

ABRIDGED VERSION  
(a quick reference guide with action items available online)

# StrengthsQuest:

DISCOVER AND DEVELOP YOUR  
STRENGTHS IN ACADEMICS,  
CAREER, AND BEYOND



Donald O. Clifton, Ph.D. &  
Edward “Chip” Anderson, Ph.D.  
with Laurie A. Schreiner, Ph.D.

**Name**

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**My Signature Themes**

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## Preface

I was wrong!

For nearly half of my professional career, I was wrong about how to help students achieve. I had the wrong focus, made inaccurate assumptions, used faulty logic, and came to the wrong conclusions about how to increase student achievement.

During almost 36 years as a college administrator and instructor, I designed programs and services, taught classes, and conducted workshops with one purpose in mind: To help students gain maximum benefits from college and continue achieving long after they are done with school.

Looking back, however, I now see that for the first 15 years, despite my best intentions, I was using the wrong approach. About the only thing I did right during those early years was to invest myself in students, express my care and concern for them as people, and encourage them. But although a high percentage of my students persisted in and graduated from the programs in which I worked, they seldom became top achievers, and few achieved to levels of excellence.

Here is where and how I went wrong: I had read the research reports that clearly indicated a correlation between academic preparation and achievement. Results from almost every study on students in high school and college showed a direct correlation between students' levels of academic preparation and their subsequent achievement and persistence in college. The statistics showed that students who had the best academic preparation earned the highest grades and persisted to graduation in larger numbers. Students who had the weakest academic preparation earned the lowest grades and had the lowest graduation rates.

Armed with this information, I began designing procedures to identify the students who were least prepared so that we could build programs and services that would help more students achieve. I assumed that there were certain preparation levels that students needed in order to accomplish more in school; that if students met or exceeded these preparation levels, everything would take care of itself; that if students were prepared and met the expectations of the professors, then the normal courses of study and interactions with faculty would be sufficient to help students develop and achieve.

But I began to see two potential problems with my assumptions.

1. Many students don't have the expected level of preparation.
2. The whole issue of preparation is complex, because there are so many different ways to prepare students to attain academic excellence.

After interviewing hundreds of students who were dropping out, experiencing difficulties, or flunking out of college, I came to believe that the types of preparation students needed included three broad areas: academic skills, background knowledge, and self-management skills. Within each of these areas, there were several specific types of skills and knowledge that instructors expected.

Assuming that certain skills and knowledge were the foundation of student success, I organized various diagnostic, testing, and assessment procedures to determine the extent to which each student was prepared in various areas. Diagnostic and assessment areas included: reading speed and comprehension; vocabulary level; knowledge of mathematical concepts and problem-solving; knowledge of grammar and writing skills; knowledge and problem-solving in chemistry and physics; knowledge of study skills and study attitudes; and time and stress management. Using a combination of standardized tests, institutionally developed instruments, and interview procedures, I tried to get a clear picture of whether each student was prepared or underprepared.

In fact, I was very much influenced by the Deficit Remediation Educational Model, which has been predominant in education for decades. This model assumes that the most important thing to do is to "fix" the student. Programs and services based on this model are dedicated to helping students achieve by first diagnosing student needs, problems, ignorance, concerns, defects, and deficits. Those who use the Deficit Remediation Educational Model have the challenge of designing classes, workshops, programs, and services to help students improve in areas where they are underprepared. Based on the diagnosis, participation in remedial programs and services is often required. Students are usually prevented from pursuing other areas of study and from focusing on their interests until their "deficits" have been removed and their "problems" have been overcome.

Using this approach, students are usually told that they must overcome their deficiencies by a specific time. If they're unable to do so by the established date, students are usually dismissed or told that they aren't "college material." Mea culpa. I designed and implemented educational programs and services based on this model for almost 15 years, with the best of intentions. In retrospect, it's crystal clear that I was actually *preventing* students from becoming top achievers.

