

Fast Company

This is the text-only, printer-friendly version of 'How to Overcome Your Strengths'
Its permanent web address is : <http://www.fastcompany.com/online/24/toolbox.html>)

How to Overcome Your Strengths

Hey, fast-tracker, you'd better beware: It's not your weaknesses that can trip you up on your way to the top -- it's your strengths. Here's how to prevent your talent from doing you in.

by Michael Kaplan

illustrations by Michael Witte
from FC issue 24, page 224

(C) May 1999

Four years ago, Sharon Mass landed her dream job: director of case management for Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, in Los Angeles. Talented and highly driven, Mass impressed her boss with her performance right from the start. Her coworkers, however, were not so pleased. Mass, 54, expected everyone to be as smart and as hard-working as she was, so she didn't realize that others found her intimidating. But she soon found out -- when a couple of people complained about her to the hospital's human-resources department.

Hoping to improve the situation, Mass decided to speak with Lois P. Frankel, a business coach and senior partner at Corporate Coaching International, based in Los Angeles. In her 12 years of counseling, Frankel has worked with lots of people like Sharon Mass: talented fast-trackers who don't understand that the skills that enabled them to succeed early on can backfire -- and knock them off their career path.

You've probably met these people in your own workplace (you may even be one yourself): the perfectionist team leader who won't delegate, the detail-obsessed finance wiz who can't see the big picture, the supergeek who alienates everyone. Last year, Frankel published a book about why such people fail: "Jump-Start Your Career: How the 'Strengths' That Got You Where You Are Today Can Hold You Back Tomorrow" (Three Rivers Press, 1998).

"What happens," says Frankel, "is that people rely too heavily on the skills that contributed to their early success. As a result, they fail to develop new skills. When the going gets tough, they revert to the same old tactics -- and then wonder why those tactics don't work. Well, they don't work because what these people need is a complementary skill set."

Because change is a constant in business, chances are good that one day you'll have to face down your own strengths. When that day arrives, think about the three people profiled below: successful businesspeople who faltered but then found ways to turn their missteps into new kinds of success.

Heavyweight: Charles Martin

Company: Fox Family Channel

Strengths: A supreme networker and relationship builder

No doubt about it: Charles Martin is a nice guy. He's thoughtful and charming -- a mentor who excels at developing people. That skill had served the 51-year-old executive well, accelerating his rise at Fox Family Channel, where he had become VP of human resources and administration.

But as he ascended the company's corporate ladder -- where senior positions are few and competition for them is fierce -- Martin found that being nice was a liability. Managers made salary and hiring decisions without consulting him first, figuring that he would be easy to bully afterward. Whenever he disagreed with someone, almost inevitably he was the one who backed down, fearful of damaging a relationship that he had worked so hard to build.

Martin had concentrated too much on helping others and too little on helping himself. And now his career had stalled: He had gone three years without a promotion. "I realized that I had really missed out on something -- that I deserved to be among the company's decision makers. Being passed over for senior VP made me feel excluded."

He thought about how his strengths had caused him to stumble. Because of his desire to maintain good relationships, he had avoided challenging people at all costs. He hadn't pushed his staff to perform better; he hadn't stood up to senior executives.

Martin's fears were confirmed when Lois Frankel conducted a feedback survey of his staffers: They said that Martin was too passive, that he wasn't a take-charge leader. Because he didn't seem to believe in himself, they didn't believe in him either. "People were taking me for granted," he says.

Frankel set out to help Martin put some swagger in his step. "She taught me that before I have a difficult conversation with someone -- to hash out a disagreement, for instance -- I should rehearse what I want to say. That helps me to create a game plan and to keep the conversation on track."

Frankel's technique -- consider it a self-administered pep talk -- also gave Martin the confidence to tell people what he really thought, rather than what he thought they wanted to hear. "I didn't win every argument. But people started to respect my point of view: They listened to me." Fighting for something that you believe in and losing, Martin now realizes, is better than never having fought at all. In fact, his new approach helped him ask for and win a promotion to senior VP.

