

The Art of Growing Strong
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It seems that everywhere you look these days, someone is worrying, griping, or staging a demonstration about some perceived injustice done to them. At work, these complaints run the gamut from unfair recruiting or hiring practices to favoritism, rigged promotion practices, unequal distribution of benefits, and everything in between. I guess if you're looking for something to rail against, life in the business world provides plenty of opportunity.

Whining and griping become habits over time and destroy so many other possibilities. There is no strength involved in complaining, and no pride associated with it.

Wouldn't it be great if people would turn their attention to building strength instead of playing the downtrodden victim? Wouldn't it be much more productive to find solutions to perceived inequities instead of wasting time, energy, and breath denouncing them?

What would growing strong entail? It's an art rather than a science in the sense that no one way works for everyone. One person's success cannot necessarily be carefully reconstructed for another. Trial and error, disappointment and learning, time and attention all play a part in growing strong. You won't get stronger by mixing a special powder with fortified liquid and quaffing it every morning for a month. Trust me on that.

Here are some things you can do to grow stronger. Investigate a situation for as many facts as you can gather before you decide something is fair or unfair, right or wrong. Your view of the world is unique and limited. Others with different information and a different seat in life's auditorium can give you a different view. It's wise to look at situations from several angles; you may be quite surprised by how different things look. You might also be surprised at how a fuller picture changes your own thoughts on a matter.

Practice holding your tongue in favor of listening to others. It's hard when you want to prove your special expertise or elevated intellect to be quiet, but if you want to be stronger, this is an excellent exercise. You will learn things you didn't know before. You will see that your expertise can be enhanced, even by folks you consider duller than you. You may learn tolerance for different perspectives and appreciation for others who, like you, feel a need to be out front.

Let someone have the last word. Truly.

Learn the power of silence. Especially during tense situations when you are peppered with questions and maybe accusations, practice taking time to think about your responses. If you don't have an answer, don't feel compelled to make one up. Hold your ground and be quiet when you need to think.

Silence is a great friend when you are seeking information. Ask a question and then be still. Most people are uncomfortable with silence, especially in business situations. Many fill conversation voids with thoughts, ideas, and information they wouldn't have dreamed about sharing if someone else had been talking. Obviously there is a risk in sitting quietly too long; you don't want to be thought a dullard. But most people talk too much and listen too little. Practice silence. Your rewards will be great.

Work at making decisions and sticking to them. You may want to start small if this is an area of difficulty for you. For example, if you agree to have lunch with Bob, don't reschedule if your best friend Larry calls. Likewise, if you agree to attend a meeting at 10:00, don't change this to accommodate a last-minute request for your attention at 9:45. This may sound like a simple thing, but when you constantly change things around you lose track of what's important to you, you get drawn into things that you shouldn't, and you teach others that your time is granted on a whim.

Which brings me to a tougher challenge. Set your own goals for the day. Decide which tasks are most important to you, allocate your time accordingly, and then stick with your agenda. Yes, there will be times when you have to throw it all out and simply go with the flow. But those times should be the exception, not the modus operandi. If you protest because unpredictability is the nature of your business, I will challenge you to rethink that argument. You control your time and attention. Practice using it to best advantage both for you and your company. As you get better at this, you'll feel stronger, more competent, and more productive.

Practice ignoring petty criticism. When you begin to try some of the things outlined here, others may start to pick at you. If you don't jump to conclusions as quickly as you once did, people will notice. When you ask for different opinions and perspectives, expect to see raised eyebrows and wary expressions. Some may be bold enough to ask if you've lost your command of things. Some may remind you that you're paid to make decisions not gain consensus. What you'll be hearing is a reaction to change and a peak in others' insecurity. Accept it for what it is and continue practicing.

If you're not as glib as you've been in the past, people may ask what's wrong. They'll ask if you're okay. They'll tease you for not having an opinion or a witty comment. They may question your interest or involvement on an issue. That's okay. Just say you're listening.

If you don't respond in knee-jerk fashion to tense and pointed questions, people may question your competence. They may argue that if you knew the answer, you wouldn't take so long to respond. They might question your integrity, hinting that perhaps you're withholding information for manipulative reasons. Don't be swayed by this attempt to "restore you to normal." Appreciate that your new quietude and thoughtfulness will be unsettling to some. Allow them to express their discomfort, then continue exploring the power of silence.

When you begin to stand firm on decisions and commitments, expect your loyalties to be questioned. If you have given special priority to certain friends and associates in the past, you can bet they will protest any change in this favor. When you allocate your

time purposefully and hold fast to your commitments, some may accuse you of being uncooperative. As long as you are steadfast and consistent, you have nothing to fear. This is a difficult area for many, so again I urge you to start with small things until you gain confidence.

Finally, learn to accept that some things are the way they are “just because.” Not everything needs to be changed or fixed. Some injustice will always exist. Life will do nasty things to you when you feel least able to deal with them. Such is life. Practice anticipating trouble and learn to deal gracefully with difficulty you didn’t anticipate. Murphy’s Law was written to help us shrug and chuckle. These are good strength-building practices, too.

Why grow stronger? Your life will be more satisfying. You’ll spend less time being stressed out about things you cannot influence. You’ll lose a bad complaining habit. You may even find people looking to you for stability, equanimity, and guidance as they struggle to find their own strength.