

# PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

## A strength overdone becomes a weakness



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It's not unusual for those who lead and manage the work force to become captivated by conventional wisdom, and the recommendations that grow out of what might seem to be obvious common sense approaches, to respond to and solve undesirable behaviors in the workplace. Unfortunately, there are times when conventional wisdom and its accompanying recommendations are not the most effective ways to resolve human behavioral problems. Occasionally, conventional wisdom misses key data points giving rise to interventions that actually stir up and increase undesirable behaviors.

For example, a long-standing convention is the imposition of discipline and punishment for undesirable behavior and results. That belief holds that negative consequences (punishment) are appropriate and called for when a person fails to perform or behave as expected.

However, I recommend a different approach, a somewhat novel approach, but one that not only reduces the stress of having to confront and impose punishment but also corrects the infraction while leaving the employee whole and inspired to do better. In this case, you can remedy undesirable behavior while leaving the employee motivated, inspired, and committed to making behavioral changes to correct the problem. This is an approach that gets you *commitment* instead of compliance.

Certainly, that's a major positive step in correcting undesirable behavior while avoiding confrontation along with judgmental and negative statements about the employee. This approach is built on positive characteristics of the employee. Rather than what the employee *is not*, this approach is built on what the employee *is*.

As for the "stress" of confronting and imposing punishment, even the hardest, most seasoned supervisors and managers typically have difficulty confronting performance problems.

They know what to do about technical incompetence—typically they train, reassign, or fire—but when it comes to personal characteristics and emotions, most of us are seriously challenged. Bargaining Unit policies impose processes establishing limitations as well as requiring precise articulation of both the infraction and the consequences to be imposed. Then too, there are company policies that must also be followed.

There are few allowances for mistakes. As if these were not enough, there is the anxiety of looking another person in the eyes and telling him or her that he or she has screwed up. Then there are denials, demands for proof, alibis, scapegoating, and defensive reactions, all of which take time. This might even result in a grievance. Additionally, in some cases this creates long-term bitterness and resentment—a scenario that takes a serious toll on the boss/employee relationship and productive work.

### Focus on strengths

Let's take a look at the suggested approach, one that focuses on the employee's strengths. This approach is built on the premise that *a strength overdone becomes a weakness*, and it is that overdone strength that has caused the breakdown in performance. Therefore, rather than identifying weaknesses, characteristics the employee rarely uses, let's identify and analyze the employee's strengths, behavioral characteristics typically utilized.

Smart people just don't operate from their weak suits. Instead, they rely on talents and attributes that have worked for them in the past, even throughout their careers. Consequently, a problem occurs when one or more of those attributes are overdone. *Therefore, an analysis of the strengths, identifying those that are overdone, will always take you to the weakness that caused the problem.* Every conflict, every

"error in judgment," every missed deadline, broken commitment, etc, is the direct result of overdoing a strength.

For years, the bulk of my consulting work has been focused on people getting along at work. I've noted that nearly every manager has spent significant time trying to resolve human problems like unacceptable performance, unresolved conflict, reactive behavior—including threats and, in some cases, rebellious behavior. Ironically, I have found that most people are proud of their work and their contributions. I have not found a predominance of mean-spirited, unethical, or immoral folks in the workplace. Furthermore, the vast majority of these people had good intentions and their behaviors made total sense—to them.

Most people in the work force are good people, intent on practicing their skills and talents as they contribute to their organization's success. Therefore, I've always looked for positive factors in the person's behavior, and in nearly every case my expectations have been met. I always find positives and strengths I can build on. Instead of asking, "What's wrong with this guy?" I ask, "What's he doing while he's not doing what he's supposed to be doing?"

While the responses are varied and numerous, they nevertheless give me clues about what's going on, what strengths are being over-utilized. The answers have always been descriptions of behaviors. Example: "While he's not getting the schedule completed on time, he spends his time checking and rechecking," because he's overdoing his high work standards, planning, and organizational skills.

Think of it this way: We live in a world of systems, and that definitely includes human beings. When a system is operating effectively, it is both integrated and balanced.

