**Chapter 10 The Likely Implications of Over-Using a Strength**

Here’s a bit of a cautionary tale about what happened with a manager, who over-used his strengths. We will call this person Andy….

*Case study – strengths in action*

Has anyone ever taken you aside to share ‘a kind truth’? You know the sort of thing “Please don’t take this the wrong way, but….”. That was how the conversation between Andy and his line manager began.

Andy was a good manager leading a high-performing team. Reliable, hardworking, thorough and focussed, it was obvious he loved his job and colleagues enjoyed working in his department.

However, things began to unravel when Andy’s department was faced with a few changes in a very short time: a senior member of the team retired, and another went on maternity leave. Andy began to come under more than usual pressure. Soon after, it was announced that the office would be moving to a new site which was likely to place an additional burden on top of the normal workload.

*Andy digs deeper into his own resources*

People started noticing Andy behaving in ways that somehow seemed different. Only too aware of the potential risks of making mistakes when shouldering a heavier than usual workload, Andy the consummate professional dug deeper into his own resources. As things got tougher, he stepped up the pace, working even harder. Hold-ups started happening in the system as Andy checked and double-checked documentation, made additional follow-up calls, delayed on email responses, pushed back deadlines. The thorough, but timely habits that had been his signature were being replaced by an excessive caution and attention to the slightest detail. Arriving at work earlier and leaving later, Andy began to come across as hard to please, picky and ‘difficult’. The work of the whole department slowed down – colleagues began to feel the strain.

*A shocking revelation*

By the time his line manager took him aside for ‘a quiet chat’, the word around the office was that he had changed, that he was becoming difficult to work with - perfectionist, pushy, over-demanding. When he learned of the effect all his extra effort was having on colleagues he was hurt and bewildered. Fortunately, his line manager was wise. He reminded Andy of all the strengths he brought to the job - including his capacity for attention to detail, solutions focus, drive and enthusiasm. He certainly didn’t want him to give up on these great qualities. In this challenging situation it was more about trying to build-in a slightly different leadership style which enabled him to use all his strengths to best effect, but which also demonstrated that he understood the impact he could have on others. How Andy would deal with this feedback would make all the difference.

**PTO**

**Strengths in overdrive**

Especially when we are under pressure, feeling over-stretched or under exceptional stress we can risk ‘overdoing’ our strengths. Here are a few examples:

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| *Strength* | *→* | *Likely result of an over-used strength* |
| Autonomous | → | Detached from the team – no longer aware of the needs of others, abdication |
| Committed | → | Workaholic, setting impossibly high standards, over-tired, irritable |
| Careful, prudent | → | Requesting more and more data, reluctant, incapable of independent decision-making, procrastinating |
| Decisive | → | Pushy, disempowering, impatient, controlling |
| Visionary | → | Unable to focus on one thing, give directions or follow anything through to completion |
| Results focused | → | Steam-rollering others, running from one result to the next, over-driven to the point of burn-out |
| Helpful or caring | → | Interfering, fussing, overbearing, feeling like some sort of parent-child relationship |

To manage the situation or the feelings, the temptation is to return to the strengths we know we have – and just do them more, rather like turning up the volume! However, excessive pulling on our favourite strengths in this way can – as Andy found out – have the opposite effect, both on the individual and the team.

**How to work with over-used strengths**

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| *Leaning too far backwards and falling over*  Following the conversation with his line manager, Andy resolved to make changes. He decided to keep a lower profile in the office, just focus on getting on with what he needed to do, and step back from the team so that they wouldn’t feel hassled. He would try not to get so hung up on detail – maybe he was getting a bit picky.  *Was Andy on the right track?*  Well yes, and no. He was certainly taking a positive attitude in wanting to reflect on what his line manager had told him, but despite his good intentions, things didn’t quite work out the way he wanted.  In resolving to tackle the feedback (‘criticism?’) that he was becoming too ‘picky’, Andy did not figure out what sort of behaviour would be acceptable to his team. He opted instead to go to the extreme opposite of one of his real strengths and ease up completely on his usual diligence. This was uncomfortable for Andy – it went against his natural eye for detail and his capacity for thoroughness, which were among the qualities that had got him the job in the first place. Andy seemed to give up, retreating to a negative - and unhelpful – position. We call this ‘disconnecting’ from your authentic self. It is easily recognisable, characterised by an opting out, an abdication of responsibility. However even as Andy was doing this, he felt out of sorts with himself – this way of being didn’t feel right for him; a part of him knew that this was not the optimum solution.  It didn’t take long for a sense of profound discomfort to set in – and far from making things better, Andy’s new strategy seemed to be aggravating the situation. His team were first puzzled and then felt abandoned by his apparent retreat at a time when they needed him most.  *Finding balance*  What Andy needed to do, with some coaching support, was focus first on being clear about his strengths, so that he could start from a position of confidence, grounded in his authentic self. He would then be better able to think about what these strengths might look, sound and feel like when over-used. From there he would be able to find a more balanced way of being and behaving that he would be happy with and that would also work well with his colleagues. |

Andy’s experience looked something like this:

Strength

Feedback / Pushback

Overused

Strength

Modified Strength

Withdrawal / Abdication

How an over-used strength can re-bound on the individual and those around them

*The consequences of not finding balance*

Following feedback some people, like Andy, can modify their behaviour themselves………...eventually. Other people who are particularly self-aware can spot when they are about to overuse a strength and can pull back and adjust their behaviour. In other cases, the person becomes stuck in a state of withdrawal / abdication; their strengths are denied, and they become shut off from their true self. Without an opportunity to revisit their own personal development needs, perhaps through coaching, or moving into a different role / team, they may even experience some sort of crisis – an uncharacteristic explosion of emotion (‘Nobody appreciates me’), a health break-down, or feelings of being unable to manage the job. They may simply decide to leave the organisation, taking their unresolved behavioural problem with them.