"Being accommodating helps you build relationships early in your career, and that's important," Martin concludes. "But it's rough-and-tumble at the top of any organization. If you don't watch out, you can wind up being someone's doormat."

3 Signs That You're Getting Steamrolled

1. You hesitate to take a stand on tough issues, fearing that you'll alienate people.
2. You put off difficult decisions.
3. You find that people abuse your time.

Coordinates: Charles Martin, charles_martin@ife.com

Heavyweight: Ed Garnett

Company: Amgen

Strengths: A fast thinker and a real-time problem solver

After nearly 12 years at Amgen, the world's largest biotechnology company (with annual revenues of \$2.7 billion), 51-year-old Ed Garnett won a promotion to VP of human resources. Two years later, he joined Amgen's senior-management team, which oversees the company's day-to-day operations. Just three days into his new job, Garnett attended his first meeting with this select group of 12 executives.

Sitting in a Ritz-Carlton conference room, surrounded by Amgen's best and brightest, Garnett saw his confidence turn to mush. He had always prided himself on his ability think fast and to crack complex problems. But, surrounded by these heavy hitters, Garnett froze up.

His silence dismayed his new colleagues -- so much so that one committee veteran took Garnett aside after the meeting. "I kept waiting to hear your opinions," this executive told him. "Why didn't you contribute?"

Garnett's reply was uncharacteristically wooden: "I didn't feel that I had the necessary technical competency."

That response floored his colleague. "You're part of the leadership team now. We expect to hear your opinions: Opinions matter at this table."

Garnett was relieved to hear that his views were welcome -- and terrified at the thought of expressing them. But he knew that holding back at this fast-forward company would mean a slow death. And he

feared that his verbose, "think out loud" mode of problem solving wouldn't fly in his new position.

Garnett's fears were, unfortunately, well founded: His shoot-from-the-hip approach frustrated members of his team, who were sent scrambling every time he changed his mind. His tendency to reverse himself, meanwhile, made him look wishy-washy in the eyes of Amgen's senior executives.

To his credit, Garnett was self-aware enough to realize that he needed help: He already knew how to think fast -- but now he had to learn how to make his first thought his best thought.

Frankel coached him on how to make his points in crisp, bulleted sentences. She also advised him to shape his remarks at meetings in the same way that an editor shapes a story. "I began creating headlines and subheads for what I needed to say," Garnett explains, adding that this technique also lets people know where he's taking a conversation.

Another way that Garnett tempered his tendency to deliver quick, half-formed opinions was by recognizing that most problems don't require instant resolution. Even when a query comes from Amgen's president, Garnett has learned, there's no harm in working out an answer overnight. "Getting it right the first time, although it might take a few extra hours, saves time in the long run," he says.

3 Signs That You're Losing Credibility

1. You learn that people can't follow you and that they tune you out.
2. You're left out of brainstorming sessions.
3. You ask people if they have a minute for a quick conversation, and they say, "Yeah, but just a minute."

Coordinates: Ed Garnett, egarnett@amgen.com

Heavyweight: Joan McCoy

Company: ARCO Alaska

Strengths: A driven, self-sufficient worker and a consummate "go to" person

Joan McCoy was devastated. The 47-year-old director of community relations had been passed over for a promotion that she thought she had bagged. She was sitting in her office after receiving the bad news, "feeling like someone had knocked the air out of me," she recalls. "I was angry and confused, and I guess I sulked for a while. Then I marched into my manager's office and asked her what I needed to do to get promoted. She told me to get leadership-development training."

That advice surprised McCoy, who had never imagined that her leadership skills needed improving. After all, she handled a delicate (and potentially perilous) job for one of the largest oil companies in the United States. She performed her responsibilities in the field with equanimity and aplomb.

But when dealing with her colleagues at work, McCoy failed to use the social skills that had made her so successful in public. To her peers, her zeal to succeed made her seem cold, aloof, and standoffish. She was so afraid of doing less-than-perfect work that she would delegate only the most minor assignments to her staff -- which frustrated her team and gave her a crushing workload.

"I thought I would be rewarded if I kept my nose to the grindstone," she says. "I never worried about my relationships with coworkers. And so I was oblivious to problems that were all around me."

