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Probing the Dark Side of Employees' Strengths Can their talents actually alienate colleagues and hurt your organization?

by Brian Brim

I spend a great deal of my time speaking, writing, and teaching about how organizations can leverage employees' talents to improve business performance. Because some executives and managers don't fully understand the impact that a strengths-based approach can have, they may write it off as "fluff" or simply regard it as a "rose-colored glasses" approach to people.

As those executives and managers begin to learn more, they realize that this approach helps them see their employees -- and themselves too -- as they really are. When organizations take a strengths-based approach to managing their

employees -- when they hire, develop, and deploy people in ways that help them maximize their innate talents -- their employees can make powerful, positive contributions that can drive the business forward. (See "How Ann Taylor Invests in Talent" and "How Marriott Vacation Club International Engages Talent" in the "See Also" area on this page.)

On the other hand, when companies begin using strengths-based management, employees don't magically become perfect in their jobs. Nor do those employees cease having problems or struggles at work. A strengths-based approach, however, does allow organizations to begin to understand *why* employees may be struggling. Managers can then use that new understanding to help employees learn how to channel their talents productively to achieve real change -- and real results.

Is Matt overbearing?

To dig deeper into this, we need to think about a question I hear all the time when I give talks about strengths: "Is there a bad side, or a 'dark side,' to strengths?" When people ask me this, I usually ask them exactly what they mean.

“ It's nearly impossible for someone to 'tone down' their top talent themes. ”

In fact, I recently had this conversation with Matt, a manager in a retail company. Matt mentioned that, on occasion, his coworkers felt he had taken over meetings or conversations, and he'd been asked if he could "tone down" this behavior a bit.

Matt had recently taken the Clifton StrengthsFinder, an online assessment that measures a person's talents in 34 categories called "themes" then reveals the user's top five themes. Matt's results showed that Command is one of his dominant talent themes. People particularly talented in this theme generally feel little discomfort in imposing their views on others; once they've formed an opinion, they feel compelled to share it.

Matt wanted to know if there was a downside to having Command as one of his top themes. He was essentially asking, "Can too much Command be bad? And if so, how do I dial it back?"

These are fair questions. People with a lot of Command talent have a strong presence. They can take control of a situation and be decisive. It's easy to see how, if the talents are applied incorrectly, a negative perception of those talents could emerge.



I explained to Matt that Gallup's definition of strength -- *the ability to consistently produce a nearly perfect positive outcome in a specific task* -- can help clarify what he's experiencing. The key to this definition, I said, is the phrase "produce a nearly perfect positive outcome."

If people are saying that Matt has too much Command, what they're really thinking is that Matt hasn't figured out how to leverage the talents in his Command theme in a positive manner. Matt's colleagues shouldn't blame his Command talents if he appears to be pushy or domineering. Rather, they -- and Matt -- should understand that he is not applying those talents productively to his job.

I also explained to Matt that it's nearly impossible for someone to "tone down" their top talent themes. Instead, he should focus on refining those talents and learning to use them in a more sophisticated way. Learning to use his Command talents more productively could be Matt's key to strengths development and increased success. He can also help others move beyond seeing him as "bossy" or "opinionated" and help them appreciate what his most powerful talents contribute to the organization. (See "Don't Mislabeled Your Employees" in the "See Also" area on this page.)

Does Susan ask too many questions?

Here's another example: Susan is a researcher at a consulting firm. Analytical is one of her top talent themes. Susan loves to probe problems and ask many questions. Her colleagues say that Susan continually "peels back the onion." This is a tremendous asset to her organization, as her in-depth analyses add real value for the company's clients.

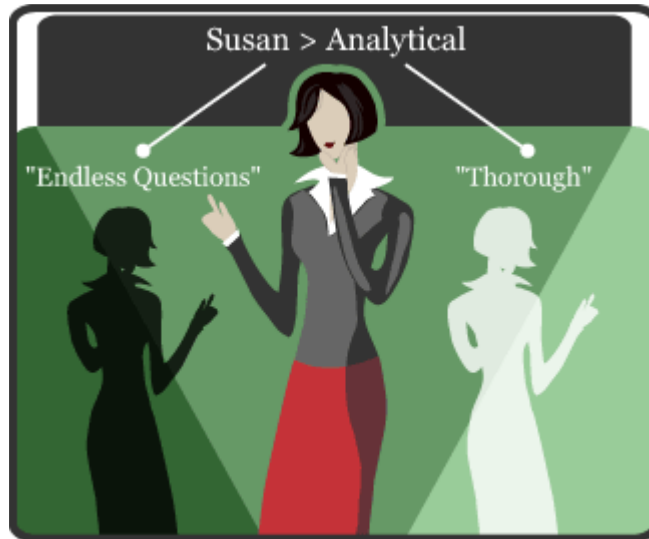


Illustration by Chris Johanowicz

The downside is that she sometimes doesn't know when to quit, and she can drive her colleagues crazy with what they perceive as her "endless questions." It also doesn't help that her e-mail messages, filled with data and analysis, can run many pages.

When thinking about Susan's talents from a strengths-based perspective, it's helpful to return to our original question: "Is there a bad side, or a 'dark side,' to strengths?" Again, if you look at Gallup's definition of strength -- *the ability to consistently produce a nearly perfect positive outcome in a specific task* -- the answer is no, because a strength is about producing "a nearly perfect positive outcome."

On the flip side, if you were to wonder whether Susan was applying her talents in a negative way, the answer is clearly yes. Again, Gallup's definition of talent -- *a natural way of thinking, feeling, or behaving* -- helps clarify this. If Susan's Analytical talents lead her to wear people out with her persistent questioning, then she is applying those talents in a negative way. This is also true when Matt's Command talents manifest themselves in pushiness or in domineering behavior.

The key to a strengths-based approach to managing employees is to help people like Matt and Susan understand their natural patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior so they can apply them in a *positive and productive* manner. When Matt uses his Command

talents to be productively decisive without being pushy or overbearing -- and when Susan channels her Analytical talents to ask questions that make her consulting firm more valuable to its clients (without driving her teammates nuts)

“ If Susan's Analytical talents lead her to wear people out with her persistent questioning, she is applying those talents in a negative way. ”

-- their talents can contribute powerfully to the workplace.

In these moments, Matt and Susan are using their greatest talents to produce "a nearly perfect positive outcome," and there is nothing bad, or dark, about that.

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