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# VANTAGE<sup>©</sup>

## PUTTING STRENGTHS TO WORK

The single most important decision an organization can make is naming someone as a manager. Why?



Great managers know how to consistently engage their teams to achieve high performance. They create environments of accountability and build workplaces that fuel productivity and sustainable profitability.

Gallup research finds that managers account for an alarming 70% of the variance in employee engagement scores in the global workplace.<sup>1</sup> That variance, in turn, is responsible for the severely low worldwide employee engagement levels. In its 2015 study, Gallup reported that only 32% of U.S. employees are engaged at work.<sup>2</sup> Yet companies rarely invest time to understand what makes a great manager. Instead, they promote highly skilled producers and hope that they will be able to replicate their success through others.

So what do great managers do? They take time to uncover and leverage the unique talents of each member of their team. In short, they turn talent into performance.

## STRENGTHS DEFINED

“What would happen if we actually studied what is *right* with people?”

That is the fundamental question that educational psychologist Donald Clifton set out to answer in his ground breaking research that launched the Strengths<sup>©</sup> movement. A veteran of World War II, Clifton found that funding for post-war psychological research was focused on studying problems rather than potential.

Instead, he turned the question of how to bring out the best in people upside down. Clifton began by rigorously studying top performers to find common patterns of behavior. His research led to a distinct differentiation between talents and strengths.



**DONALD O. CLIFTON,  
PH.D.**  
Psychologist and  
Business Executive  
(1924-2003)

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN WHEN WE  
THINK ABOUT WHAT IS RIGHT  
WITH PEOPLE RATHER THAN  
FIXATING ON WHAT IS WRONG  
WITH THEM?**

**-DONALD O. CLIFTON**

A strength, as defined by Clifton, is the ability to consistently provide near-perfect performance in a specific activity. How do we do that? By refining our talents with knowledge and skills.

Talents are the natural abilities that every human being is born with. They are hard-wired and instinctual. For example, the inclination to chat with strangers and enjoy the challenge of making new connections is a talent. Whereas the ability to consistently build a network of dependable supporters is a strength.

Although talents, skills, and knowledge are each important for building strengths, talent is the most important. Talents are innate and cannot be acquired.

**A STRENGTH IS THE ABILITY  
TO CONSISTENTLY PROVIDE  
NEAR-PERFECT PERFORMANCE  
IN A SPECIFIC ACTIVITY.**

To deviate from our natural talents requires conscious effort. Over time, that effort results -- not in improved performance -- but in mediocrity and disengagement.

### THE FOUR STRENGTH DOMAINS

<p><b>Executing</b> Know how to make things happen; ability to "catch" an idea and make it a reality</p>	<p><b>Influencing</b> Reach a broader audience; sell the team's ideas inside and outside the organization</p>
<p><b>Relationship Building</b> Glue that holds the team together; create groups and organizations that are much greater than the sum of their parts</p>	<p><b>Strategic Thinking</b> Focused on what <i>could be</i>; absorb and analyze information to make better decisions</p>

## STRENGTHS APPLIED

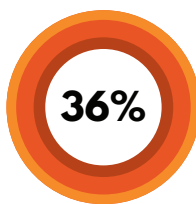
In 1969, Clifton founded Selection Research, Inc. which he grew into a large human resources consulting firm that merged with The Gallup Organization in 1988.<sup>3</sup>

Gallup, widely known for its polls, developed the online Clifton StrengthsFinder (CSF) psychometric assessment as an objective instrument to measure personal talent.

In the decades that followed, Gallup has studied the results of over 7 million CSF assessments, as well as the performance results of organizations that used a strengths-based management approach. Independent studies have also been conducted and agree with Gallup's conclusion, including these four key findings:

### 1. EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE

The Corporate Leadership Council studied 19,000 employees across 34 organizations and 19 countries. It found that an emphasis on performance strengths was linked to a **36.4%** improvement in performance. In contrast, an emphasis on performance weaknesses was linked to a **26.8%** decline in performance.<sup>4</sup>



Emphasizing strengths in the workplace led to a **36%** improvement in performance

### 2. EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Rath and Conchie found that **9%** of employees were engaged when leaders focused on weaknesses, and a **73%** were engaged when leaders focused on strengths.