Several sessions with Frankel helped open her eyes. Frankel surveyed McCoy's coworkers, bosses, and subordinates about her performance. Their consensus: McCoy had failed to build a team. She didn't listen. She didn't offer constructive feedback.

Ironically, her isolation had caused her to get little recognition for her hard-won accomplishments. "I figured that people knew I was doing a good job. But according to the feedback I got, they actually didn't know. So I began using email to promote my team. I've also been trying to visit a few key executives in the company each week. Overall, I'm becoming more visible."

When dealing with her staff, McCoy reminds herself to be inclusive. Before, she simply bulldozed ahead

without consulting anyone; now she asks for input from staffers. "I still like to be in control, and sometimes it's hard to let go. But I'm learning that when you share the workload, you also get to share the worry."

McCoy has also worked to bring her well-honed diplomatic skills into her workplace. Before, whenever someone stepped into her office, she would actually bristle at the thought of wasting time on small talk.

"Lois told me to invite people into my office," says McCoy. "The first person I asked in was incredulous: 'You want me to come in?' That really drove home how isolated I had become. Now I talk to people in the elevator or in the cafeteria. And, for the first time, I'm getting a lot of good information about what's going on in our company."

3 Signs That You're Isolating Yourself

1. You're unaware of the news that passes through your company's grapevine.
2. You consistently put in more hours than your colleagues do -- which means you aren't sharing your workload.
3. You think it's a waste of time to spend even 10 minutes a day talking with a coworker.

Coordinates: Joan McCoy, jmmccoy@mail.aai.arco.com

Action Item: Type Casting

To perform successfully at the highest levels of an organization, you need to get along with people who are different from you. One smart path to smart schmoozing is described in a new book, "The Enneagram Personality Portraits," by the husband and wife team of Patrick J. Aspell and Dee Dee Aspell.

The book provides strategies for reading nine personality types and for customizing your conversational style to each type. "If you can use behavioral cues to recognize certain types of people, you can communicate with them in a more effective way," says Dee Dee Aspell. How does she suggest communicating with, say, high achievers? "Quickly," says Aspell. "These people want efficient conversation. They respond best to action-oriented language that includes specifics and that provides a clear payoff."

Coordinates: \$24.95. The Enneagram Personality Portraits: Enhancing Professional Relationships, Jossey-Bass, 800-274-4434

Sidebar: Three Reasons People Fail

What factor separates people who are on the fast track from those who get left behind? To answer that question, the Center for Creative Leadership, in Greensboro, North Carolina, surveyed 62 executives at blue-chip service and manufacturing companies. The group then published its findings in a report titled A Look at Derailment Today. The authors of the study, Ellen Van Velsor and Jean Brittain Leslie, identify three primary reasons why talented people fail to reach the top. Consider yourself warned!

They don't adapt during transitions. Some people are so resistant to change that they can't or won't alter their behavior -- and ultimately they fail. A typical comment about one failed manager: "He had a rigid and outdated management style. He was inflexible and people got tired of it."

They are difficult to work with. People with this fatal flaw often seem insensitive, manipulative, and overly critical. One manager who derailed was described in this way: "He would have people hanging out to dry if they wouldn't do what he wanted."

They fail to lead in a team-centered way. Being assertive and taking initiative can put people on the fast track early on. But those same traits can stymie people when they reach the executive level,

where teamwork is vital. This comment was made about one such manager: "He was very isolated, [and he] did not create a team."

Coordinates: \$20. A Look at Derailment Today: North America and Europe, Center for Creative Leadership, www.ccl.org

Sidebar: Be a Social Worker

All work, says Lois P. Frankel, is social -- a fact of work life that people ignore at their peril. "Establishing good working relationships can help us secure the cooperation of the people we need to accomplish our tasks. If we delay building good relationships until we really need them, it will be too late." Here are six of Frankel's favorite techniques for socializing at work.

