

## **Finding Your Leadership Strengths** **Why effective leaders must possess a high level of self-awareness**

*by Tom Rath and Barry Conchie*

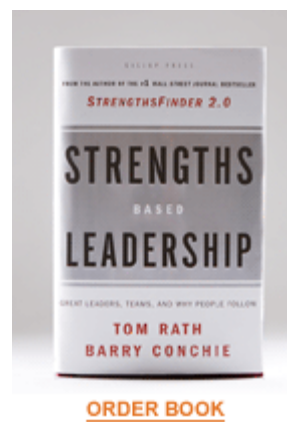
Adapted from *Strengths Based Leadership* (Gallup Press, January 2009)

*"I've never met an effective leader who wasn't aware of his talents and working to sharpen them."*

-- Former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Wesley Clark, in *The New York Times Magazine*

Without an awareness of your strengths, it's almost impossible for you to lead effectively. We all lead in very different ways, based on our talents and our limitations. Serious problems occur when we think we need to be exactly like the leaders we admire. Doing so takes us out of our natural element and practically eliminates our chances of success.

If you look at great historical leaders such as Winston Churchill or Mahatma Gandhi, you might notice more differences than similarities -- and it is the differences that defined them and led to their success. Churchill's bold and commanding leadership succeeded in mobilizing a war-ravaged nation. It is unlikely he would have had as much success if he had tried to emulate Gandhi's calm and quiet approach. Yet Gandhi's leadership, during India's struggle for independence, was much more effective because he did not try to emulate the domineering leaders of the past. Both men knew their strengths and used them wisely.



All too often, leaders are blind to the obvious when it comes to something of critical importance to them -- their own personality. Many political and business leaders have self-concepts that are miles away from reality. They simply don't know their own strengths and weaknesses.

This is the stuff of parody for late-night talk shows, sitcoms, movies, and stand-up comics. And this problem goes far beyond the boss who thinks he's funny, even though people only laugh at his jokes out of obligation. Most people have

encountered a leader who is completely unaware of a glaring weakness. We have spoken with several leaders who claim to be great at developing their people, but when we interview the people they lead, we hear a very different story. In some cases, the leaders in question may be better at demoralizing than developing people. At its worst, this lack of self-awareness can lead to masses of disengaged employees, unhappy customers, and undue stress beyond the workplace.

Although less noticeable, another serious problem occurs when people try to lead while having no clue about their natural strengths. Unfortunately, few people have discovered the place in life where they have the most potential for growth. Based on an analysis of Gallup's 2007 global client database, the vast majority of people *do not* have "the opportunity to do what they do best every day" in their current job. (See chart below.) This problem runs rampant in workplaces throughout the world.



## Key discovery

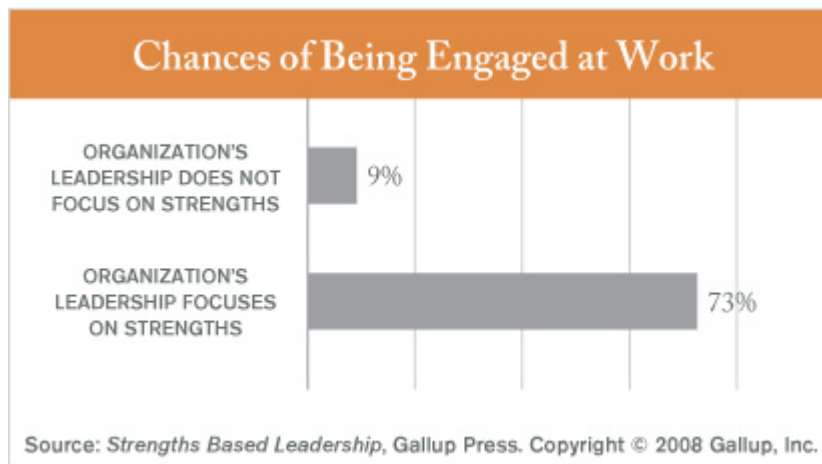
It was this problem that led the late leadership researcher and Father of Strengths Psychology, Donald O. Clifton, Ph.D., to begin studying the unique strengths of leaders. Beginning in the 1960s, Clifton, along with his colleagues from Gallup and the academic world, conducted more than 20,000 interviews with people in leadership roles across almost all industries and occupations, including former heads of state and other global leaders.