### **The Conference That Changed My Life**

In the winter of 1978, I attended a conference on college-student retention, sponsored by American College Testing (ACT), which brought together some of the best researchers and practitioners in this field. The conference coordinators were Drs. Lee Noel and Randi Levitz, who later founded the largest consulting organization in college student recruitment and retention, Noel-Levitz Inc.

Drs. Noel and Levitz gave presentations on why nearly half of the students who go to college drop out or flunk out along the way. They presented research findings and described some of the most effective programs and services designed to help more students persist to graduation. Another presenter at this conference was Dr. Robert Cope, coauthor of the book *Revolving College Doors*. He presented the best theory and research available about the causes of student persistence and attrition.

From the combination of presentations by Drs. Noel, Levitz, and Cope, I was forced to come to a radically new conclusion about college-student success:

*More students leave college because of disillusionment, discouragement, or reduced motivation than because of lack of ability or dismissal by school administration.*

It's difficult to describe how mind-boggling this new conclusion was for me. I discovered that I had been wrong both in my logic and in the way I designed programs and services. Before the conference, I had concluded that students were leaving college because they lacked certain skills, knowledge, and abilities. All the work I had done was based on this premise.

With the dawning awareness that I had been operating from a faulty perspective, I was eventually forced to an even more devastating conclusion:

*The deficit-based, remediation programming I had used for more than 10 years interfered with students becoming top achievers.*

As I make these confessions, I feel bad about what I did unwittingly. I hindered students from achieving to levels of excellence.

But I wasn't alone. The deficit-based remediation approach was widely embraced by educators — and, unfortunately, remains the most prevalent approach used today. While most educators claim to identify not only the weaknesses but also the talents and strengths of their students, in practice, most focus almost solely on the weaknesses. Many students become demoralized and disillusioned.

## **The Impact of Meeting Donald O. Clifton**

At the same conference in San Francisco, I met the man I feel so honored to know and write this book with: my coauthor, Dr. Donald O. Clifton. Don was introduced as a former professor at the University of Nebraska who had been voted Most Outstanding Educator for the state of Nebraska. Don had gone on to form a company called Selection Research, Incorporated, which helped companies do a better job of selecting employees through studying the "best of the best" in particular roles and positions. He eventually became chairman of The Gallup Organization, the global management consulting, training, and polling company.

I will never forget how Don slowly walked to the front of the stage, turned to the audience, and quickly had us riveted. His presentation drove home a significant point:

*To produce excellence, you must study excellence.*

Don's point hit me hard. Once again, I was wrong! In my efforts to help students persist and achieve, I had been studying dropouts. I should have been studying achievers! But back then, it seemed reasonable that to increase student persistence, I needed to study why students were leaving school and flunking out. Likewise, it seemed reasonable that to improve student achievement, I needed to study why people didn't achieve — which is why I spent endless hours interviewing dropouts and students who were underachieving.

It never occurred to me that I might be studying the wrong students to produce the best insights on how to help students achieve to levels of excellence. When I returned to UCLA after the conference in San Francisco, I began reading and trying to understand what made top achievers tick. Time and time again, I found that I had made inaccurate assumptions about the differences between top achievers and low achievers.

For example, I had always assumed that top achievers set high goals, and low achievers set low goals. But research indicates that top achievers tend to set goals *slightly above* their current level of performance, whereas low achievers often set very, very high goals.

The combination of reading books and articles, sitting in on classes attending workshops, and consulting with scholars in the field reinforced Don's contention that if you want to produce excellence, you have to study excellence.

Here is the most important insight I have gained from investigating excellence among college students: Top achievers aren't all alike. There are huge variations in how they approach learning and studying. Some seem to learn best in isolation, while others learn best in social settings. Some learn best through group discussions, while others learn best from self-testing and repetition. There isn't any "one size fits all" set of learning and study techniques. Top achievers capitalize on their own personal uniqueness as they learn.

