

Strengths-Based Leadership

By Tom Rath and Barry Conchie (Gallup Press, 2008)

Reviewed by Steve Gladis, Ph.D.

Overview: The Gallup folks have used their ability to research and analyze data to produce a book worthy of any team or organization reading it. The basic premises: People perform best when working in their strengths areas, and teams perform best when the team itself has a balanced, complementary set of strengths. The research behind this book is prodigious. Gallup conducted over 20,000 in-depth interviews, studied over one million work teams, considered over 50 years of data on the world's most admired leaders, and studied over 10,000 followers for insights into leaders. Here's what that data revealed. First, the most effective leaders are always investing in strengths. Employees who do not work in strengths areas are only 9% engaged in their jobs vs. 74% engagement levels for people who do work in their strengths. Further, engagement has been proven to substantially increase productivity for the company. Second, the most effective leaders surround themselves with the right people and then maximize their team. By nature we all have talents that can be developed into strengths. We also have definite weaknesses. And while no leader is perfectly well-rounded, effective teams must be. Gallup research has developed four domains of leadership strength: Execution (making things happen); Influence (selling ideas inside and out of the organization); Relationship Building (being the glue that holds teams together); and Strategic Thinking (focusing on the big picture and the future). Third, the most effective leaders understand their followers' needs. The four needs of followers are: Trust (honesty, respect and integrity); Compassion (caring, friendship, happiness and love); Stability (security, strength, support and peace); and Hope (direction, faith and guidance). This book is a team "must-read." The StrengthsFinder alone is high value; combine that with the research on teams and you have a bible for team development.

1. Data on Strengths-Based Engagement
 - a. Only a third of Americans use their strengths areas every day. Engagement with their job leads to employee happiness, productivity, and retention. The chances of a person being engaged who is not using his or her strengths is only 9%! Such a waste.
 - b. Focus on people's weaknesses and they lose confidence. Focus on their strengths and they are more confident, healthier, happier and wealthier over a lifetime.
2. A Great Leadership Team

- a. Individuals may not be well-rounded or possess strengths in all areas...a virtual impossibility. However, based on extensive Gallup research, teams need to be well-balanced across four key domains of Leadership Strength: Execution, Influence, Relationship Building, and Strategic Thinking.
- b. According to Gallup research there are 34 StrengthsFinder themes – which sort out into nearly equal sets of the above four key domains (Strategic Thinking, Influence, Relationship Building, and Execution).
3. The Four Domains of Teams (think of the word SIRE)
 - a. **Strategic Thinking:** People with strengths in this domain tend to force the group to look at the big picture and toward the future – what might be. Always reviewing the data and applying what they learn, strategic thinkers move the organization forward – stretching its members to think beyond what is, to the possibilities of the future. People who are strong in this strategic thinking domain possess strengths in such areas as: Context, Futuristic, Ideation, Input, Analytic, Intellection, Learner and Strategic.
 - b. **Influence:** People with strengths in this key domain know how to sell or promulgate the team’s ideas both inside and outside the organization. These people are natural persuaders, inspire others to adopt their ideas, and are vital to moving teams forward in communities. Again, not everyone influences the same way. But people with the following domain-area strengths tend to be key influencers: Activator, Command, Communication, Competition, Maximizer, Self Assurance, Significance, and Woo.
 - c. **Relationship Building:** Those with strengths in this domain tend to keep groups together. They’re the social glue, the mortar between the foundation building blocks. They know how to create and maintain groups such that the whole is much greater than its parts. Such relationship builders have domain strengths as follows: Adaptability, Developer, Connectedness, Empathy, Includer, Individualization, Positivity, and Relator.
 - d. **Execution:** People with strengths in this key domain know how to rally around a goal and get things done. Differing strengths might dictate the style of getting to the goal, but folks who have strengths in this domain area contribute mightily to execution. Here are those strengths: Achiever, Arranger, Belief, Consistency, Deliberative, Discipline, Focus, Responsibility, and Restorative. Take the StrengthsFinder to find yours and read the book for explanations of all of the strengths.

