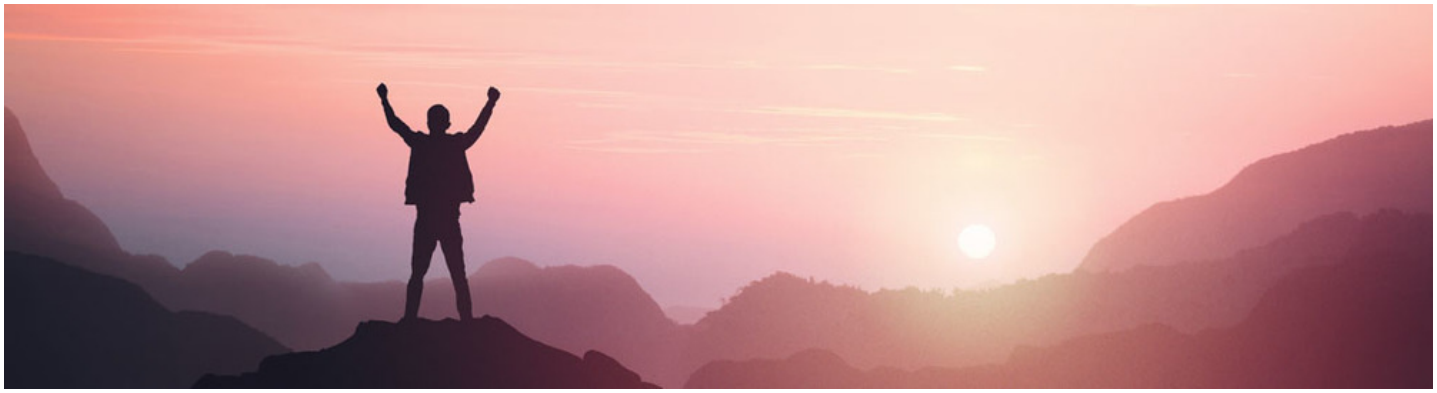
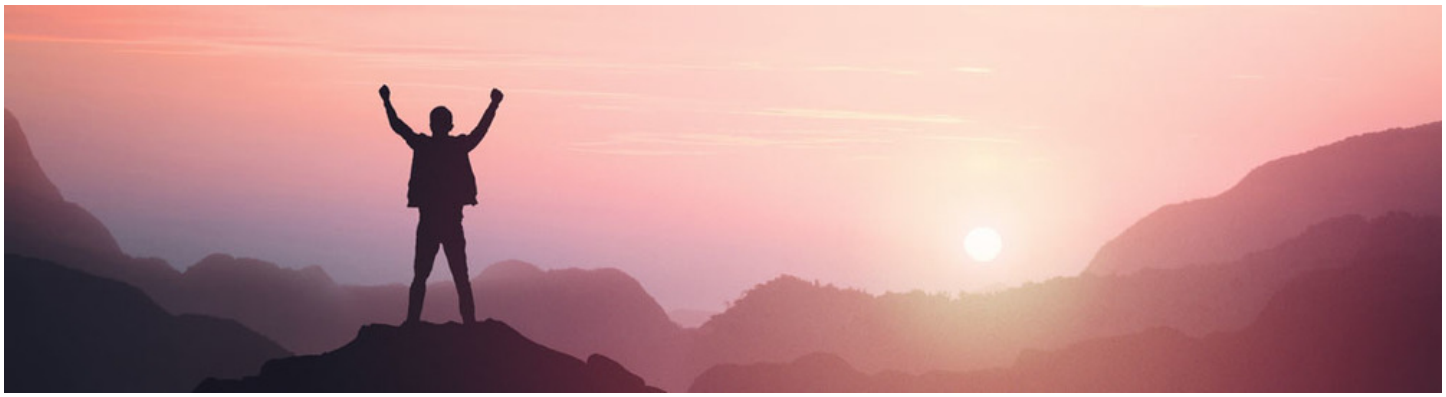
ACC DOCKET
INFORMED. INDISPENSABLE. IN-HOUSE.

