



**LIFEWOR
SOLUTIONS**

Leading From Your Strengths Means Knowing What They Are

“Success is achieved by developing our strengths, not by eliminating our weaknesses.”

Marilyn vos Savant



The quote above is a succinct reminder of one of the most important aspects of effective leadership—focusing on your strengths rather than trying to improve your weaknesses. For those who might

not be familiar with columnist Marilyn vos Savant’s biggest claim to fame, she is known for having the world’s highest intelligence quotient (IQ). This is definitely a human trait that is held in high regard by most everyone.

However, if you had her on your management team, would you put her in charge of managing a complex project simply because she was the smartest person in the room? What if she were poorly organized, or not adept at bringing diverse interests together? Your effort would likely fail unless she had close support from others who could make up for these areas where she doesn’t excel.

Finding Your Strengths

Nearly five years ago I published an article on my Web site regarding how self-awareness can help you lead from your strengths, and since then, many of my articles have gone back to this theme. That’s because as I coach leaders every day, their strengths are the most vital element that determines their success and gets them past their struggles. This subject has been in the forefront of management literature lately, mainly

due to important research on the subject done by the Gallup organization.

I led that article I wrote in June 2004 with this quote from Peter Drucker, which is still a gem: “Most people know what they are good at. They are usually wrong. More often, people know what they are not good at—and even then more people are wrong than right. And yet, a person can perform only from strength. One cannot build performance on weaknesses, let alone on something one cannot do at all.”

Some “experts” state that to be a great leader you must be an exceptional communicator, others say you must have a talent for relationship building, and still others insist that you must be a good organizer. However, the fact is, nobody can be all of these things. You are what you are, and it is your innate strengths that will guide your leadership success. You just have to know what they are and build on them.

So who can provide a guide for leadership strengths? What are the strengths that make leaders successful? Many people look to the great leaders of the past and present to try and emulate what they have done. This can be a futile pursuit. Think about it. Mahatma Ghandi and Bill Gates are both considered great leaders in their own right. However, they have little in common in their approaches. That’s because they led from different groupings of strengths, they were trying to accomplish very different things, and they had very different followers with different expectations.

Consider Barak Obama. No matter your leaning, it is clear he created a movement that was unprecedented in American politics. Why? Because he gathered the most important thing a leader needs to be successful—followers, and

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lots of them. But how did he get people so many to follow him?

Don't ask him. Ask them.

That's what Tom Rath and Barry Conchie say in the new book, *Strengths Based Leadership*. They say look to the followers for the answers, because followers know what they want most from their leaders.

The Importance of Followers

"If you wanted to know why the president of the United States was making a difference in the lives of the American public, would you look to him for the best answers, or would you ask his constituents?" Rath and Conchie ask. "When companies want to know why a product is popular, they ask their customers. So, if we want to know why people rally behind a leader, shouldn't we ask them why they follow, or how a great leader has improved their lives? If you want to lead, it is critical to know what the people around you need and expect from you."

According to the authors, what followers want is simple, and it's consistent across the board. Their findings are based on a wide-ranging, comprehensive study by the Gallup organization of 10,000 followers in all types of organizations.

What they found is that followers want four things:

- Trust
- Compassion
- Stability
- Hope

This is why Obama was so successful. These are the same issues that his followers said they found in him during the campaign, and are confident that he is going to deliver going forward. Time will tell whether he is able to do that, but if he does use his strengths to deliver on those four issues, he will be remembered as a great leader.

The authors also present years of Gallup research that has found there are four domains of leadership strength: executing, influencing, relationship building and strategic thinking. Further, within those four domains are 34 specific strengths that leaders exhibit (click here to see them). It quickly becomes clear that no person could possibly possess more than a half dozen of these strengths. In order to be successful, you must identify and make use of the strengths you have.

"In recent years, we have studied leaders who built great schools, created major nonprofit organizations, led big businesses, and transformed entire nations," the authors wrote. "But we have yet to find two leaders who have the same sequence of strengths. While two leaders may have identical expectations, the way they reach their goals is always dependent on the unique arrangement of their strengths."

Great leaders make their monumental accomplishments through other people, not by themselves. That's why it's OK to look to leaders of the past and present for insights into how they achieved, but don't make the mistake of trying to emulate some aspect of what they did unless those actions take advantage of strengths you also happen to have in abundance.

In fact, to emulate these leaders, you might be wise to look outside of yourself for some help.

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Are You Well-Rounded?

The authors state that great leaders don't necessarily have to be well-rounded, but that their leadership teams must be, so an awareness of your own strengths can help you build a highly functioning, well-rounded team that complements your own strengths. According to Rath and Conchie, to build a great leadership team, you should be looking for people who can do some things better than you.

"Those who surround themselves with similar personalities will always be at a disadvantage in the long run to those who are secure enough in themselves to enlist partners with complementary strengths," they wrote.

As I wrote years back, self-awareness is critical to focusing on the right strengths and using them effectively. The authors of this new book agree.

"As you can hear in the stories of these four leaders, they have exceptional clarity about who they are—and who they are not," they wrote, referring to people in their case studies. If any one of them had chosen to spend a lifetime being 'good enough' at everything, it's doubtful they would have made such an extraordinary impact. Instead, they've all been wise enough to get the right strengths on their teams, and this has set up their organizations for continuous growth. Unfortunately, very few teams are optimized around their strengths."

The authors also found that teams they worked with benefited from regular discussions of their personal strengths. "When teams are able to use a common language of strengths, it immediately changes the conversation, creates

more positive dialogue, and boosts the team's overall engagement," they wrote.

In that article I wrote five years ago, I stressed that leaders also have a responsibility to communicate clearly to others around them what their strengths, values and modes of work are, and they need to use their own sense of self-awareness to develop their own awareness of those around them. These authors also make this point.

Keep in mind that whether you are Ghandi, Ronald Reagan, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, or just you, you can't be strong in every conceivable way, and you probably only have a small handful of the 34 strengths Gallup research has found makes leaders effective. It's your job to figure out what those strengths are, and then surround yourself with people who make your leadership more effective by rounding out your team.

This book is a great start, and I recommend it. A bonus with the book is one-user, online access to a leadership version of the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment program, which can help you find your best strengths. The resources at the end of the book show you how you can use your strengths to build trust, show compassion, provide stability and create hope. Click here for a link to *Strengths Based Leadership*.

Remember, however, that you, and especially your followers, are the best judges of the strengths that will bring you leadership success.

"You are a leader only if others follow," Rath and Conchie wrote. "Leaders are only as strong as the connections they make with each person in their constituency, whether they have one follower or one million."

Betty Till