how your greatest
strength
can become your greatest
weakness

"What is your greatest weakness?"

A Google search using that common interview question yields more than 2 million articles, most of which outline ways to artfully dodge the answer. The most common trick, of course, is to list a weakness in the form of an exaggerated strength: I'm too hard working; or I care too much about my clients.

Although many people use this approach to give a less-than-honest answer, its premise – the idea that strengths can become weaknesses when overused – is quite accurate.

In the climb up the corporate ladder, the line between strength and weakness isn't always clear. The same ambition and drive characteristic of a go-getter salesperson also earns her a reputation as a cutthroat manager. The meticulous, detail-oriented tendencies of a great accountant can also make him a nit-picking, micromanaging boss.

The personality characteristics that help launch promising careers can turn into crippling derailers down the line. But they don't have to. By identifying and taking steps to mitigate these potentially destructive behaviors early in your employees' careers, they can avoid letting their greatest strengths become their most glaring weaknesses.

What are derailers?

Personality is best defined from two perspectives: personality from the inside and personality from the outside. Personality from the inside, or identity, is the person you think you are. Because you create your own identity, it tends to change over time.

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Personality from the outside, or reputation, has to do with the way others perceive us. Reputation tends to be stable over time, and is an excellent predictor of future performance.

Hogan measures reputation along two dimensions: bright side personality refers to normal personality, measured by the Hogan Personality Inventory. Normal personality is what people see when a person is at his or her best. It determines leadership style, judgment, and a person's ability to get along and get ahead.

Derailers are part of our dark side personality, measured by the Hogan Development Survey. Early in an individual's career, these characteristics may actually be strengths. As that person moves into a management position, however, shifting social expectations and mounting pressure can lead to overuse of those strengths, damaging professional reputation and hindering his or her ability to form and maintain a team.

by moving away from others. People in this category tend to be alert for signs of criticism, rejection, betrayal, or hostile intent. When they think they have detected threat, they react vigorously to remove it.

Moving Against Others – People with high scores on the Bold, Mischievous, Colorful, and Imaginative scales react to conflict by moving against others. They expect to be liked, admired, and respected. They tend to resist acknowledging their mistakes and/or failures (which they blame on others), and they are often unable to learn from experience.

Moving Toward Others – People with high scores on the Diligent and Dutiful scales react to conflict by moving toward others. People in this group want to please figures of authority. As a result, they are easy to supervise, and are popular with their bosses. However, in conflict, they tend to side with authority figures rather than sticking up for their subordinates.

Strategic self-awareness is understanding your strengths and limitations, and how they compare with those of your peers.

Three ways to derail

The Hogan Development Survey measures 11 potentially derailing characteristics (see insert). Although each of these has its own set of strengths and challenges, they can be categorized into three major styles of conflict: moving away from others, moving against others, moving toward others.

Moving Away From Others – People with high scores on the Excitable, Skeptical, Cautious, Reserved, and Leisurely scales react to conflict

Leading with a blind spot

It is important to note that dark side personality characteristics are not automatically problematic; most people have some combination of derailing tendencies, and some are remarkably self-aware and able to mitigate their tendencies.

For most people, however, an important disparity exists between identity and reputation. In other words, how they view themselves is often drastically different from how others

view them. This lack of self-awareness can cause managers to miss feedback messages, deny their shortcomings and ignore the feedback they do receive, resist changing, and, ultimately, stall or derail their careers.

Coaching around the derailers

Fortunately, none are doomed to this fate. With the proper assessment and coaching, individuals can gain self-awareness, challenge and change their existing behaviors, and overcome a damaged reputation.

Awareness – The strategic self-awareness gained through assessing and identifying an individual's derailing tendencies is the single most effective tool for improving performance. People who have a clear understanding of their strengths and limitations tend to seek feedback in multiple forms, accept and act on that feedback, and perform at a higher level than those who lack self-awareness.

Challenge – Although simply identifying people's derailers can be impactful for their careers, it falls short of creating a clear path for development. Coaches can help individuals challenge existing patterns of behavior to set the stage for change.

Change – Individuals' personality determines how difficult or easy it is to change problematic behaviors, but with consistent practice, feedback, and coaching, it is possible to change behavior, and repair a damaged reputation.

Derailers at a glance

What are derailers?

Derailers are personality characteristics that are strengths under normal circumstances. However, under stress or pressure, these characteristics can become crippling career obstacles.

Why is it important to identify derailers?

The most common cause of failed leadership is flawed interpersonal behavior that hinders individuals' ability to form and maintain a functional team.

When should you identify derailers?

Individuals' derailers have the potential to affect them throughout their careers. Early intervention is ideal to ensure individuals' ability to mitigate destructive behaviors before they become a problem.

What are the benefits of identifying derailers to the individual?

Identifying individuals' derailers provides them the strategic self-awareness to develop their leadership skills and improve their performance throughout their careers.

What are the benefits for organizations?

Organizations can use information about individuals' derailers help guide their careers, provide support, and match leaders' abilities to the future needs of the company.

Knowledge is power

Companies spend thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours developing their high-potential employees – from coaching, mentoring, and skills training to conferences and corporate retreats. Added to the caustic effect failed leaders have on productivity and morale and the fact that derailed managers typically cost their companies more than 150% of their annual salary, it is clear that leader derailment can be devastating to your employees, and your business.

By giving your leaders the strategic self-awareness provided by assessing and identifying potential derailers early in their careers, you are giving them the chance to make sure the strengths that helped get them to the top aren't the same characteristics that become their greatest weaknesses.

The HDS: Strengths and Weaknesses

The Hogan Development Survey measures dark side personality along 11 different scales, each of which, under normal circumstances, can be strengths. Under pressure, however, these characteristics can become powerful career derailers.

HDS Scale	Strength	Derailer
Excitable	Great charisma and excitement for projects and people	Moodiness, sensitivity to criticism, and volatile emotional displays
Skeptical	Excellent navigators of organizational politics	Cynical, distrustful, and quick to doubt others' intentions
Cautious	Careful, conscientious corporate citizens	Unwilling to take risks or offer opinions, sometimes paralyzed by fear of failure
Reserved	Strong, independent, and comfortable working alone	Aloof, detached, and disinterested in the feelings of others
Leisurely	Agreeable and pleasant to work with	Passive aggressive, resistant to feedback, and resentful of interruption
Bold	Ambitious and self-confident	Self-absorbed, cocky, and unwilling to admit mistakes
Mischievous	Charming and friendly	Manipulative, impulsive, and taking ill-advised risks
Colorful	Expressive, lively, and fun	Dramatic, distracting, attention-seeking, and disorganized
Imaginative	Creative, outside-the-box thinkers	Eccentric, impractical, and idiosyncratic
Diligent	Careful and meticulous	Perfectionistic, micromanaging, and hyper-critical
Dutiful	Eager to please	Reliant on others for guidance, reluctant to take independent action