

Four ways to identify and improve what you're good at and further succeed.

Focus on Your Strengths

BY RALUCA GRAEBNER AND SACHA LINDEKENS

Our coaching clients completely agree when we tell them: “It is your strengths that will push your career forward. People will most likely seek you out to work with you because you are excellent at X, not because you are average at everything else.” And yet, few of them actively work on their strengths, typically because doing so is ambiguous and poorly defined.

Strengths-based development—the approach that focuses on cultivating a person’s strengths as a way to improve her overall leadership effectiveness—has gained a lot of traction in the leadership development community lately. Its benefits are supported by data.

Acquiring just one “spike” (a competency for which they are in the top 10 percent in their organization) moves leaders’ overall perceived effectiveness from the bottom 40 percent to the top 40 percent, according to John H. Zenger and Joseph R. Folkman in *The Extraordinary Leader*. Further, research done by Gallup as presented in *StrengthsFinder 2.0* indicates that the probability that people will be engaged in their work increases eightfold (from 9 percent to 73 percent) when organizations invest in their employees’ strengths.

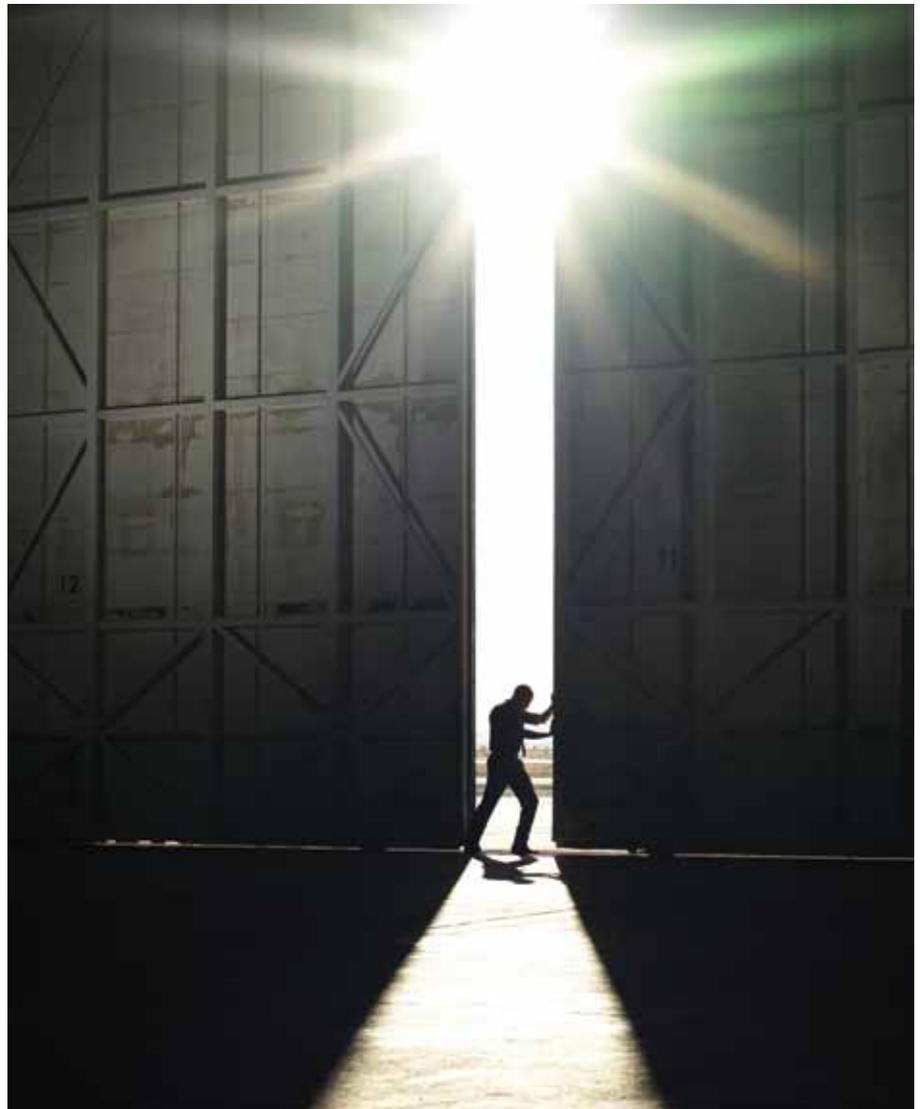


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Strengths-based development

Strength-based development acknowledges that a person needs to focus first on fixing any flagrant weaknesses. Jeremy, one of our coachees, was a thoughtful, intelligent leader whose poor public speaking held him back. It was imperative that he address this, which he did, eventually becoming a competent presenter.

