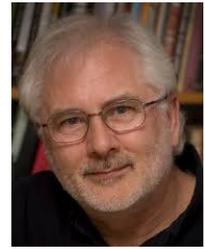


## ★ Leveraging your weaknesses into strengths

Gray Poehnell is an experienced author, trainer and presenter interested in holistic approaches that cultivate hope, practical spirituality, creativity and career integrity. He focuses on developing alternative career approaches, especially for those outside the mainstream.



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### Introduction

My own life journey has greatly influenced my work as a career consultant, author, and trainer within Canada and internationally for over 26 years.

I did not follow a usual career counsellor path. I started off as a dysfunctional Metis youth (one of the three Aboriginal groups in Canada) who was crippled with low self-esteem. Much of the mainstream culture, rather than motivating me, did the opposite; it made me feel as if I would never succeed because of all my problems. So I had to find my own way. The concept of “hope,” not the voices of the mainstream world, gave me the motivation to find practical answers to my challenges. Whether it was getting a mathematics degree, getting a degree in ancient Greek, becoming a college professor, or developing as a career consultant, I have tried to learn what I could from mainstream approaches and then look for practical alternatives when those approaches didn’t work.

Whether working directly with diverse people (such as youth, older adults, social assistance recipients, peoples with disabilities, corrections inmates, immigrants, professionals, and Aboriginals) or training the practitioners that work with them, I have tried to develop alternative approaches that provide simple, practical ways to address some of the systemic issues that cause indigenous peoples and others to lose hope. I may not be able to solve all the issues but I can equip people to deal more effectively with them through practical hope, practical spirituality, creativity, and imagination. For example in this article on leveraging weaknesses into strengths, I am thinking of all the people, including myself, who have been told that they can never succeed because of their weaknesses. There is an alternative to this common myth; one that gives hope as weaknesses are seen to be possible strengths.

### Leveraging your weaknesses into strengths

One of the most valuable lessons I've learned on my own life/career journey is to leverage my weaknesses into strengths. I grew up with a whole list of issues: family dysfunctionality, poverty, visual impairment, learning and speech disabilities, and an extremely introverted personality. I became crippled by extreme introversion because I always thought I was an embarrassment, a loser. Except for mathematics, I didn't think I had any strengths, even that I had a hard time accepting. But the older I get, the more I understand that I wouldn't be the person I am today okay without them and that these weaknesses can be leveraged into strengths.

This may seem to be counterintuitive, but sometimes that's where you find the deepest truths. Within the career field, strengths are often understood to be those things that you are good at or that you have high capacity in. On the other hand, weaknesses are understood to be those things which you are not really good at or which you don't have a high capacity in. Some may perceive other aspects of life, such as disabilities, health issues, failures and mistakes, socioeconomic status, gender, age, or sexual orientation, as potential weaknesses.

As well, strengths and weaknesses are sometimes confused with other concepts, such as possibilities and limitations, success and failure, good and bad. It is not surprising then that it is often recommended that strengths are to be emphasized while weaknesses are to be minimized.

In my life/career work over the years both with “multi-barriered” and “mainstream” clients and students, I have found it very insightful to challenge this understanding by asking several questions:

- What if this understanding of strengths and weaknesses may in fact blind you to the unsung potential of your weaknesses?
- What if this understanding might encourage you to give up too early, because you don't think you can succeed with your weaknesses?
- What if your weaknesses are just as much a part of you as your strengths?
- What if it's not a matter of weaknesses or strengths but what you do with what you have?
- If a strength can become a weakness, why can't a weakness become a strength?

The word weakness is a messy word. It is vague, imprecise, and very subjective. It can mean all kinds of things, depending on the context, and as a result it can be easily misunderstood and misused. The connection between strengths and success and weaknesses and failure is not as simple in real life. I have met people with many strengths who haven't succeeded as they would like, for personal or external reasons. But I've also met people who have exceeded their expectations, not in spite of their weaknesses but because of them.

Richard Branson in an article entitled *Turning a Disadvantage to Your Advantage* (2012, <http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/224172>) states, “Whenever something goes wrong or you find yourself at a disadvantage, often the best way to handle it is to turn a negative into a positive.” In the article, he tells his story of leaving school at 16 because of his dyslexia but then goes on to tell how his “dyslexia guided the way” he ran the Virgin Group. He states that his different way of thinking was a major factor in his success.

I have found several interrelated ways to leverage weaknesses into strengths: acceptance, learning/growth, humility/empathy, teamwork, or creativity.

### **Acceptance**

The starting point for leveraging your weaknesses into strengths is to accept your weaknesses as part of who you are. They are aspects of your life that have played a part in making you the person you are today.

Minimizing your weaknesses may result in ignoring them, hiding them, or even outright denying them. Ultimately this diminishes our sense of who we are (thought shared by my colleague Norm Amundson).

There may be things that we cannot do as well as others, but this just means that we are different. But this does not mean our weaknesses cannot not be leveraged advantageously. In fact our weaknesses may be the very things that enable us to do what others cannot do.

Tavia Grant in an online Globe and Mail article (2015, “Working wisdom: How workers with disabilities give companies an edge”, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/working-wisdom-how-workers-with-disabilities-give-companies-an-edge/article23236023/>) gives several illustrations of companies who are hiring people in well-paying jobs because their disabilities come with very marketable strengths. For example, one young man with autism was hired as a full-time junior tester monitoring quality assurance

because he offered “unique skills such as precision, diligence, attention to detail and an ability to sustain focus.”

