



Illustration by Nilesh Juvalekar



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IS A LEADERSHIP COACH,  
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*WHY MAKE EAGLES SWIM?*

# nurture your inherent strengths

*Very often people tend to emphasize weaknesses while overlooking positive traits, be it professionally or personally. This prejudice towards improving negativity can adversely affect performance. Bill Munn suggests ways in which we can identify our own innate strengths and those of others.*

**H**ave you ever seen an eagle fly? If so, then you understand why people tend to describe it as a magnificent sight.

Have you ever seen an eagle swim? A lot of folks do not even realize that an eagle can swim. The bird only does it when necessary and it is a sight more frequently described as awkward or clumsy, as opposed to those awe-striking soaring skills.

Now, let us say you are managing a team of eagles. How do you think you will help them achieve greatness? By forcing them to swim laps or by helping them take those standout flying skills to an even higher level?

“Well, I’d focus on flying, of course,” most of my clients chuckle when asked this question.

If this is so obvious with eagles, then why is it not clear that we should do the same with the teams we manage, the bosses we work for, and the spouses and children we love? Why are we so determined to focus on negatives and challenge areas when dealing with human beings?

Let us come back from the animal world to drive this home.

Imagine that you are in 7th grade, coming home from school with your report card. On it: three As, two Bs, and a C. When you show it to your parents, which grade do

they want to talk about first? I have been asking groups this question for three decades and 97% of people have responded the same way: “The C, of course!”

This bias towards the negative has become so ingrained that we not only see it as a foregone conclusion, but we also do not stop to even consider how backward this type of thinking actually is.

From a leadership standpoint, it is not negativity that is an issue here. The problem, rather, is the sub-optimized performance that the negative bias creates.

What if that eagle, as he soared over wilderness lakes searching for fish, was preoccupied and distracted from flying because he wished he could swim like a duck or peck like a woodpecker? Would he thrive if he traded in his wings for a pair of flippers, in an attempt to get better at the things that challenge him? Could he even survive? Perhaps. But life might be a little rough.

Like it is for Paula who is a natural people person. She struggles with anything analytical, so she spends her lunch breaks trying to understand spreadsheets on sales figures and criticizing herself for not being more data-oriented.

What if she instead spent that time engaging with people? Leading meetings, motivating teams, or selling? Could not she achieve so much more—and feel more fulfilled?

What about Ben, a big-picture visionary with a strategic mind? His whole life, he has been told that he is not detail-oriented, so he ‘works on that,’ to minimal effect.

What if he redirected that effort towards entrepreneurship, marketing strategy, or corporate visioning? Towards the type of work that leverages his strongest traits, rather than his weakest ones?

Meanwhile, Debbie—who is very precise, structured, and detail focused—could help Ben. But she is too busy reading books about big-picture thinking; in an effort to get better at the type of approach she has always struggled to adopt.

What is going on here? Why are we running our organizations and managing our people in such an inefficient and ineffective way? Why are we all fumbling around in the weeds of our challenge areas, rather than redirecting that time, energy, and effort toward growing



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our strongest traits—the traits that are most likely to lead us to greatness?

### **power-alley attributes**

Attributes are inherent traits that affect the way we perceive and behave toward the world around us. They are like the wiring of our own internal microchips.

I call a person's strongest attributes their power-alley attributes. These are the traits that come most naturally to you, and they represent your most effective path to success. Understanding the power-alley attributes of others will help you better map a course to team success as well.

Keep a few things in mind as you are beginning to recognize your own attributes as well as those of the people around you.

First, an attribute is not a skill. You do not need to practice it to be able to do it. It is so natural that you cannot not do it. (That said practicing certain behaviors can certainly help you optimize your attributes.)

For example, a natural oral communicator does not need to take public speaking classes in order to learn how to communicate well through the spoken word. If he studies public speaking, he will certainly excel, but he has already got the gift. He cannot turn it off.

Similarly, knowledge is not the same as an attribute. Knowledge is something you learn in order to know—whether you use it in practice or not. Again, you can collect knowledge in order to enhance an attribute, but you cannot collect knowledge to make an attribute appear in yourself.

Perhaps you are highly detailed and organized—what I call the orderly attribute. You can study organizational

methods and time management techniques to become even more of a detail dynamo. But even without that added knowledge, you are going to gravitate to detail. It is the way you are wired.

To help us better understand our own attribute profiles—as well as those of others—I categorize a person’s attributes into one of three main categories: power-alley, functional, or challenge.

Power-alley attributes, as we have discussed, are the strongest and most influential attributes in a person’s life.

Functional attributes are those things that you can do if you want to. This category of attributes breaks down further. High functional attributes are those things you can do easily and quickly; low functional attributes take more effort or practice.

Challenge attributes are those things that you just do not do well, no matter how hard you try. We usually only have a couple of these, and it is okay to let yourself go on this stuff.

By focusing on leveraging your strongest attributes, you can achieve a more fulfilled and successful life and career. But the news gets even better when we turn the lens away from ourselves.

### listening for revelation

The real power of attributes lies in better understanding and leveraging the attributes of others—your team members, colleagues, superiors, clients, prospects, even your friends, and family members.

But how can you recognize another person’s attributes at the speed of life? After all, you cannot hand a new sales prospect a 60-question personality assessment during your



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first meeting. But it sure would be helpful to know how that person is wired, so that you may communicate with her more effectively.

This is where listening (and watching) for revelation comes in.

Most of us are familiar with the enormous benefits of effective listening. Effective listening is essential, can be improved through coaching, and will enhance the positive effects of a number of your attributes.

Listening for revelation is an additional and advanced listening skill. While you are listening effectively to the content of what a person is saying, you can also tune into what the person is revealing about his or her attribute profile.

The way he or she reacts to certain concepts, the traits they recognize in others, the assumptions they make about the way people around them perceive a certain situation—all of these things point to certain attributes.

As you learn to use revelation listening tools, you will open up an entirely new world to yourself.

You will learn how to communicate more effectively—not in ways that best resonate with you, but in ways that best resonate with the other person.

You will become aware that people you used to clash with are actually the very people who can offer balance and richness to your life and your career. Relationships that were once defined by conflict become opportunities for mutual growth.

You will reimagine and restructure your teams, defining needs and realizing high-powered synergies according to how people with differing attributes can balance and support one another.

The list goes on.

All you need to do is begin. Some professional development concepts take a long time to implement. Not this one. Now that you have been introduced to the attributes concept, start studying it and using it today. You will learn quickly and see results immediately. ■