

# NATIONAL POST

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## Learn to Capitalize on Staff's Strengths

Ray Williams

Managers and Executives have been schooled to assess the performance of their employees based on identifying weaknesses, and seeing the gap between what's expected and what's actually performed. We may be looking at a glass half empty. Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton, authors of the book, *Now Discover Your Strengths*, suggest that we build our lives around strengths and show us ways to minimize the impact of our weaknesses.

The authors define strengths as "*consistent near-perfect performance in an activity.*" As an important corollary to this definition, they add "*ability is only strength if you can fathom yourself doing repeatedly, happily and successfully.*" They go on to thoroughly describe the hallmarks of the 34 strengths identified by the Gallup Organization,

Buckingham and Clifton offer these tips to build your strengths:

► **Tip 1: Understand how to distinguish your natural talents from the skills you can learn.** It's true that you can improve at activities for which you are not naturally gifted. The question is whether you can reach consistent near-perfect performance, repeatedly. Buckingham and Clifton talk about the differences among talents, knowledge and skills:

- Talent is a naturally recurring pattern of thought, feeling or behaviour.
- Knowledge consists of facts and lessons learned.
- Skills are the steps of an activity.

With skills and knowledge, you can perfect and innate talent. On the other hand, you can acquire skills and knowledge to a point—to adequately get by—but you'll never be able to attain the consistent near-perfect performance that comes with innate talent.

► **Tip 2: Have a system to identify your dominant talents.** Try an activity to see quickly you:

- Pick it up
  - Skip steps in the learning and
  - Add twists and things you haven't been taught yet
- See whether you get so absorbed in the activity that you lose track of time.

► **Tip 3: Learn a common language to describe your talents and the talents of others.**

Our language isn't up to the challenge, the author's suggest. The language of human weaknesses is

rich and varied, whereas, in contrast, the language of human strengths is sparse. They point out that

while a person with people skills has strength for relating well to people, he or she may not have the particular strength to succeed in a specific area. For example, one person with people skills might excel at building trust, while another person with people skills might be brilliant at initiating contact or networking.

Buckingham and Clifton discuss how organizations are merely a reflection of individuals. Most organizations are a puzzle put together in a dark room. Each piece is clumsily squeezed into place, and then the edges are ground down so they feel well positioned. But, pull up the shades, let a little light into the room, and we see the truth:

- 8 out of 10 pieces are in the wrong place
- 8 out of 10 employees feel they are miscast
- 8 out of 10 employees never have a chance to reveal the best of themselves

It doesn't have to be this way. A knowledge economy in an increasingly competitive global economy means that the right employees are becoming more precious with each passing year. Those of us who lead organizations must become more sophisticated and more efficient when it comes to capitalizing on our people. We must find the best possible fit for people's strengths and the roles we are asking them to play. Ethical, effective leaders focus on the importance of people. They seek out talent and concentrate performance on outcomes, rather than forcing people into stylistic modes that show their weaknesses.



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