Recognising and dealing with your weaknesses.

This article is about professional development and how an individual can continuously learn and work around any identified shortcomings or weaknesses. It's really just three simple scenarios from education and development during professional and personal life. The key observation is that an individual has to know both their strengths (so they can exploit them) and weaknesses. With recognised weaknesses the challenge is to improve or work around them – which requires first admitting them and then asking for help and coaching. This requires the organization / group the individual is in to be willing to accept and help with weaknesses (as well as utilising their strengths)

1) School children in the classroom

The first example is remembering times in a terrifying classroom and remember when the teacher asked a question. Many people were too frightened to raise their hand for fear of being wrong and being shown up to be stupid. The stereotype of the bad teacher, terrifying with their sarcasm and derision of errors or lack of ability is captured in popular culture – in my schooldays Pink Floyd memorably sang

> "When we grew up and went to school
> There were certain teachers who would
> Hurt the children any way they could
>
> By pouring their derision
> Upon anything we did
> And exposing every weakness
> However carefully hidden by the kids
> ...
> We don't need no education
> We don't need no thought control
> No dark sarcasm in the classroom"

A good teacher certainly should not be like this. A situation where a child does not know something, or how to do something should be seen a learning opportunity (isn't that the purpose of school?). So the teacher ought to be calling on children who are not confident in their answers and helping them work their way through how to solve the problem, e and helping them realise that they are not as bad as they think they are.

Early bad experiences at school can create a strong habit of not speaking up and making an input because there is a lack of self-confidence and the person is too used to, or frightened of, being criticised or derided by their more knowledgeable or experienced peers and / or the teacher. Not making any input cuts off the opportunity to both gain confidence and learn from experience.

I must add there is a reverse to this. At school there was always a smart kid who puts up their hand all the time, knew the answer and was far too smug in their knowledge. I will admit I was guilty of this at school. A smart child in a class may be frightened of answering for fear of being ostracised as a school swot or a nerd, and nobody likes a show-off.

The point I'm trying to make here is that no one when they're learning or developing, should be frightened of the reaction from others as they talk about and reveal their strengths or weaknesses. There is the whole "buttoned-up understating" stereotype of an English personality that is evidence that too often this is the case.

2) Admitting weakness when applying for a job.

During a career or professional development there is the issue of applying for a specific job in an organisation. It is a normal in these situations for an applicant to try and play up and emphasise their strengths. There is an anecdotal view that male candidates for a job when they read the advert will see about 30% of it that they can do and therefore decide to confidently apply whereas more nervous and self-doubting female potential candidates will find 10% of the job description they can't do and be put off applying (apologies for gender stereotyping). Worse, it is my cynical opinion that (especially in management / leadership positions) that many of those who see the 30% they can do remain stubbornly blind to the 70% they can't, and so the skills and behaviours that they lack. This is the wider problem of the "unknown knowns" (subject of for different discussions).

Rejection in an interview can be a dispiriting event. Therefore recruiters and interviewers in companies must make sure that those who apply for a job and aren't successful get valid and positive feedback. (When I did assessment centres for trainees to my old company I was very proud that the of the assessment centre probably spent more time in the wash-up discussing with those of us who had interviewed the candidates honest but positive feedback for those candidates who had been unsuccessful). This feedback can suggest alternative types of roles better suited to the strengths exhibited in the interview by the candidate, whilst explaining that the specific job they had applied for wasn't the job for them.

In an interview an individual should be looking make the best impact, and so have to know their strengths and weaknesses, and have to be able to describe them. In general, in professional work it is important to also know weaknesses so that they can either be worked around (so the weakness is not a blind spot causing unexpected difficulties). Individuals can work with other people to fill the gaps in capabilities (e.g. if written work known to frequently be strewn with typos which author can't see, then ask someone else to look specifically for that). Or an individual having first identified a weakness can look to improve the weakness by getting into situations that give the opportunity to

practice the weak skill. As an example, for many people a first experience of presenting or public speaking is horrific. But it's only with practise are improvements made and confidence increases

I'll illustrate this with two personal stories.

Once I applied to be a head of a department engineering department. One of the questions I was asked was "Can you describe your strengths and weaknesses?". I was open and described that I had recognised that my key professional weaknesses were clear communication and the ability to delegate. The interviewer made what I thought was a strange comment: "You are the first person to ever answer with weaknesses". I restrained myself from remarking "Well you asked me, and if you've been asking this question many times, why haven't you demanded your question be asked?". There was then a more relevant comment around the fact that to be a senior manager / Head of Department then communication and delegation are key skills for that role. I tried to explain that my awareness of these flaws meant I was going to be able to start improving, unlike some other managers I had had who thought they had these skills but didn't really and had never got better.

