

By dawn klingensmith

GamePlan for Greatness

CTW FEATURES

The best way to advance in the workplace, some experts argue, calls for accentuating the positives.

Concerned about surviving the next round of layoffs? Then you ought not to worry so much about improving your weaknesses. It sounds counterintuitive, but working on your shortcomings will not save your job or help you get ahead. Instead, focus on what you do well and then do it better, says London-based business strategist Vaughan Evans.

"It's about making what you offer distinctive and different," he says. "If you focus on becoming near-perfect in just one or two of your strong areas, you will stand out from your co-workers." Just make certain those strengths are critical to the success of your organization. Batontwirling skills don't count. Gallup research supports Evans' observation that employees who refine their talents gain more opportunities than those who try to turn weaknesses into strengths.

However, the research also uncovered widespread reluctance to devote attention to strengths. Instead, people choose to spend their time and energy examining their weaknesses, says Tom Rath, Gallup's global practice leader for workplace-related research. To get past this tendency, employees should think of themselves as a business and the boss as an investor. "Once you treat yourself as a business, you start to think more clearly about where demand for

your services lies, who your competitors are, what your bosses require of you and what you need to do to become the ideal service provider," says Evans, who discusses this concept in his book, "Backing U! A Business-Oriented Guide to Backing Your Passion and Achieving Career Success" (Business & Careers Press, 2009).

Analyze the "business" – you – from your boss's perspective as an "investor." What are the business's defining strengths? The areas worthy of "financial backing" are the ones you should focus on developing. Follow a few simple steps to figure out which areas to target.

First, identify your top strengths – the half dozen or so qualities and skills that managers and co-workers praise, and that make you feel masterful. Then, rank them from strongest to weakest. Next, identify and rank the five or six strengths that are most valued and play the largest role in your employer's success. Now compare the two lists. The top two strengths on your personal list that intersect with the topranked requirements of the company are the ones you should invest in.

"Become a superstar in your top two strengths," Evans says. "Take classes, read books, get a mentor – whatever is necessary to become an unparalleled leader at your company in these two skills."

Aside from your tiptop talents, it also pays to constantly hone at least one other skill, says Paul Sorbera,

president of the New York-based executive search firm Alliance Consulting. "Without a doubt, highly successful people often are great at a few things and weak in other areas. Developing and playing to one's strengths are key to distinguishing one's career," he says. "That being said, one skill that is universally valuable is communication. Written and verbal communication is very important to advancement."

Also, emphasizing your strengths does not mean you should pretend your weak spots are nonexistent. "The research is very clear that people cannot bury their head in the sand when it comes to their weaknesses. You need to be aware of your weaknesses and figure out the best ways to manage around them," Rath says. However, "There are big differences between managing and fixing weakness," he adds. "If you spend the majority of your time trying to fix all of your weaknesses, there is very little chance you will ever be great at anything." If a weakness is actually a failing, address it immediately.

Correct behavior that causes counterproductive outcomes, such as poor customer service. And take action if a supervisor keeps harping on an aspect of your performance. "When you have a boss who irrationally bangs in about an area of weakness which is not of importance to the firm – and, yes, irrational people do exist – you would do well to address that weakness," Evans says. "Otherwise, you may, irrationally, be one of those who is shown the door."

© CTW Features