Lead With Your Strengths

Skills and Professional Development





“Tell me about your weaknesses.”

It’s a classic job interview question. We’ve all faced it at some point. You are supposed to respond earnestly “I wish I wasn’t such a perfectionist,” or “Sometimes I just bring TOO MUCH passion to my work,” or something similar. It is the original humble brag: Pick something that is clearly a strength (to the employer) and look distraught as you confess to being a detail-obsessed workaholic.

There are plenty of dopey interview questions out there. I was once asked, “If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be?” (Easy … a sequoia sempervirens, obviously!). The NFL is notorious for asking oddball questions of pro prospects. The weakness question is more interesting than dumb though, because it reveals a widespread preoccupation that we have with people’s shortcomings. The talent evaluation process at many companies seems to focus more on exposing the weaknesses of candidates than on uncovering their strengths.

This speaks to a model that many people have about human performance, in which limitations are weighted more than assets. This way of thinking values people who have either mastered their flaws, or had none to begin with.

I think this is wrong. It is a limiting and harmful way to evaluate anyone … especially yourself.

Stop trying to be what you are not

I learned this the hard way. I wasted too much time and psychic energy in my career trying hard and wishing that I could be better at some things. Writing my Law Review note — indeed just being on Law Review — was pure torture … I love writing, but my note was objectively bad. The analysis was thin, the citations were spotty, and it was extraordinarily dull. As I was writing it, I kept thinking: *Why can’t I just finish this thing into which I’ve already poured countless miserable hours?*

I’m also a competitive person. I know this both intuitively, and because I’ve done enough self-analysis and “testing” to understand this part of my DNA. I can’t just participate and be content … I have to try to win. So when I run across someone who is better or more natural at something, it can drive me crazy. I want to push myself, to get better at that thing. This desire has at times helped me grow and learn in all parts of my life, including my career, but has sometimes become a harmful and wasteful distraction from what matters most.

Put the time in where it counts

I know I’m not alone. People miss becoming their most effective selves because they’ve focused on trying to build up their weaknesses, instead of building to their strengths. Are you a brilliant presenter and comfortable on your feet, but a slow writer? Spend your time becoming the best presenter, rather than beating yourself up to become marginally better at writing. Get better at what you are good at rather than worrying about your limitations.

We all have only so much time. So be aware and be selective. If you want to get return on your time, focus on making a strength even better. It can be much slower to build up your capabilities in an area that is unfamiliar and uncomfortable. The things that make you shine are the ones that will propel you forward, while a marginal improvement in a weakness will still leave you way behind someone else.

Understand yourself and lean on others

There are two points I try to stay true to when it comes to running my team. First, I want to be honest with myself about where my strengths lie and where I have gaps. Second, I want to work with amazing people who are great in areas where I have challenges. There is an old saying: “play to your strengths, staff your weaknesses.”

Good leaders understand their limits and welcome help.

I know, for example, that I can sometimes be both too subtle and too impatient, mistaking honest confusion and thoughtful contemplation for ignorance and indolence. These weaknesses are exacerbated working with a global team, trying to drive perfect alignment across continents and cultures, usually via phone calls and emails. Fortunately, I have colleagues who can spot my weakness, see when I may be derailing, and force me to get clear (even when I think I have said the exact same thing five times already), or have more empathy (even when I think my point of view is the only possible correct one). I rely on colleagues to supplement my weaknesses, and I hope they feel the same way in return.

While no one is good at everything, *everyone* is good at *some things*. The real weakness is not knowing what those things are. There are lots of ways to discover your strengths, including resources like MBTI/Myers Briggs, Gallup/Strength Finders, personal coaching, and more. I have found value in all of these.

So go ahead and play your strongest cards. Give yourself permission not to be good at everything. Find your lane and become exceptional at something that fits you. That’s what leads to real growth and the best and happiest career.

Matt Fawcett



GENERAL COUNSEL

NETAPP