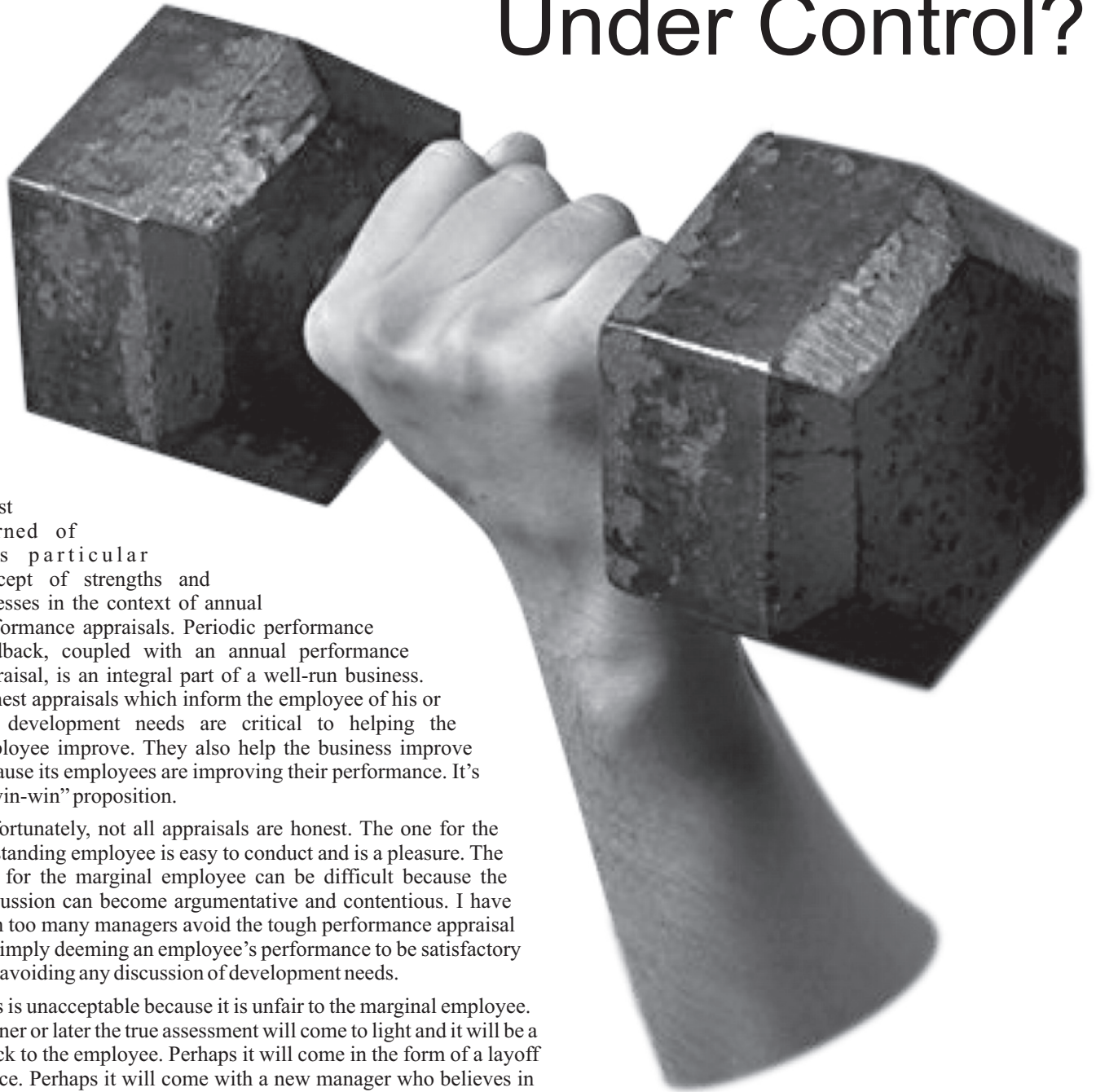


Are Your Strengths Under Control?