- 1. Once a day, drop into someone's office for a 10-minute talk.** "Casual conversation helps build friendly relationships that can withstand stress."
- 2. When people talk to you, listen.** "Put everything else on hold for a moment, so that people will realize that what they're saying matters to you."
- 3. When you need help, ask for it.** "This is mainly a relationship-building exercise, but you'll get lots of useful feedback as well."
- 4. Begin conversations with small talk.** "If you always talk about work, people will think that you only care about work -- and that you don't care about them."
- 5. Don't let your desire to be liked keep you from being straightforward.** "We all want to be popular, but that desire should never overshadow the need to make tough decisions."
- 6. Do favors for others -- even when you can't anticipate that a favor will be returned.** "Doing so builds good corporate karma, and somehow, some way, you'll benefit from that karma."

Coordinates: Lois P. Frankel, lpfrankel@msn.com

Sidebar: Are You Knocking Out Your Own Career?

The reasons why a fast-tracker suddenly derails are often evident to everyone except that person. To help you determine whether your career is in danger, we've adapted a "Derailment Inventory" from Lois P. Frankel's *Jump-Start Your Career*. Use the scale below to answer the questions that follow. Each set of questions gauges your abilities in one of three areas: working with coworkers, working with higher-ups, and networking.

- 1 = describes me exactly
- 2 = describes me
- 3 = somewhat describes me
- 4 = does not describe me

People Skills

- Other people describe me as a real "people person."
- I spend a part of each day making small talk with coworkers.
- I see some of my coworkers outside of work, and I know most of them socially and not just professionally.

- Because I have good work relationships, I often succeed where others fail.
- I do not have an inordinate need for everyone to like me.

Working with Authority

- When I have a good reason for doing so, I can express a view that differs from that of my company's senior team.
- If I see a senior leader making a decision that seems harmful to my company, I speak up.
- People see me as someone who can independently assess an executive decision and, when appropriate, offer an alternative perspective.
- When senior people ask for my opinion, they know that I'll respond to them with candor.
- I believe that it's more important to be honest with senior leaders than to placate them.

Networking

- I spend at least a part of each week networking with colleagues.
- I belong to professional organizations and know other members of them.
- A few times each month, I am invited to join key members of my team or my organization for lunch.
- I'm fairly well connected to my company's grapevine.
- I regularly interact with peers in other divisions and at other companies.

The Score

Now, to find out whether your career is on the fast track or whether it's headed for derailment, tally your score for each set of questions.

5 to 8: You're right on track! Examine the points on which you rated yourself 1 or 2, and try to continue acting accordingly.

9 to 13: You need to fine-tune your skills to stay on track. Review the questions on which you scored 3 or 4, and work to add the relevant skills to your repertoire.

14 to 17: You're dangerously close to derailing. Time to do an in-depth self-assessment and to expand your skill set.

18 to 20: You're seriously derailed. To get your career back on track, seek help from a mentor or a career coach.

Coordinates: \$14. "Jump-Start Your Career," Three Rivers Press, www.randomhouse.com

Michael Kaplan (mkap@interport.net), a frequent contributor to Fast Company, also writes for Smart Money and GQ.

Fast Company retains the copyright in all of the material on these Web pages as a collective work under copyright laws. You may not copy, republish, redistribute or exploit in any manner any material from these pages without the express written consent of Fast Company. Contact our Permissions Editor (permissions@fastcompany.com; fax: 617-973-0373) for permissions and robyn@parsintl.com for reprints. You may, however, download copyrighted material for your individual and non-commercial use only.

The Fast Company name and logo and all related product and service names, design marks and slogans, including but not limited to Benchmark, Best Practice, Big Idea, Company of Friends, fastcompany.com, Fast Pack, Fast Take, Fast Talk, How Smart Business Works, Job Titles of the Future, Look + Feel, Meeting I Never Miss, Neoleisure, People & Teams, Powertools, Real Time, Real People Real Team Real Solutions, Spy in the House of Work, Toolbox, Unit of One, Working Progress, and @Work are the trade names, service marks, or trademarks of Fast Company, and may not be used without the prior written consent of Fast Company.

Please read the full and current legal notes online <http://www.fastcompany.com/disclaimer.html>