However, Jeremy was never going to dazzle with his presence; his strengths were his ability to build strong client relationships and drive group consensus. Once he managed mitigating his “derailer,” he was better focusing on sharpening his strengths than trying to get his weakness to an outstanding level.

It can be tough to focus on your strengths if you work for an organization that rewards fixing the “deficits.” But even in this type of organization, focusing on strengths is time well spent, especially for high potentials and more senior-level staff. Ultimately, it is your strengths that drive your profile and make you successful. Our intuitive four-pronged model offers best practices for effectively leveraging your strengths.

Identify your strengths

Find the drivers of your success in as much detail as possible. Seek specific feedback regarding strengths. Only by knowing exactly what you do and how it accounts for success, can you replicate it.

If people tell you, “You’re a natural at creating constructive relationships,” thank them, but also ask for detail: “How exactly do I do that?” “Can you think of an example, and what made you notice it?”

Look at root causes, not outcomes. Think of outstanding results you have achieved, and work backward to the root cause behaviors. Carol received

tremendous feedback around strategic thinking. Diving into her 360-degree report, it became clear that people had a specific skill in mind: her pattern recognition ability.

She was excellent at seeing connections between events, and identifying downstream impact (for example, how a particular event would affect which ancillary groups). This knowledge made it easier for Carol to make a decision about her ideal role, which was not in setting the direction for her organization, but rather in a change management or implementation role.



ULTIMATELY, IT IS YOUR STRENGTHS THAT DRIVE YOUR PROFILE AND MAKE YOU SUCCESSFUL.

Build on your strength

Getting even better is easier said than done, but it is probably the action that brings the greatest challenge to our coachees. Some ideas follow.

Find a role model. No matter how good you are at something, there are likely people out there who are even better. Seek them out and learn from them through job shadowing, in-depth interviewing, or just picking their brains around their approach.

Take on projects in your area of strength, especially challenging ones. Nothing beats stretch assignments as developmental opportunities. A client shared this Diane Sawyer quote with us, and it has become one of our favorites: “Great experience takes place at the edge of your competence. Because in that beautiful anxiety is an air pocket of what you’ve always done and what you might do.”

Identify what *elite* means in your strength; even incremental improvements can be essential. In golf, half a stroke per round is the difference between the Hall of Fame and someone you’ve never heard of. What is your half-stroke?

Apply your strength horizontally

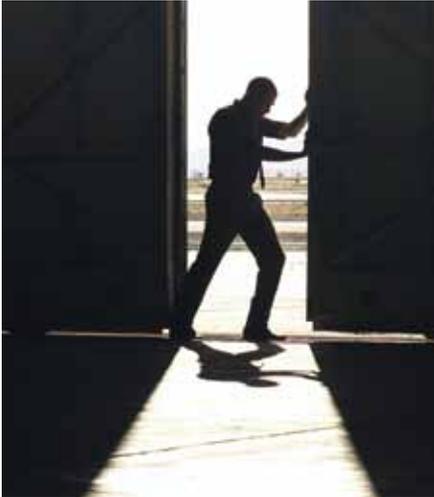
Think outside the box to either support a weakness or to innovate.

Mark was an exceptional presenter because of his ability to understand and provide what mattered to his audience. His weakness came in informal settings, where his colloquial style diminished his credibility. In coaching, we explored using one to help the other: What was it that drove Mark’s effectiveness in formal presentations, and could he replicate it informally? Framing the issue in this manner helped Mark realize that he could equally apply his audience analysis skills in informal interactions.

Push yourself to innovate by applying your strength in different fields. New products or processes often come from the combination of two seemingly unrelated topics. If you have deep expertise in one subject, it might be worth spending some time exploring subjects that you might never otherwise need (for example, by reading a professional magazine from a field unrelated to your job). This type of unstructured, nongoal-directed exploration might spur connections in your mind that lead to interesting innovations.

Spread your strength

Use your expertise to teach others and become better at it in the process. Develop others in your area of expertise by participating in internal mentorship programs, training sessions, or presentations at professional conferences. Not only does



teaching your strength to others help you hone it, but it also builds your visibility and credibility inside and outside the organization.

You're also paying it forward. The best all-around leaders we have worked with take pride in developing and empowering others to make them better leaders.

Learn how to influence others—it will make your strength more likely to have an impact. The truth is, the way you communicate can make or break the content of your communication. As a leader, you will need to learn how to “sell” your strength, for

instance, by communicating with stories and examples.

These are some proven strategies for working on your strengths. More important is prioritizing this often-forgotten aspect of development. It can be helpful to start small, with just one action. In Nike's famous words: Just do it.

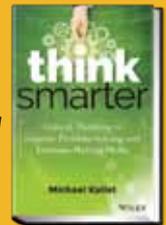
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