

# SUMMARY

## NOW, DISCOVER YOUR STRENGTHS

MARCUS BUCKINGHAM AND DONALD O. CLIFTON



# **Summary of “Now, Discover Your Strengths” by Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton**

Written by Lea Schullery

Learn how to Develop Your Talents and Those of the  
People You Manage

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# Introduction

While many of us are quick to identify our weaknesses and where we come up short, we also have little sense of our talents and strengths. We fail to recognize which talents and skills we possess and how we can utilize them to work up to our full potential. This is likely because it is common practice for companies and businesses to focus on areas of improvement. Now, researchers and management consultants Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton have the answer to help you focus on boosting your strengths. Based on a Gallup study that interviewed over two million people who have excelled in their careers, *Now, Discover Your Strengths* uses a revolutionary program to help you discover your unique talents. Using the StrengthsFinder program, author Marcus Buckingham introduces thirty-four talents or “themes” and reveals how best to utilize them to find success in both your career and personal life. Through the program, you’ll learn how to discover your innate talents that might be hiding. You’ll also learn how to identify the five dominant strengths that you can then develop and leverage to become your best, strongest self.

# Why Correcting Our Weaknesses is All Wrong

Throughout life, we are constantly encouraged to identify our weaknesses and improve upon them to become our best selves. According to Marcus Buckingham, this type of thinking is counterproductive. Instead, we should be discovering our *strengths* to uncover a clear path to success. Before we begin, you'll need to learn exactly what strength is. How do you know what your strengths even are?

Well, *strength* is a “consistent near-perfect performance in an activity.” In other words, it is any activity that you can perform repeatedly and excel in time and time again. And while you may be good at many different things, a strength must meet certain criteria. First, you must be able to do it consistently. Tiger Woods, for example, is one of the best golfers in the world because of his ability to consistently hit a golf ball off the tee and putt on the green. Second, you don't need strength in every aspect of your role to excel. Tiger Woods is not necessarily the best chipper when compared to other pros who excel at chip shots. Instead, Woods focuses on his strength, his swing. Lastly, you will only excel by maximizing your strengths. While we are constantly told to strengthen our weaknesses, we should instead identify them and learn how to manage or work around them.

Organizations fail to understand this concept, however. Many organizations develop programs that center on addressing the weaknesses of their employees; meanwhile, employees simultaneously feel as if their employers aren't utilizing their full strength and talents. Unfortunately, organizations only make this issue worse by believing two things: 1) Anybody can acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to be good at any job. 2) People develop most efficiently when their weaknesses are attacked. As a result, companies waste time, money, and resources trying to fill their employees' “skill gaps.” It should be no surprise then that the most successful organizations are those who identify and develop the unique strengths of their employees.

A study developed by the Gallup Organization asked 198,000 employees across various businesses whether or not they believe they can do their best at their job each day. The study revealed that only 20 percent of respondents agreed with the question. Of those 20 percent, those employees were 50 percent more likely to work in an organization with low employee turnover, 38 percent more likely to work in a more productive business, and 44 percent more likely to work for companies that had high customer satisfaction. Despite these statistics, organizations still attack weaknesses and often send employees to various trainings to correct them. Instead, companies work better if their employees grow and develop with the organization. To accomplish this, companies will need to adopt a different approach to the way they do business.

# Refine Your Talent with Knowledge and Skills

Why is it that we always hear the phrase, “Practice makes perfect?” In reality, this is not true! Instead, we have built up our strengths because we have started with *natural talent*. So what is talent? Talents are simply patterns of thoughts and behavior that make certain actions and jobs easier for you. For example, some of us are naturally comfortable talking to strangers. That’s a talent. Others fear to talk to others and try to avoid social situations. This ability or inability to talk to strangers is predisposed, we cannot change it.

You can, however, take a predisposition that you like about yourself and develop it. This requires you to refine your talent with both *knowledge* and *skills*. Knowledge can be separated into two categories: factual knowledge and experiential. Factual knowledge is gained through study and learning. This kind of knowledge is necessary for knowing what you need to perform. For example, an artist who wishes to create a powerful painting must first know how to mix paint!

