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*Develop Organizations
through People!*



| Friedbert Gay

Personal strength is no coincidence - Part 2

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Professional self-management as a characteristic of a strong personality

The person who consciously bears in mind the relationship between environment and his own behavior can overcome reflex-based reactions and control his behavior in a targeted manner. People with strong personalities are capable of adapting their behavior to the situation and constructively dealing with people of different behavior types. This has nothing to do with chameleon-like adaptations but much more with not submitting to direct behavioral impulses and emotions. And this is because the systematic conditionality of human behavior has an encouraging consequence: *I cannot change others but by changing myself I automatically get different responses. This means that others change themselves.*

Cautious Mr. Smith reacts differently if I behave less impulsively and take his considerations more seriously. If I conduct the conversation in a different way, I get a different reaction, which in turn plays a role in determining my further behavior. If I more strongly respect the advance timing Mr. Smith demands, he is potentially more likely to act differently in spite of his fussy self.

“Professional self-management” sounds good you may say, but how does one put it into practice? Remember that as a general rule our behavior is motivated by certain goals. Different behavioral tendencies correlate to certain basic aims. One important aim underlying “steady” behavior, for example, is achieving harmony with the environment (being accepted, satisfying others and making them happy). In “cautious” behavior, caution plays a major role (avoiding risks, doing things the right way) while “influencing” behavior is motivated by the desire to realize own ideas and remain capable of acting. “Dominant” behavior is less characterized by caution as it is by striving for power (responsibility) and success.

Our aims trigger certain perceptions and cause us to act in certain ways. A desire to achieve success soon with my project motivates me to act energetically. If I don’t want to make any mistakes, I am not going to be affected by people trying to hurry me up. Thus, recognizing and reflecting on one’s own aims are of major importance to successful self-management. Being conscious of my own aims and ensuring that these agree with a given situation give me an emotional advantage in successfully adapting my behavior: aim + perception = action.



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Here is an everyday example of this relationship: People hate doing their tax declarations; a lot of people put them off week after week. Imagine, however, that you intend to recover a nice amount from the tax authorities. The job suddenly appears easier and you no longer dread filling out those “awful” forms.

Professionally managing your behavior thus means:

1. Consciously assessing situations

What exactly is occurring in this situation? What demands are being made of me? How do I classify this specific situation on the basis of my experience?

2. Being clear about your own intentions

What are my intentions? Which aim is realistic and appropriate for the situation?

3. Determining the behavior required

What behavior will serve my purpose? How can I achieve my goal? If I am serious about my aim I will generate the energy needed to adapt my behavior to this end.

4. Strengthening the new behavior

How do others react to my behavior? What feedback do I get? What proves successful?

5. Reflecting on the entire process

How successful am I in this specific change process? Are my aims strong enough for me to adapt my behavior? Am I less successful in doing so because other aims I have are possibly stronger?

You may have noted that this is somewhat different than just telling yourself you are going to be more patient from now on in tolerating Mr. Smith's sense of thoroughness or that you are not going to take your “influencing” colleague's very verbal outbursts of enthusiasm so seriously in the future. The main thing is to understand that your own actions and emotions are the result of your intentions and thoughts and to align them accordingly. Professional self-management means no longer making other people or events responsible for our behavior but rather reflecting on the causes within ourselves. The situation is what it is. But I can choose how I react to it: Do I want my behavior to be dominated by spontaneous reflexes or do I want to target my behavior to agree with my intentions? Do my emotions control me or do I control my emotions?



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Suggestions for leadership and teamwork

Most problems in companies are of an interpersonal nature. Ask a close friend about his job and you will hardly ever hear about impersonal work-related issues such as difficult new software or the like. Most often you will hear about his new boss that is too strict or not decisive enough, or about colleagues that reject your friend or try to get too close, about employees that don't pull their weight or that run away with the ball. According to an old personnel saying, people are hired for their expertise and dismissed for their personalities. Nonetheless, in companies, completely different types of people have to work together.

