

maximus insights

stop worrying about your
weaknesses



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Little Johnny comes home one day, looks down at his feet, and gives you his report card. You smile at him as you open it up and look inside. Then your smile disappears when you see the F in math. You also see an A (English) and two Bs (history and science). You look down at little Johnny and ask, "What happened in math, Johnny? Why did you get this F?"

We want our kids to be successful at everything they do. And if they're not good at something, we ask why they failed. We tell them to work harder at it. Understand what went wrong, focus, and fix it.

But that's a mistake. The wrong focus. If you dwell on Johnny's failure, on his weakness, you'll be setting him up for a life of struggle and low self-esteem while reducing his chances of reaching his full potential.

Also, as a side note, you won't fix his weakness. You'll just reinforce it.

The problem with a report card is that it measures all students against the same criteria, which ignores that each student is different with unique talents, distinct likes and dislikes, and particular aspirations. And when we see the F on little Johnny's report card, it's easy for us to get distracted from our primary job: to help him deeply enjoy his life and fulfill his potential by developing and deriving pleasure from his unique talents.

Fast forward 20 years. Little Johnny is now big John. As he sits down for a performance review with his manager, she spends a few quiet minutes looking over his review and then raises her eyes to meet his.

"You've worked hard this year John. Your client orientation is superb. You've met your sales goals and you're a solid team player. But you have an area that needs development, specifically, your detail orientation. The spreadsheets we get from you are a mess. Let's talk about how you can get better in that."

An A, two Bs and an F. And his manager handles it the same way his parent did. By focusing the conversation, and John's effort, on his least favourite and weakest area.

We have a report card problem in our companies and it's costing us a tremendous amount of time, money, potential, and happiness. It's costing us talent.

Traditional management systems encourage mediocrity in everything and excellence in nothing. Most performance review systems set an ideal picture of how we want everyone to act (standards, competencies, etc.) and then assesses how closely people match that ideal, nudging them to improve their weaknesses so they "meet or exceed expectations" in every area.

But how will John add the most value to his organization? He's amazing with people, not spreadsheets. He'll work hardest, derive the most pleasure, and contribute his maximum potential with the greatest result if he is able to focus as much time as possible in his area of strength.

Which means taking his focus *off* developing the things in which he's weak. They're just a distraction.

Here's what his manager *should* say: "You've worked hard this year John. Your client orientation is superb. You've met your sales goals and you're a solid team player. But working on those spreadsheets isn't a good use of your time and it's not your strength. I'm going to ask David to do those for you from now on. He loves spreadsheets and is great at them. I want to spend the rest of our time talking about how you can get even better at working with your clients. That's where you shine — where you add the most value to the company — and you seem to really enjoy it."

An organization should be a platform for unique talent. A performance review system should be flexible enough to reflect and reward the successful contributions of diverse employees. Let's *encourage* people to be weak in areas in which they are average — because no one can possibly be great at everything — and place all our effort on developing their strengths further.

If it's impossible to take away the part of their job in which they're weak, then help them improve just enough so that it doesn't get in the way of their strength. If you can't take the spreadsheets away from John, help him get a C and move on. That would be *preferable* to spending the time and effort it would take to get an A or even a B.

Next time little Johnny hands you his report card with an F in math and an A in English, keep smiling and resist the temptation to ask about the F. Instead, ask about the A first. "What happened in English?" you should say to Johnny, "Why did you get this A?" Then let him tell you about how and why he *succeeds*. What is it about the work that excites him? What about the teacher? How did he study?

Then, if you want him to get a little better in math, you can help him recreate the conditions that led to his success in English.

And when you're done with the report card conversation, it might still be a good idea to get him a math tutor. Because school is about exposure to everything while business is about success in something.

And then, if you want to teach him to harness his particular path to success, make sure to get him an English tutor too.





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