Not accepting your weaknesses may also result in blind spots that can lead to unintended and unfortunate consequences on your life/career journey. Think of the people you have encountered, who experience problems in their lives or careers because they have weaknesses that are visible to everyone but themselves. Things are exacerbated when they try to act like there is no weakness, seek to accomplish a task, and then fail. Accepting all of yourself can help avoid the stress that comes from perfectionism or overcompensation.

Accepting your weaknesses does not mean that you have to showcase your weaknesses but it does mean that you are at peace with them and can, when necessary, be willing to be honest and vulnerable and use them to your advantage. Learning to leverage your weaknesses into strengths may give you the freedom to be who you really are and to work effectively with all that you are.

### **Learn and Grow**

Carl Rogers, influential American psychologist best known for his person-centred approach, stated, "the curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am then I can change." Leverage your weaknesses for learning and for growth.

I enjoy the stories of people who recognize that the trials and struggles of their life have made them into people that they are. In fact often times, they say that if they had the chance they wouldn't change anything.

Take a moment and consider the things that you've considered weaknesses in your life at one time or another. How have these weaknesses helped form you into the person you are today? What have you learned as a result of these weaknesses that you could not have learned any other way? Are there any weaknesses that you have now that could be opportunities for learning and growth?

When I entered university to study mathematics, I was told that I was functional illiterate. I was stuck in a self-fulfilling prophecy: I had always failed English miserably; I believed that I would always fail at it; so I avoided it. In my early 20s I started to change my life and had to face my struggles with English and communication skills. After I graduated from university and worked for a year as a statistician, I took further schooling in which I had to take 4 years of English. I had decided that I wasn't going to let my past dictate my future. Though I didn't know how I would do, I decided that I was going to try and, if possible, find some way to learn. Long story short, four years later, I was hired to teach at the college; one of the areas I was asked to teach was English. I became a very good English teacher because I had had to learn how to learn English myself. My very weakness became a strength. I later became the chair of the English department and then the language department after I became the Greek teacher. Now I write and speak for a living. Some weaknesses are not permanent; I was a late bloomer when it came to English; I only needed time and a new learning environment.

Recognizing what we have learned and how we have grown as a result of our weaknesses can be helpful on a very practical level in your life/career journey. For example, in behavioural interviews, it is not uncommon to be asked about a time when you dealt with some kind of failure or weakness. At such times you can clearly leverage your weaknesses into strengths.

### **Humility and empathy**

You can also leverage your weaknesses into strengths, when you allow them to develop humility and empathy in your life. Humility and empathy are key to interpersonal relationships. An honest, humble acceptance of yourself with all your strengths and weaknesses can help

you in empathizing with others' strengths and weaknesses. As you empathize with others, you are better able to understand them and their needs, to identify the best ways to meet those needs, and to learn the most effective ways to communicate whether they are peers or those you serve or those you lead.

I'm often asked, why disengaged youth or adults listen to me. One of the main reasons is that I've walked a similar road. I know what it is to be treated differently because I was different and to feel absolutely worthless and hopeless as a result. But those very things that I thought were an embarrassment have turned out to be some of my greatest strengths because they are a safe bridge between myself and the multi-barriered people with whom I work.

### **Teamwork**

You can leverage your weaknesses not only by allowing them to influence how you work with others but also by encouraging you to team with others. When you accept your weaknesses, you accept that you don't have to do it all and that you can team with those who can do what you can't.

Teamwork may work at several different levels. You may just need someone to give you advice. You may need someone to work with you. You may need someone to do it for you. You may need all three. The key is that it is often much more effective to engage others than to try to do it all yourself.

Being aware of and accepting my own weaknesses has enabled me to come out of my shell and be open to working with others. I don't have to do it all or pretend that I do. What a weight this has lifted off my shoulders. As many others, a critical part of my success has been surrounding myself with people more capable than myself.

### **Creativity**

Finally, you can leverage your weaknesses as a catalyst for creativity. The old adage "necessity is the mother of invention" certainly applies when it comes to our weaknesses. Just because you are not good at doing something in one way doesn't mean there isn't another way in which you might be better.

This can be as simple as changing the questions you ask yourself when you face a challenge. For years I was trapped in a downward spiral of oft-repeated questions, such as "Why can't I do this?" "What is wrong with me?" "What's the point?" Such questions just confirmed the hopelessness of my situation. I've been seeking to change my questions to those that turn my attention to seek other possibilities (Marilee Adams, *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life*, 2009): "What needs to be done?" "Are there different ways this could be done?" "Which would work for me?" "Who could help me with this?"

In closing, leveraging your weaknesses into strengths is summarized well in Branson's advice, "Whatever personal challenge you have to overcome, you must be brave enough to accept that you are different. ... Believe in yourself, and use everything you can — including the obstacles — to propel you along the road to success. Who knows what you might achieve?"

★ Gray Poehnell is a Canadian career consultant, workshop facilitator, keynote speaker, and author of a number of books including *Hope-Filled Engagement*, *Guiding Circles*, and *Career Pathways*. Gray's books are available for purchase at: <http://www.ergoncommunications.com>