Essentially, top achievers build their academic and personal lives — and later their careers — on their talents. They use those talents as the foundation of strengths development, and they apply those strengths to produce excellence. They also manage any weaknesses — lesser talents, skill, or knowledge that can detract from their performance or that of others. This is the same approach that Don Clifton has always advocated, and its effectiveness is supported by decades of Gallup research.

This book and the strengths approach to achieving in academics, career, and beyond represent a revolutionary departure from traditional and counterproductive philosophies and practices. We hope that its principles resonate with you, and that you apply the strengths approach to achieving success in all of your life's endeavors!

—Edward "Chip" Anderson

# Chapter I

## The Nature of Strengths

At the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, Kerri Strug was a gymnast on the United States women's gold-medal team. Her performance on the vault, as she nursed an injured ankle, remains one of the most memorable in Olympic history.

With 32,000 people in the Georgia Dome and millions watching her on television, Kerri fell on her first attempt at her most difficult twisting vault, severely spraining her left ankle. With less than a minute between vaults, and in great pain, she again attempted the vault, further injuring her ankle — but this time successfully landing on both feet. So she stood erect on one foot, raising both hands to salute the judges, then collapsed to her knees.

The crowd went wild. Kerri's vault earned a 9.712, and the U.S. women won the gold medal.

During that same year, Kerri was a freshman at UCLA. One of her classes required a research paper similar to a mini-doctoral dissertation. Students had to formulate their own research question and develop a questionnaire that was consistent with their research question. Then, the students would administer the questionnaire, collect and analyze the data, draw conclusions, and write a report that described the process. The written report was to be 35-40 pages long.

Taking the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment was one of the class requirements. When Kerri took it, she scored extremely high in the Focus theme. But doesn't that make sense? Who else but a person with tremendous Focus talents could concentrate on completing her most difficult vault on an injured ankle in front of 32,000 screaming fans while Olympic gold hung in the balance? Who else could block out all of those distractions and then land on one foot without falling?

While Kerri certainly had other talents that enabled her to succeed, her Focus talents played a critical role. Without them, she might never have enjoyed such stunning Olympic success.

But there's more to the story. Toward the end of the fall term, as research papers were coming due, Kerri turned her paper in three days early, before any of the other 300-plus UCLA students in the class. She did this while traveling nearly every weekend on a national tour with fellow Olympic medalists. Even more remarkable was the way that Kerri could go out on an arena floor, do a routine, and then go underneath the stands and work on the paper. She would then go back out on the floor and do another routine and return to do more homework.

You see, Kerri also applied her Focus talents to succeed in academics.

Kerri is a remarkable young woman. But the excellence she achieved wasn't due simply to the fact that she naturally possessed talents. She recognized her Focus talents and built on them by adding skills and knowledge to create strength — the ability to produce consistent, near-perfect performance. She obviously did so at the Olympics — even while in severe pain and under tremendous pressure — but she was also able to apply her Focus in academics, where she achieved despite rigorous assignments and the myriad pressures of her athletic career.

Kerri has presented each of us with more than a shared pride in her Olympic success. We can learn from her. You, too, have talents. And in those talents you have the ability to meet challenges and achieve just as surely as Kerri did.

### The Basics of Strengths

#### Talent: The Beginning of Strength

What is a strength? That's a good question, but strength begins with talent, so let's start there. A talent is a naturally recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied. A great number of talents naturally exist within you, and each of them is very specific. They are among the most real and most authentic aspects of your personhood. Your specific set of talents is a major part of what makes you a unique person, and that uniqueness holds great value for you and those around you. And your talents work in various combinations each time you do something very well, in your own unique way.

There is a direct connection between your talents and your achievements. Your talents empower you. They make it possible for you to move to higher levels of excellence and fulfill your potential. This is why it is so important for you to know, understand, and value your talents.

A talent represents a capacity to *do* something. In fact, when you are able to do something very well, you can be sure that at least one of your talents is involved. Just think about all the things you do very well. You'll realize that you have many talents!

And talents help you do something well not just once; they help you do it well over and over again. Because talents are naturally recurring patterns, they are "automatic," almost like breathing, so they repeatedly help you achieve.