Each of these 90-minute interviews was carefully structured; for most of the interviews, the various leaders were asked the exact same questions. This allowed for side-by-side comparisons of leaders' responses. For many business leaders in this study, data on the leader's actual performance were available. This allowed Clifton and his team to compare the best leaders to those who were less successful, based on objective measures.

After all of this research, you might think that a team of scientists would find at least one strength that *all* of the best leaders shared. But when Clifton was asked, just a few months before his death in 2003, what his greatest discovery was from three decades of leadership research, this was his response:

*A leader needs to know his strengths as a carpenter knows his tools, or as a physician knows the instruments at her disposal. What great leaders have in common is that each truly knows his or her strengths -- and can call on the right strength at the right time. This explains why there is no definitive list of characteristics that describes all leaders.*

To help aspiring leaders identify their strengths, Clifton and his team created a Web-based program dubbed "StrengthsFinder." A new leadership version of the StrengthsFinder program helps people discover their own strengths to lead and provides them with several strategies for leading others based on *their* unique strengths. As you can see in the chart below, if you are able to help the people you lead focus on their strengths, it will dramatically boost engagement levels throughout your organization.



### **A long-term investment**

As one top executive summarized, "If you focus on people's weaknesses, they lose confidence." At a very basic level, it is hard for us to build self-confidence when we are focused on our weaknesses instead of our strengths. Over the past decade, Gallup scientists have explored in much more detail the mechanism through which a strengths-based approach influences our lives. These studies revealed that people experience significant gains in self-confidence after taking StrengthsFinder and learning more about their strengths. This increase in confidence at an individual level may help explain how strengths-based programs boost an organization's overall engagement and productivity.

The awareness of one's strengths and the subsequent increase in self-confidence it produces might have longer term implications as well, according to a landmark 2008 study led by the University of Florida's Tim Judge. Judge and his colleague Charlice Hurst studied the self-evaluations of 7,660 men and women who were between the ages of 14 and 22 when they were first studied in 1979. These 7,660 participants were followed for the next 25 years, and the measures (which included questions about career success, job status, education, and health) were repeated in 2004.

What Judge and Hurst discovered from this 25-year longitudinal study was quite profound. They found that people with higher self-confidence in 1979 ended up with higher income levels and career satisfaction in 2004. But what was even

more striking was the fact that people with high self-confidence in 1979 saw their income increase *at an entirely different rate* compared to those with lower levels of self-confidence.

The people who had more confidence in their abilities at a young age (between 14 and 22) started off with slightly higher income levels -- making, on average (in 1979), \$3,496 more per year than the low-confidence group. As each year went by, this gap continued to widen. When the researchers reviewed follow-up studies from 2004, the group with higher self-confidence was making \$12,821 more annually compared to the average annual income for the lower self-confidence group. The people with higher self-confidence in 1979 continued to capitalize on their disproportionate gains as each year passed.

In addition to the income and career benefits, what Judge and Hurst discovered about the link between early self-confidence and physical health may be even more surprising. When asked about the number of health problems they have that interfere with their work, the group with low self-confidence in 1979 reported almost *three times* as many health problems 25 years later in 2004. Almost unbelievably, the group with high self-evaluations in 1979 reported having *fewer* health problems in 2004 than they did 25 years before.

The results of this study suggest that people who are aware of their strengths and build self-confidence at a young age may reap a "cumulative advantage" that continues to grow over a lifetime. A preliminary Gallup analysis (using the same longitudinal panel from Judge and Hurst's study) suggests that people who report having a chance to use their strengths in the workplace gain a similar advantage. Our research team found that people who had the opportunity to use their strengths early on (between the ages of 15-23) had significantly higher job satisfaction and income levels 26 years later.

These outcomes highlight the value of leaders knowing their own strengths and also reveal how important it is for leaders to help others uncover their strengths as early as possible. If an organization's leaders are able to help each person capitalize on this cumulative advantage, it is likely to create more rapid individual *and* organizational growth.

Tom Rath is coauthor of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *How Full Is Your Bucket?*. He is also the author of *Vital Friends: The People You Can't Afford to Live Without* and the bestselling *StrengthsFinder 2.0*. His latest book is *Strengths Based Leadership*.

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Barry Conchie, Principal Leadership Consultant with Gallup, is coauthor of *Strengths Based Leadership*.

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