- e. Again, to remember Strategic Thinking, Influence, Relationship Building, and Execution, just think of the word SIRE – to **sire** greater productivity, teams have to work together.
4. Common Elements of Great Teams
- a. Conflict does not destroy strong teams because strong teams focus on results. Strong teams may well argue as they proceed toward the goal, but they're all focused on the goal – together. Weak teams argue and tend to personalize their disagreements, thus fracturing groups and driving them away from the goal toward silos and personal interests.
 - b. Strong teams prioritize what's best for the organization and then move forward. Strong teams figure out what's best for the organization's health and welfare, focus on that, and subordinate their own interests for the greater good of the organization. This isn't easy, but it separates the great teams from fair teams and companies.
 - c. Members of strong teams are as committed to their personal lives as they are to work. Members of strong teams commit to their work, their families and their communities. These folks seem to know how to get it all done – without falling into an obsession about work. They work on their families and the community as well – volunteering and making their communities better places to live and work.
 - d. Strong teams embrace diversity. Diversity helps teams solve problems better and faster than homogenous teams, the members of which all see the world the same way. The more diverse the team in age, gender, and ethnicity, the research shows, the greater the level of engagement. And the greater the engagement, the greater the productivity and retention. Diverse teams look at people's strengths, not their gender, race, or age.
 - e. Strong teams are magnets for talent. The easy way to find a strong team or a weak team is to look at what people are doing to get on or off the team. Strong teams attract the best and brightest. Weak teams start looking like abandoned tenements as people flee to a better place.
5. Followers' Four Basic Needs: Gallup's research focuses not just on looking at how leaders behave but also on followers. A leader charging forward without followers is just out for a walk! The good folks at Gallup looked at 10,000 followers and asked two questions: 1) What leader has the most positive influence in your daily life? 2) List three words that best describe what this person contributes to your life. The results were remarkably simple and profound. Here are THE 4 things followers want from their leaders: Trust, Compassion, Stability and Hope. Actually, not far off from what our ancient

friend Aristotle said 2,500 years ago – people want leaders to have Ethos (Trust), Pathos (Compassion) and Logos (Stability & Hope).

- a. Trust: Employees who trust leaders are much more likely to stay around. Things get done far more quickly in high-trust teams. Respect, integrity, and honesty are the results of high trust. Trust happens through behaviors. And, in high-trust organizations there's more a presumption of trust than a lot of chatter about it. Whereas on low-trust, struggling teams, there's a lot of discussion about trust. Remember, trusted relationships will "trump" competence any time. Better to be trusted than be the smartest person in the room!
- b. Compassion: People want leaders who care about them. It's that simple and, for some leaders, that difficult. When 10,000 employees were asked what great leaders contributed to their lives, they said: Caring, friendship, happiness, and love. And when 10 Million (!) people were asked whether their supervisor or someone at work cared about them, the ones who answered yes were more engaged, productive and most likely to stick around (retention). Moreover, not only do leaders have to care, the culture of an organization has to "have a heart." When that happens, employees do great things and hang around.
- c. Stability: No one likes constant chaos. And most people like stability – especially in times of threat or crisis. A steady hand on the rudder of the organization calms people down and allows them to make better choices. Those surveys by Gallup used words like security, strength, support and peace. People want stability and confidence. Those who are particularly confident in a company's financial future are nine times more likely to stay with the company, rather than jump ship. To ensure financial stability, make the numbers open to everyone....be transparent.
- d. Hope: While people want stability on a day-to-day basis, they want hope in the future. People in the Gallup survey used words like direction, faith, and guidance. When asked if they had faith in their organization, the 69% who answered affirmatively were the most engaged employees in their companies, as compared to a miserly 1% of those who answered negatively about hope in their company's future. Just the mere act of initiating something new can offer hope in the future for employees. Such hope and optimism gives employees something to live and strive for. Without hope, despair and paralysis take over. However, most managers work on day-to-day problems rather than hope-filled strategies of the future. It's easier to take a phone call than to plan a strategy for financial

growth into the future. Add to that the quarter-to-quarter mentality of many corporate boards and their CEOs and you see how establishing hope in the future is as difficult as necessary.

6. Back of the book: The basic theory of the book is that we all have specific talents. With work and development, we can hone those skills to become real leadership strengths. And, taken together with others on the team, pooling skills results in strong, effective teams that foster engaged, productive and happy employees.
 - a. Developing Talents: One section in the back of the book describes the 34 themes (or talents) in the Clifton Strengths Finder. Not only do they describe the theme (talent), but they also give specific, customized direction about how that talent can be developed so that people will want to follow you. Thus, each theme is passed through four familiar filters about how to build Trust, Compassion, Stability, and Hope.
 - b. Research: This book is based on a lot of research, and the back of the book attempts to summarize that. I especially like the annotated references, which reinforced my confidence in the data. Using such an evidenced-based approach to team building only makes sense. And using this book as a central component of that strategy makes even more sense. Buy the book, take the StrengthsFinder and have your team discuss it as if it were a roadmap to success – which it is, in my opinion.