I first learned of this particular concept of strengths and excesses in the context of annual performance appraisals. Periodic performance feedback, coupled with an annual performance appraisal, is an integral part of a well-run business. Honest appraisals which inform the employee of his or her development needs are critical to helping the employee improve. They also help the business improve because its employees are improving their performance. It's a "win-win" proposition.

Unfortunately, not all appraisals are honest. The one for the outstanding employee is easy to conduct and is a pleasure. The one for the marginal employee can be difficult because the discussion can become argumentative and contentious. I have seen too many managers avoid the tough performance appraisal by simply deeming an employee's performance to be satisfactory and avoiding any discussion of development needs.

This is unacceptable because it is unfair to the marginal employee. Sooner or later the true assessment will come to light and it will be a shock to the employee. Perhaps it will come in the form of a layoff notice. Perhaps it will come with a new manager who believes in

giving honest performance assessments. Whatever the form, the day will come and it won't be pretty.

I never understood why many managers don't give honest appraisals. Again, the employee deserves honest feedback. If a manager can't conduct an honest discussion, he should not accept a position as a manager.

In one particular staff discussion this subject was being discussed. The general manager stated that he expected his managers to conduct honest performance appraisals with their people. He further stated that there is no need for the discussions with marginal employees to be contentious if the discussion is in terms of strengths and excesses.

The theory he was discussing is that no one inherently has any weaknesses. We develop weaknesses when we carry strengths to an excess.

It is a very healthy exercise for everyone to periodically make a list of his or her strengths. You should know yourself pretty well and should be able to easily list your strengths.

Self-confidence is a trait we admire, we strive to have, and we count as a strength. If we carry the strength of self-confidence to an excess, it becomes arrogance, and a weakness.

Consider one's ability to trust others. This is a strength and one which you need to develop as you need to delegate more to others. If you carry trust to an excess it becomes gullibility.

Being strong and forceful are strengths. Carry them to an excess and you become a bully.

Being cautious is a strength. Carry it an excess and you become indecisive.

Being cooperative is a strength. Carry it to an excess and you become a pushover.

Taking risks is a strength and a necessary ingredient to being an entrepreneur. If you carry risk-taking to an excess you can become reckless.

Having ambition is a strength. In this case I'm thinking of the person with the desire and ambition to get ahead. You've recognized that in some people and you admire their drive. However, I have seen some people carry their ambition to an excess. They become obsessed with getting ahead and start doing some pretty dumb things which have hurt their chances. They carried their strength right into a weakness.

Again, this was presented in the context of having performance discussions with marginal people in a positive manner.

Like many of the lessons I've learned I have thought about them long after and have extrapolated them beyond their original context. In this case I have tried to self-assess my weaknesses to see if they are indeed strengths carried to an excess. Not surprisingly, the theory fits the case.

I feel one of my strengths is the capacity to speak out when I don't agree with something being said. In other words, I am not a "yes-person." I think of this as a strength which adds value to the organization.

In my later years I came to the realization that this strength was of value to me if I utilized it in moderation. If I carry my outspokenness to an excess I become argumentative. I have learned to speak out more sparingly and with more caution. I will speak out when I think something is wrong or if I think something can be done in a better way. However, I don't play devil's advocate as much as I used to and I've learned to pick my fights.

I think it is a very healthy exercise for everyone to periodically make a list of his or her strengths. You should know yourself pretty well and should be able to easily list your strengths. Which of your characteristics make you proud? What do you do well and which characteristics contribute to your doing that well?

Once you have your list spend some time thinking about what those characteristics would become if they were carried to an excess. Then ask yourself, "is there any characteristic on the list that I might be carrying to an excess? Are any of these strengths becoming weaknesses?" If there are, you need to consider what you are going to do about them.

From time to time you must ask yourself, "are my strengths under control?"

From the book "IT AIN'T OKAY TO FAIL" By Brian Strachan.
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