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When all parts of the system have come together, have combined, and are operating effectively, they are integrated. On the other hand, effective systems are also balanced—that is, they are operating harmoniously. When our capabilities, skills, and talents are integrated and balanced, we are operating in sync and we excel.

Recall the times when you were really operating on all eight cylinders. All your competencies were integrated and balanced, all supporting each other in just the right amounts at just the right times, and you were knockin’em dead. Unfortunately, if one component goes out of sync, because it’s being over-utilized, it loses its balance, and is not operating harmoniously, the entire system loses its synchronization and that strength overdone is now a weakness—that is, it’s causing the system to fail.

I’m an avid boater and I experience my boat as a system. That is, when both engines are operating at precisely the same rpms and when the trim tabs are set just right for the load, there’s very little wet surface and we’re moving through the water with a minimum of resistance. Every part of the system is integrated and balanced. If you look at the wake it’s beautiful: straight, symmetric, and there’s a minimum of wave.

Now, if I increase the speed of the port engine—that is, overdo the power to the port engine—the boat loses its integration and balance and that beautiful wake changes. It goes away and it loses its symmetry—a strength is being overdone, the port engine is putting out too much power. The trim tabs no longer contribute to a minimum of wet surface and I get a distinct list to starboard. Every part of the system goes out of balance, while losing efficiency.

That’s exactly how it is with people. For example, when I speak about analysis, I’m referring to the collection of information, separating the irrelevant from relevant, and noting the gaps and connections in the information. Typically we collect as much as possible in the time allotted.

That may mean we sometimes have to act before we’ve collected all the available information. That frequently causes folks to resist because they know (or think) they need more data, so they collect more. When analysis is overdone, you encounter the problem of “paralysis by analysis.” This throws the entire system out of balance and integration is lost because work has to stop.

## Case study: The situation

Let’s see how we do dealing with a case study. Bill Metcalf (a fictitious person) was a newly promoted operations superintendent at Florida Power’s Crystal River plant. The selection process was focused primarily on Bill’s extraordinary expertise with coal plants. Therefore, it wasn’t surprising that he was selected for his new position because of his know-how. Bill was known as a good guy, liked and respected by all those who knew him. Some described him as a sensitive leader, a good listener, a guy who always had the time to share his expertise and offer suggestions, one who insisted that maintenance work be completed in a timely manner with precision and accuracy. To be sure, Bill was very proud of his contributions.

Nevertheless, within weeks of his promotion, complaints began to find their way to the plant manager’s desk and there were rumblings from the Bargaining Unit. They were saying that Bill was unreasonable, that his expectations were unrealistic, and that his approach was dictatorial. He had even threatened several people. Attempts to talk with Bill were futile because he was determined to have the plant operating at maximum efficiency—regardless of the costs, human or financial.

## Case study: The analysis

So, as plant manager, what do you do with Bill? Let’s take a look at Bill’s behaviors. Keep in mind that these conclusions are based on a history of Bill’s behaviors as well as recent observations. You’ve had considerable time to observe him and you know where he excels. He is a value-adding member of the organization, a unique contributor, and a real asset to the plant and the company in general. If you just use the information provided, you know quite a lot about Bill.

Determination is one of Bill’s strengths. He exhibits a strong drive to complete work on time and with exceptional quality. You know “he was a good guy” who was liked and respected by those who knew him. Additionally, you know he has the capacity to be sensitive, “he’s a good listener,” and you can also presume that he is a reasonably good leader; at least he has notable influence because he emerges as a leader when necessary—such as when he engages in teaching and developing others. You know he wants things done right, so his work standards are quite strong.

If you compare and contrast what he was with what he is now, there is a bit of a contrast—that is, Bill’s capabilities are no longer integrated and have, therefore, lost their balance and harmonious collaboration. He doesn’t look like the same person. He is now described as “unreasonable,” his expectations are “unrealistic,” and his approach is “dictatorial,” and he is driven to have the plant operating at maximum efficiency.

You can presume that his influence is due to his well-established expertise, his wealth of information because of his expertise, the respect others have because of his integrity, and a genuine desire to do the right things. You know he wants completed work to exhibit “precision and accuracy.” Let’s list the strengths you know:

- Sensitivity.
- Listening.
- Determination.
- Developing others.
- Leadership (emergent).
- Work standards.