I did get the job, but it turned out that my weakness in the type of high-level management communication expected, and poor delegation abilities, were actually fatal flaws. But during the role I did improve (so if you know me now you can imagine how bad my communication must have been then). But doing this role did open up the eyes of a number of senior managers to my strengths as the job gave me visibility. Applying for the role gave me visibility and they found a role for me that could exploit my strengths and tolerate my weaknesses. This led to me becoming a specialist / generalist in Systems Engineering which was my role until I retired.

My second example is more trivial and comes from one of my hobbies, playing golf. I am a keen but really not very good golfer. I don't always concentrate, and I have no rhythm, so my strokes are somewhat lacking in smoothness. My most common problem, especially from the tee or with long distance shots, is a horrendous push / fade / slice. The ball starts to the right of my point of aim and then turns further right, losing both distance and ending up in big trouble, usually behind trees. I am now resorting to using an iron rather than a driver from the tee. I can control this shot and get reasonably good results (often, but not all the time – I still struggle to always concentrate). The ball goes straight without any bend, and it travels a reasonable distance and keeps me in play for the rest of the hole.

The problem is that I've got it into my head that I cannot use a driver. Like some schoolchildren who determine that they can't do maths and therefore never try. But having convinced myself I cannot use a driver, then I don't use it and so I will never get to be good at using one. And there are times when you need that club in your armoury.

Having identified I have a difficulty or a problem either in communication or delegation, or with my golf drive, I can't just struggle on alone. The only positive thing about my slice in golf is that it is consistent. But I don't know what I should do to correct it. If I don't know how the shot should be played continuing to practise will just embed and solidify the bad habits. I need to be open about my problems and ask for help. With golf that is easily and readily available - I just have to go and pay the golfer professional, and his job is to be polite and to improve my game. At work I needed to start with the difficult part of admitting my shortcomings and therefore asking for training, asking for coaching, and asking people who I see are good at it, to help me improve.

The difficulty is the personal fear of admitting weakness and admitting to a fault and being at a less than perfection. A good work environment is one where weaknesses and problems can be admitted and then worked on to remove them. without stigma or being perceived of a weak or a failure.

3) Promotion / regrading boards

In many professional roles there is a "grading" structure that allows for promotion without having to apply for a specific new job. Typically, the regrading / promotion criteria is based on a combination of competence, experience and (positive) impact. Normally an individual's manager will nominate them for promotion as a result of a career development discussion and the individual will prepare a" promotion pack", then attend a "promotion board". For me as a "specialist" this was an important way to gain recognition, salary increase and status. [In my career I went through five promotion boards, compared to two "applications for specific jobs, and three instances where I was moved (after discussion) into a specifically different role but without an interview or response to an advertisement.]

It seems from my experience that failure in a specific job interview is not seen totally negatively – they will have been several candidates for one role, so not getting the job, whilst disappointing is not seen as devasting. Professional re-gradings seem to be treated differently. Managers were always fearful of having their judgement criticised if they put people forward for regrading who in the eyes of an independent review panel were not ready – so often there was an overlong delay in putting a candidate forward.

The impact of failure to be regraded seems to be bigger on the candidate. Having nervously prepared themselves for their regrading panel, they get the unpleasant news that the view was they hadn't quite achieved the level of competency / impact required. This knockback seems is often taken as a major negative and destroys the individual's confidence. I knew one person who was "marginally" rejected for a regrading, and it was suggested then come back in a few months with some stronger evidence in one area of their experience. But rather than do that the individual took the rejection as a demonstration of them not being up to it the next grade. He moved role, worked for

another four or five years to get a whole new set of experiences to take to a new regrading panel and was ludicrously late in achieving the grade he should have had years earlier – and had a long-term knock back in his self-confidence.

A summary: To improve ourselves during education or training, and in our professional development, we must be able to recognise and admit our weaknesses. And not see admitting weakness as a negative. The rest of an organisation needs to welcome and accept people with weaknesses, and to help them and coach them to get better or to work around them so their weaknesses don't become a problem for the whole team.(it seems) to recognise strengths and exploit them.

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