On the other hand, experiential is knowledge based on the lessons you learn through practice or trial and error. It’s more conceptual than factual knowledge, which means you must have some self-knowledge and awareness of your beliefs and values. For instance, salespeople may realize they don’t enjoy persuading customers into buying something to turn a profit. As a result, they may transfer into a role that meshes better with their innate talents, like human resources. When you break down your experiential knowledge into repeatable steps, you begin to engage in a skill-building activity. For instance, say you speak at several conferences. As you formalize your process for preparation, you practice by writing down stories and telling them aloud. This process allows you to gain new skills and improve your public speaking; however, if public speaking is not one of your innate talents, then you may never transform into an engaging public



speaker. At the end of the day, skills work best when they are combined with your innate talent.

Our innate talents lie in our strongest synaptic connections. Improving our weaker connections to make them equal to our stronger ones is nearly impossible. This is why when we focus on correcting our weaknesses, it becomes a futile and frustrating experience. Links in the brain form through *recurring patterns*, and beyond a certain age, you are not going to be able to “stitch a new design - your talents are enduring.” But what exactly is a weakness anyway? A weakness is any lack that you have that may deter you from doing your best in any job or activity. Buckingham suggests that instead of attempting to overcome our weaknesses, we should simply *work around it*. There are many ways to do this.

First, you can attempt to get a little better at it. So while you can't completely convert a weakness into a strength, you can certainly become proficient enough so that it doesn't impact your performance. Tiger Woods, for instance, improved his chipping skills enough to win countless tournaments. Second, you can design a support system. This means developing techniques that help you perform your best despite your weakness. For example, incredibly disorganized people can rely on daily planners to keep them organized and on schedule. Third, use your strongest themes to overwhelm your weakness. This simply means that if you have a strong passion or belief, then you can use that strength to overcome a weakness. For instance, people with a fear of public speaking can overcome their fear if they have a passion for advocating a particular topic. Next, find a partner and team up with someone who has complementary strengths. Finally, just stop doing it. If your weaknesses are getting in the way, it's okay to admit defeat. You can delegate the work, hire outside consultants, or even confess your weakness to your staff.

# How Talents Are Developed

So now that we have learned what talent is, it's time to take a look into the brain to discover why some of us are naturally talented in some areas and not others. In the brains of infants and young children, neurons communicate with one another through connections called "synapses." And up until the age of three, our brains contain a hundred billion neurons that can make roughly fifteen thousand connections between synapses. These connections then allow brain cells to communicate with one another. The brain quickly creates links, thus forming patterns of threads and associations. As you age, your synapse numbers steadily decrease until you reach the age of 15, then your mental network remains stable for the rest of your life.

Losing billions of these connections is not necessarily a bad thing. When we have fewer synaptic connections, we don't suffer from sensory overload and we can reinforce specific ones. As a result, some connections become stronger than others, which explains how some of us can perform actions with greater proficiency. As you know, certain movements, responses, and activities come naturally to us while others feel uncomfortable. So if you want to improve certain connections, you need to practice them and make them strong enough to overcome the ones that cause you to behave unfavorably.

For instance, you may often practice staying calm in an argument. In the end, you might fail as your short-temper takes over and unleashes your anger. All that practice on keeping your cool is soon gone as your unfavorable connections take control! The good news is that you can identify your strengths and discover your talents by observing your responses to everyday situations. According to Buckingham, the simple secret to success is "Capitalizing on your strengths and managing around your weaknesses." For instance, investment guru Warren Buffett attributes his success to his ability to hone his talents and develop professional roles that played to his strengths. Buffett describes himself as both patient and

practical; therefore, he avoids “hot stocks” and invests in companies that are more likely to give him long-term rewards. For example, he was skeptical about investing in Microsoft at first because he was unsure of the stability and potential of the internet.

# Observe Your Reactions to Uncover Hidden Talents

As you look around the workplace, you'll find that each person has his or her own unique strengths and talents. Unfortunately, many people fail to identify them, thus their skills and strengths become wasted. But if we simply observe our reactions to life's problems and everyday encounters, then we can uncover our talents and use them to become our best selves.

For instance, when an employee calls out sick, what is your first concern? Are you concerned with his or her health or the burden of unfinished work? It's important to remember that neither reaction is right or wrong. Instead, these reactions simply show you your predominant skill. In the first reaction, your strength is empathy; the second, your strength is the ability to arrange and delegate work to ensure it all gets done. Or perhaps you are attending an event where you don't know many people. Do you simply talk to the people you already know? If so, then your talent might be your ability to foster and reinforce existing relationships. On the other hand, you might thrive on meeting new people and immediately start talking to strangers. If this sounds like you, then you likely have a talent for getting people to like you.