Leaders who invest in strengths increase engagement eightfold in their teams and in their organizations.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. WORK UNIT PRODUCTIVITY

Harter, Schmidt and Hayes completed a meta analysis of over 10,000 work units and over 300,000 employees in 51 companies. They found that work units scoring above the median on the question "I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day" had **38%** higher probability of success on productivity measures.<sup>6</sup>

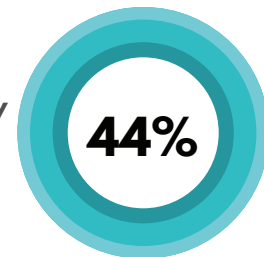
**ONLY 1 IN 3 WORKERS SAID THEY DREW ON THEIR STRENGTHS EVERY DAY.**  
-GALLUP POLL

### 4. CUSTOMER RETENTION

The Harter, Schmidt and Hayes study also showed that work units scoring above the median on the question "I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day" had **44%** higher probability of success on customer loyalty and retention.<sup>7</sup>

Though the idea of leveraging employee strengths may seem obvious, it is surprisingly underused. A 10-year Gallup survey of 15 million people in 100 countries found that only one in three workers said they drew on their greatest strengths every day.<sup>8</sup>

Employees having the opportunity to "do what they do best every day" had a **44%** higher likelihood of earning customer loyalty.



## 3 WAYS GREAT MANAGERS PUT STRENGTHS TO WORK

One of the most prolific Strengths advocates is Marcus Buckingham. In his *Harvard Business Review* article “What Great Managers Do,” he wrote:

“In my research, beginning with a survey of 80,000 managers conducted by the Gallup Organization and continuing with in-depth studies of top performers, I’ve found that while there are as many styles of management as there are managers, there is one quality that sets truly great managers apart from the rest: They discover what is unique about each person and then capitalize on it.”

He continues, “Great managers know and value the unique abilities and even the eccentricities of their employees, and they learn how best to integrate them into a coordinated plan of attack.” Buckingham offers three keys for how great managers can put strengths to work:



### 1. KNOW THE STRENGTHS OF YOUR DIRECT REPORTS

It’s not enough to have your employees take an online StrengthsFinder assessment and simply review a printed report of their strengths.

Great managers spend time with their direct reports to observe them in action. They ask questions, listen, and note what each person is drawn to as well as where they struggle.

### Strengths March Forward with Marcus Buckingham

While studying in Cambridge, Marcus Buckingham was recruited by Donald Clifton to help build the CFS assessment. Based on the assessment results and on interviews with thousands of managers, Buckingham published *First Break All the Rules*.

After the publication of several subsequent books on the subject, including *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, Buckingham started The Marcus Buckingham Company in 2006.

The company extends the Strengths concept to help managers apply Strengths principles to turn talents into Strengths, and Strengths into performance.

They build strengths into one-on-one conversations with employees and celebrate occasions when they succeed using their strengths. “The primary objective,” writes Buckingham, “is to create in each employee a specific state of mind: one that includes a realistic assessment of the difficulty of the obstacle ahead but an unrealistically optimistic belief in her ability to overcome it.”

This strengthens the employee’s self-assurance and make her more optimistic and more resilient in the face of challenges to come.

**GREAT MANAGERS KNOW AND VALUE THE UNIQUE ABILITIES AND EVEN THE ECCENTRICITIES OF THEIR EMPLOYEES, AND THEY LEARN HOW BEST TO INTEGRATE THEM INTO A COORDINATED PLAN OF ATTACK.”**

**—MARCUS BUCKINGHAM**



## 2. TRIGGER GOOD PERFORMANCE

An employee's strengths aren't always on display. Sometimes they require precise triggering to turn them on. Squeeze the right trigger and an employee will push himself harder and push past resistance. Conversely, squeeze the wrong trigger, and the employee may shut down.

The best managers know what triggers each employee. They know that by far, the most powerful trigger is recognition, and that each employee's standard of recognition is nuanced.

To excel as a manager, you must be able to match the employee to the recognition he values most. One employee might prefer peer recognition. The best way to praise him would be to point him out in front of his coworkers and give kudos for his achievement.

Another employee's favorite audience might be you. The most powerful recognition would be a one-on-one conversation where you tell her quietly and precisely how you value her on the team. Still another employee might define himself by his specialized skills. He would most prize being recognized with a professional or technical award.

