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NOW, DISCOVER YOUR STRENGTHS

Marcus Buckingham &

Donald O. Clifton

New York: The Free Press, 2001, 260 pp.

BucNowD

Two members of the Gallup Organization have created a program to help readers identify their natural talents and build them into strengths. Just as we maintain health by studying disease, we have tried to develop employees and managers by reducing weaknesses. Consequently we have not developed a clear understanding of strengths and how to build them. The authors say this is key to success in careers and organizations.

Based on open-ended interviews and psychological profiles of more than two million "excellent performers" (136), the authors have derived thirty-four talent themes, the meat of the book. Even without using the internet "StrengthFinder" questionnaire, I was easily able to identify my talent themes simply from the book's descriptions.

"To excel...you need to become an expert at finding and describing and applying and practicing and refining your strengths." 3

"The great organization must not only accommodate the fact that each employee is different, it must capitalize on these differences. It must watch for clues to each employee's natural talents and then position and develop each employee so that his or her talents are transformed into bona fide strengths." 5

"The organization whose employees feel that their strengths are used every day is more powerful and more robust." 6

"Most organizations are built on two flawed assumptions about people:

1. Each person can learn to be competent in almost anything.
2. Each person's greatest room for growth is in his or her areas of greatest weakness.

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"These are the two assumptions that guide the world's best managers:

1. Each person's talents are enduring and unique.
2. Each person's greatest room for growth is in the areas of his or her greatest strength. 8

This book is meant to show how to design a systematic strength-building process. 9  
Chapters 1-5 deal with the following questions: What are your strengths? How can you capitalize on them? What are your most powerful combinations? Where do they take you? What one, two, or three things can you do better than ten thousand other people? 10

A strength is quite specific, "consistent near perfect performance in an activity."

Three principles:

1. You must be able to do it consistently and derive intrinsic satisfaction from it.
2. You don't have to have strength in every aspect of your role to excel.
3. You will excel only by maximizing your strengths, never by fixing your weaknesses. 25-26

“Capitalize on your strengths, whatever they may be, and manage around your weaknesses, whatever they may be.” 27

Three revolutionary tools:

1. Distinguish your natural talents from things you can learn. To develop a strength in any activity requires certain natural talents. Note three definitions:

- “Talents are your naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior. Your various themes of talent are what the StrengthsFinder Profile actually measures. (Your talents are innate.)
- Knowledge consists of the facts and lessons learned.
- Skills are the steps of an activity.” 29

“Thus, the key to building a bona fide strength is to identify your dominant talents and then refine them with knowledge and skills.” 30 “Unless you have the necessary talent, your improvements will be modest.” 31

2. Identify your dominant talents. “Step back and watch yourself for a while. Try an activity and see how quickly you pick it up, how quickly you skip steps in the learning and add twists and kinks you haven't been taught yet. See whether you become absorbed in the activity to such an extent that you lose track of time.” 31 Alternatively use the StrengthsFinder Profile.

3. Use a common language (introduced in this book) to describe your talents. 32

Build your strengths through knowledge and skills. You need both factual knowledge, content, and experiential knowledge, which takes a multitude of forms. “A skill is designed to make the secrets of the best easily transferable. If you learn a skill, it will help you get a little better, but it will not cover for a lack of talent. Instead, as you build your strengths, skills will actually prove most valuable when they are combined with genuine talent.” 47

Talent is often described as ‘a special natural ability or aptitude,’ but the authors prefer the following definition: “Talent is any recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied.” 48

You should not avoid the fixing of weaknesses, but “you should see it for what it is: damage control, not development.” “Damage control can prevent failure, but it will never elevate you to excellence.” 49

To reveal your talents, “monitor your spontaneous, top-of-mind reactions to the situations you encounter. These top-of-mind reactions provide the best trace of your talents.” 67

Three more clues are yearnings, rapid learning, and satisfaction. 69 “You start to learn a new skill—in the context of a new job, a new challenge, or a new environment—and immediately your brain seems to light up as if a whole bank of switches were suddenly flicked to ‘on.’” “If it feels good when you perform an activity, chances are that you are using a talent.” 73

“Pay close attention to the situations that seem to bring you satisfaction. If you can identify them you are well on your way to pinpointing your talents.” “If you find yourself actually anticipating the activity—‘When can I do this again?’—it is a pretty good sign that you are enjoying it and that one of your talents is in play.” 75

“The StrengthsFinder Profile was designed to help you sharpen your perception. It presents you with pairs of statements, captures your choices, sorts them, and reflects back your most dominant patterns of behavior, thereby highlighting where you have the greatest potential for real strength.” 76 [This is an internet questionnaire, the taking of which is one of my ‘talents.’ Unfortunately the library book didn’t have an access number. dlm]

The heart of the book is the list of thirty-four identified themes of strengths with one-page descriptions and examples of each. Here is the list: Achiever, Activator, Adaptability, Analytical, Arranger, Belief, Command, Communication, Competition, Connectedness, Context, Deliberative, Developer, Discipline, Empathy, Fairness, Focus, Futuristic, Harmony, Ideation, Inclusiveness, Individualization, Input, Intellection, Learner, Maximizer, Positivity, Relator, Responsibility, Restorative, Self-assurance, Significance, Strategic, Woo (winning others over). The book is worth its cost for this set of strength descriptions.

