



DISCOVER YOUR STRENGTHS

BY REBECCA BRADLEY

“Most Americans do not know what their strengths are. When you ask them, they look at you with a blank stare, or they respond in terms of subject knowledge, which is the wrong answer.”

—Peter Drucker

“To be what we are, and to become what we are capable of becoming, is the only end of life.”

—Baruch Spinoza

Most of us have a poor sense of our talents and strengths. Throughout our education and careers, there is a lot of attention paid to our weaknesses. We are acutely aware of our faults and deficits, our “opportunities for development,” or whatever euphemism is popular for naming them.

Parents, teachers, and managers are all experts in spotting deficits. In fact, most parents, teachers, and managers consider it their responsibility to point out flaws and try to help us correct them.

We have become experts in our own weaknesses and spend our lives trying to repair our flaws, while our strengths lie dormant and neglected. The research, however, is clear: We grow and develop by putting emphasis on our strengths, rather than trying to correct our deficits.

A Focus on Deficits

Most people don't concern themselves with identifying their talents and strengths. Instead, they choose to study their weaknesses. A Gallup poll investigated this phenomenon by asking Americans, French, British, Canadian, Japanese, and Chinese people of all ages and backgrounds the question: “Which do you think will help you improve the most: knowing your strengths or knowing your weaknesses?”

The answer was always the same:

weaknesses, not strengths, deserve the most attention. The most strengths-focused culture is the United States, but still only a minority of people, 41 percent, felt that knowing their strengths would help them improve the most. The least strengths-focused cultures are Japan and China. Only 24 percent believe that the key to success lies in their strengths.

The majority of people in the world don't think that the secret to improvement lies in a deep understanding of their strengths. Interestingly, in every culture, the older people (55 and above) were the least fixated on their weaknesses. Perhaps they have acquired more self-acceptance and realize the futility of trying to be what they are not. *Now Discover Your Strengths*, by Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton, is an excellent resource for checking out the Gallup research on this topic.

Why Are Weaknesses So Attractive?

Why do so many people avoid focusing on their strengths? Weaknesses may be fascinating and strangely mesmerizing, like watching soap operas and Jerry Springer shows. But the attraction lies in the fact we deeply fear our weaknesses, our failures, and even our true selves.

Some people may be reluctant to investigate their strengths because they may fear there isn't much in the way of real talent or strength inside them anyway, or that they are just average (again, ingrained from education models). Or, maybe there is a feeling of inadequacy, an “imposter syndrome,” and an underlying fear of being found out. Despite your achievements, you may wonder

whether you are as talented as everyone thinks you are. You suspect that luck and circumstance may have played a big part in your getting to where you are today.

However, if you do not investigate your strengths, for any of the above fears and feelings of insecurity, you will miss out on discovering more of who you really are. You will miss out on becoming who you are really meant to be.

Too Close to See?

You are probably not as cognizant of your strengths as you could be, because most of us take them for granted. We are so embedded in our strengths, we are not aware of them as strengths. We think everybody is that way, too. It never occurs to us to be any other way; it is just natural for us.

This way of thinking excludes developing our strengths and becoming even stronger and more brilliant. You can't develop what you don't recognize. You can't expand what you are not aware of.

Building on your strengths is also about responsibility. You probably don't take pride in your natural talents any more than you would take pride in your sex, race, or hair color. Natural talents are gifts from God and your gene pool.

However, you have a great deal to do with turning your talents into strengths. You can take your talents into the realm of excellence. It involves becoming acutely aware, developing an action learning plan, and “practice, practice, practice.” Viewed in this light, to avoid your strengths by focusing only on your weaknesses is almost a sign of irresponsibility.

The Courage to Be Brilliant

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure . . . We ask ourselves, ‘Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?’ Actually, who are you not to be? Your playing small doesn’t serve the world.”

—Marianne Williamson

The most responsible, yet the most challenging, thing to do is to face up to your natural talents. It is an honor to have such blessings. Do not waste them. Step up to the potential inherent in your talents and find ways to develop your strengths.

This advice is easy to give and difficult to put into practice. Working with a coach can make it easier for you to identify your talents and strengths. There are also a number of online self-assessments available to help (see the list of recourses below). Once you identify your top five strengths, you can examine how they show up in your life.

It is a process of a few steps back, a few steps forward, and learning as you go. It is not the same as book

learning. The only way to learn about your strengths is to act, learn, refine, and then act, learn, refine again. Open yourself to feedback. This means you must be strong and courageous. Personal and professional development is not for sissies.

Discovering your true strengths is the path toward improvement and success. When you pay attention to your deficits and try to overcome them, you are placing emphasis on becoming what you are not. You wind up living a second-rate version of someone else’s life rather than a world-class version of your own. When you focus on your strengths, you are true to yourself by becoming more of who you really are. ■

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Resources

Web Sites

<http://www.gallup.com>

<http://www.authentic happiness.org>

Books

Buckingham, Marcus, and Donald O. Clifton. *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (The Free Press, 2001)

Seligman, Martin. *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2002)

———. *Learned Optimism* (Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1998)