're hitting the mark.

**"If we regularly overdo our strengths, it is more likely that other will perceive these behaviours as weaknesses"**

## The Emotional Effect

Using our strengths in the right way, at the right time and with the right individuals will enable us to perform at our best. At times however, although we have this information at our disposal, we underperform, and our strengths fail to support our behaviours as we would ordinarily expect. One of the main reasons for our underperformance is how effectively we manage our emotions – regardless of whether these are perceived as 'positive' (such as joy) or 'negative' (anger, fear, shame).

For many of us, we sometimes become flooded with negative emotions which can severely impact our ability to perform at our best. Our strengths become more difficult to utilise as our brains focus on dealing with the emotion at hand.

Similar problems can also be experienced when we are dealing with extreme pressure or stress. It is not unusual for our emotions, pressure and

stress to combine together and result in problems when thinking clearly, feeling motivated and performing effectively.

Given the current global Covid pandemic, it is unsurprising that many individuals are having to deal with managing their emotions rather than perform at their best. This takes mental effort and can be incredibly stressful. Overcoming these effects can take time and requires acceptance, (rather than suppression or ignorance) of the feelings being experienced. Remember, we are all different in how we manage and deal with our emotions.

**“For many of us, we can sometimes become flooded with negative emotions which can severely impact our ability to perform at our best.”**

### Seeing is Believing

Despite the doom and gloom often attached to negative emotions, some of us have become adept at using our feelings to help us perform more effectively. The phrase ‘controlled anger / aggression’ is commonly used to describe an individual using a ‘negative’ emotion to achieve positive results.

A significant influence on what we do and how we feel is based on the images we all create in our minds. These images are likely to impact how we behave, and hence creating the right image can have a positive effect. Conversely, if our images are aligned to negativity, it should come as no surprise when we feel unhappier, stressed or generally more pessimistic.

To further exacerbate matters, our beliefs are highly influential on our experiences. Henry Ford once said: “Whether you think you can, or you think you can’t, you’re right”. This is the power that our beliefs hold in either helping or hindering us with matters that are within our control.

If you want to think or feel differently, arguably the first place to start is to examine your beliefs and how these are

likely to dictate the images you create around a particular event, situation or individual.

From a strengths perspective, although we can always improve on our behaviours, if we believe we are weak or insufficient, be prepared to perform below par!

**“Examine your beliefs and the images you are creating in your mind. Are they positive and supportive of what you want to achieve?”**

### Conclusion

Using our strengths in the right way and getting the best out of ourselves is clearly beneficial. This holds even greater importance during times of increased uncertainty, pressure and/or stress, as we are all experiencing at the moment due to Covid-19.

It can be helpful to remember that no one is perfect, and our strengths can sometimes be perceived negatively by others. Achieving the right balance can be tricky, especially when our emotions or beliefs influence our behaviours. However, developing our awareness of these factors and creating positive images will go a long way towards helping us perform at our best.

## Top Tips:



### ✓ Getting it Right

Individual strengths can vary depending on your, and others’ perspectives. This largely depends on whether you use these strengths at the right time, in the right way, and with the right individual. Our interactions with others will provide useful feedback on whether or not you’re achieving the right balance – use it wisely!

### ✓ Don’t overdo it

Most of our strengths can be observed on a scale between under and overdoing them. If you regularly miss the mark, other individuals are likely to perceive your strengths as an area for improvement.

### ✓ Recognise the emotional effect

The presence of strong, particularly negative emotions is likely to hinder our ability to consistently perform at our best. If you believe you are underperforming, take a ‘time out’ and examine how you’re feeling. Is this causing you a performance problem?

### ✓ Positive Images

We all create images in our brains to inform how we intend to behave and what we are prepared to believe or disbelieve. Challenge your images and your beliefs where they are unhelpful and replace them with more empowering options.