The remainder of the book deals with practical questions like:

Are there any obstacles to building my strengths?

Is there any significance to the order of my strength themes?

Why am I different from other people who have the same themes?

Are any of the themes opposites? (no)

Can I develop new themes? (no)

How can I manage around my weaknesses?

Can my themes reveal whether I am in the right career?

Here are some things I found useful.

The biggest obstacle to build your strengths is your own reluctance. 121

“Although your signature themes will not change much during the course of your life, you can acquire new knowledge and skills, and these new acquisitions may well lead you into exciting new arenas.” 141

A weakness is anything that gets in the way of excellent performance. 148 “As soon as you find yourself in a role that requires you to play to one of your nontalents—or area of low skills or knowledge—a weakness is born.” “Identify whether the weakness is a skills weakness, a knowledge weakness, or a talent weakness.” 149 If it is skills or knowledge, go get the skills or knowledge you need.

Five strategies for managing a talent weakness: 150-157

1. Get a little better at it.
2. Design a support system to neutralize it. (They list several creative ideas.)
3. Use one of your strong themes to overwhelm your weakness.
4. Find a partner who has a strength to match your weakness.
5. Just stop doing it. (Maybe no one will notice!)

“A person can never have too much of a particular theme. He can only have not enough of another one. For example, rude people don’t have too much Command. They have insufficient Empathy.” 159

Your signature themes offer little help on which is your field but offer some guidance on which are your best roles. People who excel in the same role do have similar themes. However, people with very different theme combinations play the same role equally well. They do it by crafting their role to fit their themes. “You will be most successful when you craft your role to play to your signature talents most of the time.” 160-62, 167

To excel as a manager, the all-important ingredient is Individualization (intrigued by the unique qualities of each person, 104). All great managers share this passion. 171 “Each employee is wired just a little bit differently. If you are to keep your talented employees and spur each of them on to greater performance, you will have to discern how each one is unique and then figure out ways to capitalize on this uniqueness.” 174

Bullet list suggestions for managing persons with different talents are provided, one page per talent, in pages 177 – 210. Somewhat general, but interesting.

The chapter on “Strengths-Based Organization,” asks the question: “How can you create an entire organization that employs the strengths of every person as efficiently as your best managers do?” 214 Base everything on two core assumptions:

1. Each person’s talents are enduring and unique.
2. Each person’s greatest room for growth is in the areas of the person’s greatest strength. 215

Four steps: 216

1. Be very careful to select people properly to begin with
2. Focus performance by legislating outcomes rather than style
3. Focus training on educating him about his strengths and building on them.
4. Devise ways to help each one grow in his career without necessarily promoting them up the corporate ladder – and out of their areas of strength.

How to select people based on strengths: [sounds like a sales instrument]

1. Build selection around an instrument for measuring talent.
2. Study your best performers in each key role
3. Teach the talent language throughout the organization.
4. Build a theme profile of your entire company. 218-221

How to manage performance based on strengths: The goal is to focus and develop talents into measurable performance. Focus on the person's impact on the business, the customer, and the employees around them (the culture). Figure out how to state the desired outcomes and then measure the outcomes, even the emotional outcomes for customers. [not always easy] 230-231

The outcomes of a productive culture can be measured by the following twelve questions:

1. Do I know what is expected of me at work?
2. Do I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work?
3. At work do I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day?
4. In the last seven days have I received recognition or praise for good work?
5. Is there someone at work who encourages my development?
6. At work do my opinions seem to count?
7. Does the mission of my company make me feel like my work is important?
8. Are my coworkers committed to doing quality work?
9. Do I have a best friend at work?
10. In the last six months have I talked with someone about my progress?
11. This last year have I had opportunities at work to learn and grow? 232

Ensure that every manager has a strengths discussion with every employee. Don't play checkers with your employees and assume all employees in a role have similar moves. Play chess with employees: understand that each piece moves differently. 236

"The best mechanism for channeling the employee's path toward performance must by definition be regular, predictable, and productive meetings with his immediate manager." Focus the meeting on three basic questions:

- What will the employee's main focus be for the next three months?
- What new discoveries or items of learning is he planning?
- What new partnerships or relationships is he hoping to build? 237- 238

"We must find the best fit possible of people's strengths and the roles we are asking them to play at work. Only then will we be as strong as we should be." 245