That's not all, either. Each of your many talents can enable you to do more than one thing very well. We're not saying that each of your talents enables you to do *everything* very well, but know that each of them can be applied to multiple areas of achievement.

The great value in your talents is not merely that they help you achieve, but that they help you achieve at levels of *excellence*. Your greatest talents are inextricably linked to your top achievements and to what you do best. Your talents make you exceptional. Therefore, coming to know, understand, and value your talents is directly linked to achieving in classes, careers, and throughout your life.

### **Talent Versus Other Concepts of Ability**

The concept of talent is more specific in terms of the quality it describes and the things that various types of talent help a person to do very well. Traditional concepts and measures of ability (for example, I.Q. and aptitude testing) are more global and are not designed to explain what a person can specifically do.

The concept of talent also goes beyond the limits of traditional concepts of academic abilities (for example, in the areas of reading, math, and composition) in that it also addresses the qualities that help a person achieve in all aspects of life.

### **The 34 Themes of Talent Measured by the Clifton StrengthsFinder**

What is a theme? Essentially, it's a group of similar talents.

Kerri Strug once again provides a good illustration. Kerri used a wide variety of talents in the Focus theme to achieve in athletics and academics. Among them was her talent for focusing on the precise steps required to perform complicated gymnastic maneuvers, and, during the intense pressure of the Olympics, her talent for blocking out the distraction of intense pain to produce a gold-medal performance.

Kerri used other types of talents, too. Her talents in the Adaptability theme enabled her to achieve excellence in athletics and academics at the same time. Her talent to balance two extremely high priorities, easily moving from one to the other, was crucial to her success in each area.

As a result of studying top achievers for more than three decades, Gallup was able to identify more than 400 themes of talent. The 34 most prevalent themes are measured by StrengthsFinder.

### **Back to Your Question: What Is a Strength?**

Now, let's go to the definition of a strength: A strength is the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity.

As you read earlier, the concept of strengths begins with talent. Each person naturally has a group of talents. Talents are like "diamonds in the rough," whereas strengths are like diamonds that show brilliance after they have been carefully cut and polished.

Your greatest areas of talent, your most likely sources of potential strengths, are identified by StrengthsFinder.

Just as finished diamonds start as diamonds in the rough, strengths begin with talents. And just as rough diamonds are naturally found in the earth, talents are naturally found within you. But while diamonds are refined with blades and polishing wheels, strengths are produced when talents are refined with *knowledge* and *skill*.

Unlike talent, which must naturally exist within you, skills and knowledge can be acquired. Skills are the basic ability to perform the specific steps of an activity. Knowledge consists of facts and lessons learned.

Many of the skills and much of the knowledge that are combined with talent to create a strength come through experience, and sometimes a great deal of it. Skills and knowledge are also developed in a "book learning" sense, such as in the academic arenas of high school, college, technical school, and training classes.

When you have supplemented your greatest talents with knowledge and skill to the point at which you can provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity, you have a strength. And in applying and even further refining your strengths, you move closer and closer to fulfilling your natural potential as an individual.

Each person has a unique and profound set and combination of talents that are developed and used to different degrees. This combination of talents makes each person like no other.

While each person defines success for himself or herself, achievement and excellence result from fully developing and applying strengths. Some roles require several strengths, all working together, to produce excellence.

You probably already have some strengths, and you certainly will have plenty of opportunity to develop more strengths throughout your lifetime.

### **What Do Strengths Produce?**

As you develop strengths by building on your greatest talents, achievements will naturally follow. But there is also a great sense of personal satisfaction that results from knowing that you are becoming more and more of whom you have the potential to be. In a sense, the development and application of strengths generate a feeling that you are fulfilling your personal destiny. This can produce enormous satisfaction and enhance the quality of your life.