As a manager, your performance is measured by your success in leading your staff. Your job is to achieve results. For this to happen you have to motivate the people in your department. However, what motivates one staff member and drives them to top performance can have exactly the opposite effect on another member. One person loves challenges and plenty of flexibility while another person feels alarmed and lacking orientation under the same conditions. A third person finds it difficult to perform routine tasks and abhors precise scheduling, while the colleague sitting across from him reacts sensitively to always having to get used to something new and changing plans in mid-stream.

One important initial step in professional leadership is to accept this diversity and to actually value it as a gain. However, our efforts are often thwarted in the process by something that is a common human tendency: We tend to judge people that have the same behavior tendencies as we ourselves do on the basis of their strengths and people with other prevailing behavior tendencies on the basis of their weaknesses. In either case, our view is myopic. When we judge people on the basis of their weaknesses it is impossible to establish a good long-term relationship with them. There are five steps we can take to prevent this from happening:

- Step 1:** Identify the *behavior* of others through observation.
- Step 2:** Learn to understand the personal *needs* of others.
- Step 3:** Develop a positive *attitude* toward people with different behavioral styles.
- Step 4:** Find out what could cause *tensions* in the relationship with certain people.
- Step 5:** Use your own *ability to adapt* so that the interpersonal needs of these people are met.

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Being adaptable means that we treat others like we want to be treated ourselves. This statement is often quoted and just as often misunderstood to mean a superficial rule to “treat everybody the same way” and “be fair”. However, if we are honest with ourselves, we also expect something different from our counterpart: We want him or her to listen to us, to make a serious effort to understand us, to respect our needs and not try to set us on another course with unsolicited advice. For management, this means protecting individual employee strengths and balancing their weaknesses with our strengths. This is, of course, an ambitious plan and a continuous daily challenge. But you ultimately became a manager yourself because you dare to act, isn’t that right? Treating dissimilar people the same way is not “fair” but extremely unfair.

Insight into people’s different strengths and limitations has consequences for teamwork as well. Recognizing that genuine teams benefit from the different contributions made by their members is meanwhile common knowledge. A team that is exclusively made up of “pioneers” or “entertainers” or “perfectionists” would probably hardly ever get anything accomplished due to lots of cunning planning, lively debate or painstaking fiddling with process requirements; instead, such a team would end up standing in its own way. The atmosphere in each of these “monocultures”, on the other hand, would probably be great: As the team members would be similar, everybody would be likely to get along automatically. Dealing with people who are like you, who think like you do, is generally easy.

On high performance teams, in contrast, the sum of the different strengths of the members ideally adds up to more than the individual parts. For such teams, individual diversity is their biggest opportunity and biggest challenge at the same time. This is because diversity demands that all involved recognize the strengths, needs and limitations of the others and that everyone be prepared to accept these differences and even put them to productive use. Most people however are hardly aware of the variety of personality types there are and the behavior dynamics generated as a result. The same is also true, by the way, for the much praised diversity model practiced in companies: Having a variety in age, gender, nationality, religion, educational background, etc. can potentially benefit performance, and just as easily be a source of conflict that limits performance. It also depends in such cases on what you do with what you have.



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Diversity in teams and in companies can indeed be beneficial to realizing potential if we take the following steps:

- Step 1:** Make the *diversity* of those involved a topic of discussion, steering the focus to the strengths of the individual team members.
- Step 2:** In *assigning* tasks on a team, take account of strengths and tendencies insofar as this is possible.
- Step 3:** Make *conflicts* a topic of discussion as soon as they are evident and eliminate misunderstandings that result from different behavioral tendencies.
- Step 4:** Promote a *culture of discussion* (and set an example as a manager) in which individual aims are discussed rather than speculation about others' motives or even assigning blame.
- Step 5:** Offer *development opportunities* instead of demanding that a person "change". There's a difference in whether somebody gets a chance to expand his or her range of behaviors to agree with their aims or whether they are quickly sent off to a "re-education" seminar.

Conclusion: Personal strength is no coincidence.

...but the result of reflected behavior towards oneself and others instead. And the best basis for targeted development of one's own personality is a more in-depth understanding of personal strengths as well as limitations: one's own and those of one's counterpart.

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