

What Is Your Biggest Weakness?

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Key Points:

- Answering the question regarding weaknesses creates a conundrum for applicants, truthfulness and what impact will it have on the candidacy
- The real answer to the question resides in a person's corresponding greatest strengths
- When strengths are taken to extremes, once positive attributes can suddenly be liabilities
- Candidates who cannot think of any possible weakness usually do not fare very well with constructive criticism

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This, the dreaded question of all job interviews. In effect, it is the so-called mother of all interview questions that stumps even the best prepared candidates. In an attempt to look good and not reflect badly on one's candidacy, applicants will typically reply with such lame responses as "People say that I work too hard" or "I'm a perfectionist." How about, "I'm too nice." Even worse, we have heard candidates deride their spelling skills (ever heard of Spellchecker?) or in an attempt to sound humble, we have heard applicants say that they could improve "in all areas." At best, such silly-sounding answers do little to enhance a candidate's desirability to a potential employer, and at worst, they sound circumspect and evasive.

Unfortunately, this is a question that is part of almost every standard job interview. Employers use it as an accepted practice, and naturally, applicants fear the repercussions from answering the question truthfully since the competition for job openings is so fierce in today's challenging economic climate. According to government statistics, there are five applicants for every one job opening, and we would bet that the ratio is probably even higher for prized positions that pay well and offer a fair degree of job status and security. Therefore, the conundrum becomes how do you answer the question truthfully and still avoid ruling yourself out as a viable candidate for a much desired position?

Surprise! The real answer to the question resides in a person's corresponding greatest strength. How so, you ask? Well, just like the old adage there can be too much of a good thing, so to with a person's strongest attribute. While many people, even those who see themselves as students of personality and human behavior, would like to think of a person's strengths and weaknesses as comprising some kind of a balance sheet of assets and liabilities - much like those used in financial accounting - the truth is that all of us have a core set of personality characteristics. When our strengths are taken to extreme, as they often are, those once positive attributes that help us perform at our best can suddenly be liabilities. Let me try to explain.

Have you ever encountered a coworker or boss who was simply too smart for his or her own good? How about the interpersonally gifted individual who is trying to please everyone and ends up pleasing no one? What about the

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incredibly well-organized employee who spends more time planning than doing or executing for results? And then, what about results-oriented managers who achieve great success and meet their annual goals and objectives, but in the process cause a lot of "breakage" in terms of hurt feelings and angry colleagues who feel as though they have just been run over by a two-ton truck? In each and every instance, these high performing and generally very successful people have allowed their major strength to turn into a liability by taking a positive attribute one step too far.

While it is probably hard to envision how intelligence, excellent people-skills, careful planning and organization, and a bias for action and achieving results can be possible weaknesses, they do have that potential. Intelligence is one of those attributes where too little can be an impediment to performing effectively, but quite frankly, too much in a position unrelated to the physical sciences, engineering, or finance can cause a person to think that he or she has all of the answers. When this occurs, that individual will experience trouble taking feedback from others, and when his or her coworkers do offer their input, it will be discounted by the genius in residence. We remember one client in particular, where the young, talented, and very bright CEO could not understand why none of his direct reports contributed any ideas during his weekly staff meetings. After observing one such session, it was no surprise that people feared opening their mouths. When they did the CEO made them feel like idiots for offering what he termed as half-baked ideas and suggestions. Moreover, when his staff did have a viable solution to a vexing situation, the CEO was always quick to offer one that was better.

For those gifted with excellent interpersonal skills, part of their artistry is the ability to bring people with diverse points of view together in order to work collaboratively toward a common solution. In trying to get everyone to work together smoothly, the skilled interpersonal communicator might make concessions to all of the parties involved, and in doing so commit to promises that cannot be met. Similarly, we have seen the thoughtful strategic thinker get mired in the details of a plan and suffer from paralysis-by-analysis. Finally, for those individuals who can execute consistently for results, they often lose the proverbial forest for the trees and charge full steam ahead while often neglecting the niceties that serve to maintain or boost group morale.

Can you think of any other positive attributes that when taken too far can cause a person trouble? What about the highly creative individual who is always looking to the next great idea before implementing his or her original thoughts? Then, there's the person who can cope with an enormous amount of pressure and stress on the job, but at the same time, this same individual demands a high degree of stress in order to be stimulated by his or her work. In short, no stress equates to no motivation to get the job done on time. Finally, there is the serious and

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conscientious worker who lacks a sense of humor along with a sense of perspective as the requirements of the job tend to override everything else of importance in the person's life.

So there you have it, our strengths can morph into our weaknesses if unchecked. The next time you ask a job applicant to list his or her biggest weakness, be skeptical of the poor speller, or the person who works so hard that he or she cannot achieve a suitable work/life balance. Instead, you might think back to the attributes the applicant offered as the strongest in that person's repertoire of behavior. With some careful questioning – such as "has your best quality ever gotten you into trouble?" - the skilled interviewer will likely uncover a treasure trove of information about how strengths can turn into weaknesses. On the other hand, if you are on the receiving end of this most uncomfortable of interview questions, think for a minute about how your strongest attribute has gotten the best of you when stretched too far.

A final word of caution, for the candidate who cannot think of any possible weakness, the predictors are also equally clear. Beyond being self-protective and probably hiding some unflattering attributes, those individuals who are unable to see themselves in an objective fashion usually do not fare very well with constructive criticism or any kind of negative feedback aimed at correcting their behavior. In a word, these kinds of individuals are defensive and that kind of behavior predicts for a person who will have trouble learning from the lessons of experience.