While the experiences of individual people differ tremendously, most report that it is a rewarding experience to be fully living in tune with their natural talents by building and using strengths. Almost everyone says increased confidence and optimism as they become aware of, affirm, and celebrate their talents. Many describe the experience as "coming alive," or even feeling joy as they develop and apply strengths. Reports about the exact inner experiences may differ, but nearly everyone who develops and uses strengths reports a sense of positive and pleasant psychological rewards.

Our initial goal is for you to become more aware of your talents and your potential strengths. We hope you are filled with appreciation for your particular talents, for the positive differences they have already made in your life, and for the excellence strengths can produce in your future achievements, relationships, and other life experiences.

### **The Beauty of Strengths: Angel's Story**

Angel Alcoser is an extraordinarily talented educator. She stands in front of her bilingual kindergarten/first-grade class and performs her role with poise, grace, and excellence — yet with no formal training.

Angel obtained an "emergency credential" to teach the year she graduated from college. She hadn't taken any courses in curriculum design, teaching methods, or assessment. But somehow she knew what to do and performed as if she were a magician generating one creative learning activity after another.

At the beginning of one class, which two visitors were observing, Angel stood before the children and said, "Boys and girls, would you like to perform for our guests?"



With a rousing "Yes," the children lined up.

As Angel walked over to the tape recorder on a table by the wall, every eye was on her. She pushed the "play" button, and with the first note, the children burst into a breathtaking show of song and dance. The visitors were moved, even spellbound.

Angel later explained how she prepared to do her work as an educator. She related a story about the children, the potential she saw in each one of them, and how she tried to involve parents and make her classroom like a family. Then, she talked about how essential it was to connect with every child, emphasizing the importance of seeing each one as a unique person.

"Most of the children in my class come from very humble homes," Angel said. "Some are neglected; some are abused. But," she asserted, "I can't control much of what goes on outside of my class. I do what I can. Once they are in my class, they are all safe. In my class, they can grow to be more than they have ever been."

Angel continued, "I don't focus on what they don't have. I focus on who they are and what they have to offer. I challenge the students to see what they do have, not what they don't. I want them to see that each of them has something that makes them special. They are each talented in some way. Some of the children are great storytellers; others seem to be natural leaders; still others are wonderful organizers. Regardless of the type of talent, I start with the child and what each of them can do best."

How does Angel recognize the children's talents?

"I listen. I look. I see them. I work at it every day! Almost every day, I stay after class. I sit in the classroom and meditate about each child. I let my imagination go and imagine each child both in terms of who they are now and the person they can become."

Angel spoke glowingly about one young lady in her class, who often wore a little blue cap that flopped over her ears. The girl, Delia, carried an old file folder with accordion sides. "She's from a very humble home," Angel said. "It's only her and her mother, who sells oranges on street corners. They are very poor. But Delia has a dream that one day she will become a doctor. Every day, she picks up papers and stuffs them in her little folder. She does this because she pretends that she is already in college and that those papers are the homework assignments for her college classes."

At the end of the school year, Angel presided over the children's graduation ceremony. Each child was encouraged to invite one or more family members, and this really excited the children. More than 30 people attended. The children performed as a group with dance and music, singing alternately in English and Spanish.

The formal graduation ceremony began with the children taking their little chairs and making a large circle in the middle of the room. Angel stepped into the middle of the circle carrying a large box. Then, she called every child's name one by one, and each one went up to the box and pulled out a picture frame containing a piece of paper with printing and handwriting, a picture in the middle, and brightly colored stars around the border.

As the children got their framed pieces of paper, they turned and walked back to their chairs and handed their framed works of art to the parents and other guests they had invited.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, Angel read what was on the framed pieces of paper:

*"I was born to dream big dreams. I would like to be \_\_\_\_\_ when I grow up."*

In the blank space, each child wrote his or her goal, the career they hoped to pursue. Then, there was the picture of the child, beneath which these words appeared in bold print: "Yes, I can do it. Give me your unconditional love and

tell me every day that I was born to do beautiful things. With much love." And then there was a line where each child wrote his or her name.