When observing your instinctive reactions, there are two different indicators for two kinds of talent: *yearnings* and *rapid learning*. Yearnings are those that reveal our talents early on in life. For example, Mozart was just twelve-years-old when he wrote his first symphony! What was your interest as a child? Perhaps looking at what you enjoyed in childhood can help you discover a hidden talent that you forgot about. On the other hand, rapid learning is observed when you try something new. How quickly are you able to master it? If you can quickly master something new, then perhaps you have a natural talent for something you didn't know you had. For example, Henri Matisse didn't begin painting until later in life where he began with a basic manual as a guide. Just four years later, he was accepted into Paris's most prestigious art school.

Buckingham uses the *StrengthsFinder program* to help you identify the five strongest *themes of talent* - your areas of greatest potential. The program first builds upon your talents or your naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling or behavior. Next, it helps you strengthen your knowledge, or the facts and lessons you've acquired. Finally, it helps you to identify your skills or the techniques of carrying out a particular process. You can begin to identify your own themes of talent in the next chapter.

# Utilizing Talents in the Workplace

Oscar-winning director Sam Mendes attributes his success to his ability to direct each actor differently. By observing each actor, Mendes can create an environment that plays to each person's strengths, allowing each actor to be their absolute best. Managers should take a page from the book of Mendes and learn how to optimize their employees' strengths. This method relies on the "individualization" of each person's unique talent. To discover these talents, Buckingham applies the *StrengthsFinder Profile* which helps you to identify your five dominant themes or talent areas from a list of 34 possible talents and characteristics. Your five strongest themes are the areas in which you'll find your greatest growth potential. There are 33 million possible combinations, so finding someone with the exact profile and talent as you is incredibly rare.

The following are common talents that you may find around the workplace:

- *Achiever*: for the achiever to feel fulfilled and satisfied, this person strives to accomplish something every day.
- *Arranger*: This person is more logical and approaches complicated projects by analyzing its many aspects and organizing them into manageable tasks.
- *Belief*: Believers value meaning more than money and excel at work they find profound and fulfilling.
- *Competition*: This person acts as a contestant and compares his or her performance with others. They need competition to feel as if they've won. To them, winning is everything.
- *Deliberative*: A cautious individual weighs the risks before making plans.
- *Empathy*: These individuals are incredibly warm and may not always agree with others' perspectives, but possess a unique ability to relate to other people's feelings.

- *Harmony*: This person creates a collaborative atmosphere by encouraging people to work together and abandon their personal agendas.
- *Learner*: These are the life-long students who enjoy the process of learning as much as the result.
- *Positivity*: These people view the glass as always half-full and naturally look at the bright side of life.
- *Strategic*: Strategists see patterns and identify routes to success in complexity
- *Woo*: These convivial people enjoy engaging with strangers, meeting new people and initiating conversations.
- *Input*: An inquisitive person who seeks out every bit of knowledge possible.

To utilize these talents around the workplace, you'll need to identify and determine what type of job each talent enjoys and thrives in. For example, an Achiever needs responsibilities and goals to measure his or her performance. An Arranger needs authority to oversee projects and organize a team. Perhaps you have a staff member that excels in Empathy, as a manager, you can use his or her strength to get inside the emotions of the rest of the team members. Similarly, people who thrive on Input will enjoy projects that require intensive research and collecting data from various websites.

By identifying each employees' strengths, you can identify their talent and help them grow and develop. To do this, you can follow the formula Buckingham recommends. First, select people properly in the first place. This means setting aside a budget and time to ensure you hire the best candidates. Next, set goals based on results. To do this, you'll need to focus on performance by legislating outcomes instead of forcing people to follow a single path. Now it's time to build strength. Prioritize spending "training time and money" to identify and improve each individual's best strengths. Finally, beware of the destinations you develop for your employees. Instead of simply moving people up the "corporate ladder" away from their

strengths, you should focus on encouraging each employee to build a solid career.



# Final Summary

Companies and organizations have it all wrong. They tell us to identify our weaknesses and develop them to make us more well-rounded and perform better. However, this type of workplace fails to utilize the strengths of their employees. Instead, we need to be identifying our strengths and working on developing them to become the best version of ourselves. If you look inside yourself and observe the way you react to everyday situations, you'll be able to uncover some of your natural talents. Once you've identified your talents, you'll be able to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to bring those powerful strengths to light. Furthermore, organizations that understand how to utilize the strengths of their employees will not only experience growth in their people but growth in their organization. Such companies will unleash new levels of success and develop strong teams that bring their strongest selves to work each and every day.



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