Now let’s expand that list by defining those strengths as well as the typical results of overdoing them:

**Sensitivity.** This person exhibits consideration for the feelings and needs of others including his impact as a manager—for example, what others expect of their boss, the courage to perform as the person in charge.

When overdone, sensitivity results in smothering behaviors. For example, the person can come off as pampering. He may appear to have lost his objectivity in favor of coddling. He fails to give consideration to employees’ need for a leader as well as the duties and responsibilities of the leader. People need a leader. They need protection or a buffer between them and the “big bosses.” When the boss doesn’t emerge to fulfill that role, frustration, distress, ambiguity, and anger rise up, seriously disrupting the workplace.

**Listening attentively.** Hears what is said and displays his comprehension by asking clarifying questions, playing back what he has heard, displaying confirming non-verbals—including, nodding, smiling, posture (leaning into the conversation), and eye contact.

When overdone (rarely overdone), appears to have taken over the discussion by asking too many questions, nit-picking the speaker’s comments, and generally displaying brash behavior.

**Determination.** Exhibits persistence in striving to reach a person-



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ally desired goal despite major obstacles. Won't stop until it is exactly the way he wants it. Increases his energy when setbacks are experienced. Repeatedly tries alternative approaches. Self-sacrifices regardless of personal costs. Keeps going without encouragement from others.

When overdone, determination will play out as a driven behavior, and if that is overdone it becomes aggressive and even ruthless. Typically, a person displaying overdone determination will come off as bull-headed, even a bully, regarding work issues.

**Developing others.** Takes the initiative to coach work performance and, as needed, provide job-skills training for employees. This includes career-development counseling. Emerging as a leader, will take responsibility for offering advice and direction that result in developing competencies on a real-time basis.

When overdone, developing others will result in development at the expense of getting work done. Will spend excessive amounts of time observing and coaching employees rather than let them learn through on-the-job-training and trial-and-error. Becomes smothering.

**Leadership (emergent).** Seizes opportunities to affect leadership

intended to increase the abilities of individuals. Utilizes effective interpersonal skills and approaches to lead employees to successful task completion.

Although rarely overdone, will be experienced as unwelcome interruptions to ongoing work. This will usually occur with employees who are both able and willing to accomplish required tasks, those who require a minimum of direction and interaction.

**Work standards.** An uncompromising commitment to producing excellent end results. A personal value and belief that a less-than-perfect product is unacceptable. An unwillingness to accept shoddy work.

When overdone, work standards will present as unnecessary nit-picking and time-consuming checking and rechecking. Nothing is ever good enough. Not willing to accept that standards of excellence are variable, depending on the criticality of the end product.

### Case study: Corrective action

When you consider Bill's current behaviors, based on the above descriptions, it would be safe to consider determination as an overdone strength. Note that his other

strengths have lost their harmonious and balanced effect—that is, his capabilities have lost their integration and are no longer operating in sync. Our objective then is to bring about integration and balance of his skills, talents, and competencies.

Utilizing the "overdone strength approach," the following steps are recommended to correct Bill's poor performance. It goes without saying; you must be prepared for this meeting:

**F**irst step. In a quiet and private area, respectfully express your concern about the complaints and grouching that have become a real issue. The specific problem must be articulated precisely, otherwise the ensuing discussion will become scattered and you're apt to lose control. Don't be distracted. Stay on the real problem—specifically, that he is alienating the work force while remaining intently focused on the efficient and effective operation of the plant.

Ensure that he knows and agrees that there are two major responsibilities of his job: Managing and developing the human capital, and keeping the plant operating efficiently. He is paid to do both. As it now stands, he is only doing part of his job. Notably, this is a clear violation of his work standards. Nevertheless, he will not correct what he won't acknowledge.

**Second step.** Inform him that over the time you've known and worked with him, you have recognized and respected him for several strengths he brings to the workplace. Sensitivity and excellent listening are two highly valued strengths. Tell Bill that you're counting on him utilizing those competencies to understand the essence of this conversation.

