Weaknesses – the Dreaded Question

Many clients dread the interview question regarding a weakness:

- Are there any problem areas or developmental needs that we should be aware of?
- What difficulties or frustrations have you discovered in your recent employment?
- What are your weaknesses?

How to answer

- Be authentic. Don't try to give a "standard good answer"
- Be aware that some answers that you think are "good to use" (i.e. I am a perfectionist, I work too hard) are not in fact "good" answers to use.
- Sandwich technique – start with positive, touch on negative, end on positive.
- Think of things that don't come naturally to you that require extra preparation.
- Think of projects where you might have done things differently in hindsight – what specifically would you do differently? Can this example be turned into a weakness that you are currently dealing with?
- Is there an 'elephant in the room' (i.e. you are seen as unapproachable because you don't smile often)?
- Think of someone who doesn't know you well or doesn't like you. What are five adjectives he or she might use to describe you?
- If we talked with your boss and co-workers, what blind spots or soft spots would they be likely to mention?
- What information have you been given in prior performance reviews?
- What does the DISC say are potential weaknesses for you?

Examples

- Although I've never missed a deadline, sometimes, I spend more time than necessary on a task, or take on tasks personally that could easily be delegated to someone else. It is still an effort for me to know when to move on to the next task, and to be confident when assigning others work.
- I pride myself on being a 'big-picture' person. I have to admit I sometimes miss small details, but I always make sure I have someone who is detail-oriented on my team.

- I used to like to work on one project to its completion before starting on another, but I've learned to work on many projects at the same time, and I think it allows me to be more creative and effective in each one.
- I really benefit from teamwork and the verbal interactions I have with my teammates. I am also aware that I do not care for paperwork, so I try to get it all done by 10AM so I can go on to other things.
- As an introvert, I know that I am a very good listener. However, sometimes people who don't know me particularly well get the wrong impression and see me as intense or even aloof. Even though people who know me well would never use those words to describe me, I know I can come across that way at times. For this reason, I am taking steps to be seen as more kind and approachable – like being the person who smiles and says hello to strangers.
- I take pride in the quality of the work that my team accomplishes. When the stakes are high, I can be a very firm leader who insists on excellence in all things.
- As a natural introvert, I take time to process information before speaking. At times, when I don't speak up in meetings my colleagues interpret it as lack of assertiveness. When I join new teams I try to inform them about this trait.
- Given a choice between strategic thinking and a job that focuses primarily on implementation and repetitive quantitative activity, I prefer the former. I'm far more comfortable in planning and strategic positions.
- I'm aware my tendency to make fast decisions sometimes makes some of my staff feel like I'm impatient. In situations where it's important that they feel valued, I know I have to be careful to slow down, and make sure to be a more active listener.
- Public speaking is an area I really enjoy. However, when creating a presentation to a large group, I need extra time to prepare. I do make many presentations and am happy to do so, but I am not as skilled in extemporaneous speaking. Extra preparation time helps me feel more comfortable during presentations.
- I need quiet time to reflect on the project I am working on and sometimes my colleagues misinterpret this as quiet time as that I'm being aloof. I try to make sure my fellow co-workers know my work style and make an effort to interact with my co-workers regularly.