### **The Best of the Best All Have One Thing in Common**

Angel Alcoser, in both her excellence in teaching and her approach to students, exemplifies what Gallup has discovered through more than two million in-depth interviews with people from all walks of life: Top achievers in virtually every profession, career, and field of achievement all build their lives upon their talents.

This simple but profound finding forms the heart of this book. You see, Angel isn't one of the "best of the best" by accident. She has achieved excellence because she has capitalized on her talents. In fact, she has built her teaching strategies, even her whole life, on her talents.

### **Findings From Gallup's Study of the Best**

Here is what Gallup knows about top achievers: *They fully recognize their talents and build on them to develop strengths.* In contrast, underachievers, the merely average, and even above-average achievers often fail to recognize their powerful talents and develop strengths. But the best achievers are certain to do so.

*Top achievers apply their greatest talents in roles that best suit them.* Clearly, to achieve, one must apply his or her abilities, and many do so to some level of success. But the best apply their most naturally powerful talents and do so in roles that are best suited to those talents. The ability to achieve with excellence in one area is not proof of the ability to perform equally well in another area. A proper "fit" between an individual's talents and the task at hand is essential.

*Top achievers invent ways to apply their greatest talents to their achievement tasks.* Every role, position, and career entails a group of tasks that must be completed, and quite often the person who performs them must consciously seek, even invent, ways to apply his or her talents to that end — even when one's role is well suited to his or her talents.

### **How Angel Alcoser Uses Three of Her Signature Themes**

Angel took the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment, which identifies the user's top five themes of talent — their Signature Themes. In both her role as an educator and her personal life, she primarily uses strengths that she has developed from talents in three of her Signature Themes.

1. **Maximizer:** People exceptionally talented in the Maximizer theme focus on strengths as a way to stimulate personal and group excellence. They seek to transform something strong into something superb.
2. **Connectedness:** People exceptionally talented in the Connectedness theme have faith in the links between all things. They believe there are few coincidences and that almost every event has a reason.
3. **Developer:** People exceptionally talented in the Developer theme recognize and cultivate the potential in others. They spot the signs of each small improvement and derive satisfaction from these improvements.

You can easily see how Angel used Maximizer and Developer talents as she worked with the children. Remember that she said that she focused on who the children were, rather than who they weren't. Angel started out with the correct assumption that each child had unique and powerful talents.

Angel's ability to perceive talent in the children, to notice progress, and to mirror what she sees in each child are not coincidences. Angel has an abundance of talent within the Developer and Maximizer themes.

Angel's Connectedness talents are reflected in her determination to connect with children and their families. Connectedness also comes into play as she sets up her classroom with a family atmosphere.

Mostly, Angel's Connectedness talents are revealed in the way she meditates after school and envisions each child. She is looking for talents within each child and for the role she can play in their development. Her Connectedness talents enable her to see a bigger picture, a grand plan.

What makes Angel Alcoser such an outstanding educator starts with who she is as a person. Her natural talents are the source of her excellence. She is simply being her true self. Understand this: Top achievers fully develop whatever talents they happen to possess and apply the resulting strengths in a way that positively impacts their role or the task at hand.

### **The Tragedy of Undiscovered Talents**

Less than five miles from where Angel first taught, there is another elementary school. A young girl by the name of Leonor was a student there in the 1950s. When Leonor was 10 years old, she and her parents emigrated to the United States from Mexico. She had done very well in school in her native country, but she didn't know any English, so classes in the United States would be much more difficult for her. Nevertheless, she was anxious to go to school, because it had always been a positive experience for her in Mexico.

In fact, Leonor had always had a secret desire to become a teacher. She had two great aunts who were teachers, and she greatly admired them. Because she could neither read nor write in English, Leonor was held back and repeated the fourth grade. Her fourth-grade teacher volunteered to stay after school to help her learn English. Leonor worked hard throughout elementary, junior high, and high school. In her sophomore, junior, and senior years, Leonor earned almost straight A's, and each year she was on the honor roll and in the Honors Society. She graduated near the top of her class.