List the other characteristics that you value. Define each strength and tell him why you see them as value-adding strengths—for example, he consistently develops the human capital of the plant by sharing his expertise and he ensures that work is completed correctly and on time.

This is probably the first time Bill has heard that he is respected and valued for his capabilities. When you add confirming behavioral observations, it becomes even more believable and valid. So, instead of a confrontation, he's actually being complimented. Still, your comments must be correct and verifiable. He must continue to trust you, so don't blow smoke. Remain objective and truthful.

**Third step.** Explain (teach) the concept that a strength overdone becomes a weakness. Next ask him which strength overdone might be causing the current problem. Ask him to describe what might happen if he overdoes determination. Help Bill see the connection—that he becomes driven, and his expectations become unrealistic, and his approach becomes dictatorial.

He's focusing on the plant while ignoring the people side of his job. Stay with this until you have his concurrence, his agreement. Explain that the issue is not caused by a weakness. Rather its cause is the overdoing of one of his strengths, at the expense of his other strengths.

**Fourth step.** Gain Bill's commitment to utilize his strengths to correct and resolve the current problem. Suggest that sensitivity should be used as a means to engage the employees. Point out that his commitment to quality, his work standards, should be called on to create a motivating workplace, to manage each component of his job: the plant and its people.

To make things happen, he'll have to utilize his leadership. Certainly, his determination, along with its drive and tenacity, is a valuable motivator to accomplish the task that comes with his new position. Nevertheless, he must recognize the threshold where his determination crosses boundary and causes his com-

petencies to lose their integrations and balance.

**Fifth step.** This is going to be a new experience for Bill. Not only will it be corrective, it will also be management training. Seize opportunities to offer assistance and provide training. Remember, it's your obligation to consistently add value to the organization's human capital. Therefore, it will be essential that you visit him on a daily basis for the first week. Then visit once a week for several weeks, followed by several times a month. As Bill becomes able and willing, withdraw, allowing him to act independently. Mentor him, sharing your experiences and offering advice.

### Case study: Epilogue

I'm pleased to report that Bill listened attentively and immediately took action to correct the inconsistencies in his performance. Complaints stopped as he began to behave in his customary manner. In feedback to his plant manager, he commented that the two most valuable factors in his willingness to change was the reminder that his job was more than technical, that people (the human capital) were also a major obligation.

Additionally, discovering that by overdoing his strength in determination had put all of his other competencies, talents, and skills out of balance, made it easier to bring about an immediate change. He quickly brought integration and balance to bear on his performance. He now was operating on "all eight cylinders." He also commented that he had used the approach on one of his associates who was having difficulty working for a new boss. The last time I checked, things were operating quite well at the plant.

**Reviewing the "overdone strengths approach,"** there are several benefits that have resulted. They are listed below:

- The event was a positive experience rather than a downer, a load that Bill doesn't have to carry. The positive nature of the intervention has left him whole.
- The problem got resolved using it as a training intervention. Bill benefited from the new learning. This approach is likely to become his approach. It is highly likely that he'll model your approach. For many folks, the boss is the only training course they'll attend. Make sure you're teaching the right lessons.
- Bill remains highly motivated (inspired) because he's heard

many good things about himself and his work. He will be driven by the need to prove you right. In this case, you get commitment rather than compliance. Bill becomes a more effective manager as a result of the intervention.

- Bill becomes a better manager because he's been through the process and knows it works. As you coach him, continue to drive home the need to continually identify the strengths of each employee.
- You become a better manager because you've tried a new approach that works. It leaves your work force healthy and collaborative, more willing to be contributing members of the team.
- There are minimal grievances within your plant. You are considered an imaginative and forward focused leader. Your people are highly motivated and committed. Most perform because they are committed rather than compliant.

**The take-away.** As a leader, you now have a choice regarding your approach to solving performance problems. You can take the "infracture, confrontation, punishment" approach with its potential pitfalls and stressors. Or, you can take the "overdone strength approach" that becomes a feedback and training intervention. This approach focuses on the employee's strengths rather than his or her weaknesses. It's a positive approach that is built on a foundation of value-adding characteristics, an approach that leaves the employee whole and motivated to do better by proving you right.

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