**TO EXCEL AS A MANAGER, YOU MUST BE ABLE TO MATCH EACH EMPLOYEE TO THE AUDIENCE HE OR SHE VALUES MOST. FIND THE RIGHT METHOD, AND YOU'LL UNLOCK A DESIRE FOR HIGH PERFORMANCE.**

## How Facebook Puts Strengths to Work

In an interview with *The New York Times'* Sunday Book Review, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg was asked to name the best business book she had read in recent years. She responded with *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, by Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton. Not only has the book personally influenced her, but has been instrumental in determining how Facebook develops talent.

After 25 years of research, the authors found that the most important indicator of extraordinary performance in a company or team was how many people said 'yes' to one question: "Do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?"

Under Sandberg, Facebook has adapted its culture to reflect the book's lessons.

"At Facebook, we try to be a strengths-based organization, which means we try to make jobs fit around people rather than make people fit around jobs. We focus on what people's natural strengths are and spend our management time trying to find ways for them to use those strengths every day."



## 3. TAILOR TO LEARNING STYLES

Studies show that adults have three predominate learning styles. Some may use a combination of two or all three. Great managers find each employee's style or styles to help focus their coaching.

First, is **analyzing**. The best way to teach an analyzer is to give her ample time to study. Allow her to role play and do postmortem reviews. Help her break down her performance into steps so she can see its component parts. Always allow an analyzer time to prepare. She hates making mistakes.

Second, there is **doing**. The doer learns fastest while performing. He likes leaving the manual on the floor and digging right into figuring things out for himself. Give the doer a specific task, give him a brief overview of the outcomes you want, and get out of his way. He may make a few mistakes along the way, but for the doer, mistakes are the raw material for learning.

Finally, there's **watching**. Watchers learn when they are given the chance to see the total performance. Studying the individual steps of a task leaves a watcher lost in the weeds. Instead, they need context and how each step relates to the whole. Watchers are only able to see this when they view the complete picture.

## CONCLUSION

Great managers know that the most effective way to invest their time is to identify exactly how each employee is different and then to figure out how best to incorporate those innate idiosyncrasies into the operational plan.

To excel at managing others, you must bring that insight into your daily interactions with your employees. Great managing is not about shaping your employees to fit the environment, but about tweaking the environment so that the unique contribution of each employee can shine.

Don't hire people for their strengths then ask them to work on their weaknesses. Instead, unlock their natural talents, give them the tools and support that best suits their individual style, and you'll have a strengths-based team that thrives.

### Resources

<sup>1</sup>[http://www.gallup.com/services/182138/state-american-manager.aspx?utm\\_source=gbj&utm\\_medium=copy&utm\\_campaign=20150421-gbj](http://www.gallup.com/services/182138/state-american-manager.aspx?utm_source=gbj&utm_medium=copy&utm_campaign=20150421-gbj)

<sup>2</sup><http://www.gallup.com/poll/188144/employee-engagement-stagnant-2015.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.thepositiveencourager.global/don-cliftons-approach-to-doing-positive-work/>

<sup>4</sup>[http://talentexperiment.com/images/CLC\\_Building\\_the\\_High\\_Performance\\_Workforce\\_A\\_Quantitative\\_Analysis\\_of\\_the\\_Effectiveness\\_of\\_Performance\\_Management\\_Strategies\\_1\\_.pdf](http://talentexperiment.com/images/CLC_Building_the_High_Performance_Workforce_A_Quantitative_Analysis_of_the_Effectiveness_of_Performance_Management_Strategies_1_.pdf)

<sup>5</sup>[https://nclp.umd.edu/resources/bookreviews/BookReview-Strengths\\_Based\\_Leadership-Luffy-2011.pdf](https://nclp.umd.edu/resources/bookreviews/BookReview-Strengths_Based_Leadership-Luffy-2011.pdf)

<sup>6</sup><http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12002955>

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/businessjournal/186044/employees-strengths-outperform-don.aspx>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/books/review/sheryl-sandberg-by-the-book.html?pagewanted=1&r=1&nl=books&emc=edit\\_bk\\_20130315](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/books/review/sheryl-sandberg-by-the-book.html?pagewanted=1&r=1&nl=books&emc=edit_bk_20130315)

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