Unfortunately, Leonor never had a teacher like Angel, who could lead her to discover her natural talents. And despite the fact that she was an honor student, no one ever asked if she might be interested in attending college.

The year Leonor graduated from high school, her father lost his job. So Leonor found work in a business close to her home and would turn her paycheck over to her parents so they could pay the rent and buy food for the whole family.

For the next 33 years, Leonor toiled in the banking industry and hated almost every day of it. What's incredibly sad is that Leonor was convinced that she had no talents.

The tragedy for Leonor wasn't in where she worked or what she did. Banking is a fine and respectable profession in which many people thrive and are quite happy; Leonor herself advanced to vice president and administrative manager of a branch office. Clearly, Leonor achieved, and she didn't squander 33 years in banking. But those years could have been immensely more fulfilling if Leonor had been aware of her natural talents. Fortunately, in recent years, Leonor has gone through the process of discovering the talents she has had from the beginning, refining and building on them to create strengths, and applying those strengths. Following her talents, Leonor has transitioned from banking into teaching, where she is experiencing joy and excitement like she never has before.

### **Your Strengths Quest Begins With You**

As described earlier, the seeds of your personal greatness — your talents — are already in you. Therefore, your strengths quest — your quest to achieve excellence and become all you can be through your own natural talents — is really a quest to discover, develop, and apply who you truly are. Your strengths quest begins as you look within yourself as an individual to recognize your own natural talents.

Your quest will then continue as you build on your talents to develop strengths — abilities to provide consistent, near-perfect performances in specific activities. As you do this, your self-identity and personal values should

become clearer, and as a result, you will likely become more confident, optimistic, and focused. As you achieve through your greatest talents, you will likely aspire to higher goals.

Your strengths quest is a lifelong adventure. Each of the three aspects — discovery, development, and application — will continue throughout your life. This exciting and fulfilling process should bring you a lifetime of great satisfaction and joy.

## **Chapter II**

### **Gaining Direction for Your Quest**

A strengths quest is a revolutionary approach to achieving. Why? Because adopting a strengths perspective to your life and fully embracing it has a radical impact on your motivation. So, what exactly are the connections between your strengths quest and your motivations?

#### **1. Your quest addresses your questions.**

Most great scholars know that motivation to conduct research, and to learn in general, stems from personally meaningful questions to which they want to find answers.

#### **2. Your quest is an adventure of discovery.**

A quest is motivating simply because of the adventure and the discoveries you will make along the way. The first adventure is discovering your talents — but that is only the beginning. Then, there are discoveries and insights that will come to you as you gain a strengths perspective on your entire life. Suddenly, you will begin to understand the connection between your talents and your past achievements.

#### **3. Your quest generates optimism.**

As you become increasingly aware of your talents, you'll develop more optimistic, because you realize that you have abilities you can use in pursuing your goals. This alone builds motivation because you recognize that in your talents, you in fact have assets that can help you reach your desired goals.

#### **4. Your quest provides a sense of direction.**

Being lost is a dreadful experience. One of the most motivating aspects of a strengths quest is the increased sense of direction that comes as you gain a greater understanding of who you are.

#### **5. Your quest generates confidence.**

As you become increasingly aware of your talents and as you develop strengths, you will become more aware of your potential for excellence. As a result, you'll gain confidence.

#### **6. Your quest generates a sense of vitality.**

Whenever you use your greatest talents, there is a psychological reward — you receive both satisfaction and motivation. The pleasurable experience of using those talents seems to reach some of your deepest motivations. When you are using your most natural talents, you seem to become more fully alive.

### **Your Signature Themes Report**

Let's turn now to your Signature Themes report, which you received after completing the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment.

As described earlier, your Signature Themes are your five most dominant themes of talent, as indicated by your responses to the assessment. They are presented in rank order, with your most dominant theme listed first. Each Signature Theme is accompanied by a description of the talents in that theme.

Some people are concerned about receiving only their top five themes. That's understandable, but Gallup research clearly points to the fact that the top achievers focus on their most dominant areas of talent, and we would like you to do the same. Attempting to focus on too many themes can dilute the attention you give to your top themes. Also, we don't want you to fall prey to the conventional "wisdom" that the best way to achieve is to emphasize your areas of lesser talent. We want you to hone in on your Signature Themes — your greatest areas of talent — which present your best opportunities to achieve.

### **What Should You Do With Your Signature Themes Report?**

The rest of this book is devoted to answering this question. But there are two things that we would like you to do as soon as possible.

First, please print a copy of your report, and carefully read the descriptions of each of your Signature Themes. Please underline or highlight each term, phrase, and sentence that seems to describe you.

Next, contact the three people who know you best, and read each of your Signature Themes and their descriptions. After reading each description, please ask these people if they see that theme in you. If they say yes, ask them to give you an example of when they have seen it in you. If any of them answer no, simply move on to the next Signature Theme.

You are a talented person with a unique and very special set of talents. Now, it's time to learn more about them and gain further direction for your strengths quest by affirming your Signature Themes.

## Chapter III

### Affirming and Celebrating Your Talents

You have taken the Clifton StrengthsFinder, received your Signature Themes report, and discussed your Signature Themes with three people who know you very well. Now, it's time for you to affirm the Signature Themes indicated by your StrengthsFinder responses.

Affirming a Signature Theme simply means that you *agree* that it is one of your dominant areas of talent. It also means being able to see how your talent in that theme enables you to do certain things very well. Affirming your Signature Themes may seem easy, but many people experience some difficulty in doing so. Listed below are some of those difficulties and the reasons for them.

#### Difficulties in Affirming Our Signature Themes

1. *Many people are blind to their own greatest talents, and often to the greatest talents of others.* Some of our talents are called upon so frequently that we take them for granted. We don't consider them special, and we don't even perceive them as talents. Consequently, our Signature Themes may not seem important, valuable, or even special to us.
2. *Our talents sometimes threaten others. Rather than admit their insecurity, some people criticize us for having talents they wish they had.* As a result, we might mistakenly come to think that our Signature Themes hold weaknesses rather than talents.
3. *In some cases, we end up in positions or roles that simply don't fit our dominant talents.* Or, those talents may conflict with the roles and expectations of the positions we are in. This can make us feel like there is something wrong with us. But the problem may only be a mismatch between our dominant talents and the expectations of a role we are in.
4. *The fear of becoming proud and arrogant may interfere with seeing and affirming our Signature Themes.* In reality, pride and arrogance often stem from feelings of inadequacy. Affirming our dominant areas of talent usually results in humble gratitude for having been blessed with them.
5. *Some people have difficulty affirming their Signature Themes because they don't see how the talents in them will help them achieve their goals.* If that is the case, they will benefit from a better understanding of their talents. Talents are always valuable, and they can often be applied toward achievement in less obvious, or even surprising, ways.

#### Questions You Might Be Asking

##### **If a Particular Theme Is Not Among Your Signature Themes, Is It Necessarily an Area of Weakness?**

No. The Clifton StrengthsFinder *does not* simultaneously measure weakness and talent. StrengthsFinder measures talent, and that's all it does. So, if a particular theme is not among your Signature Themes, it simply means that at least five other themes are more dominant in you. For example, your Responsibility theme might not be among your Signature Themes. That doesn't mean you are irresponsible. It just means that your overall talents in at least five other themes are more dominant than those in your Responsibility theme.

By focusing on your Signature Themes, you will concentrate your attention on where you have the greatest potential for achieving excellence and personal fulfillment. Focusing on any other area may serve as nothing more than a distraction.

### **What If You Believe You Have Dominant Talent in a Theme That Was Not Identified as a Signature Theme?**

Our response is simple and direct: Claim it! Affirm and celebrate your talents in that theme, then build on them to fully develop and apply strengths. Just remember that we limited your Signature Themes to five because focusing on your *most* dominant areas of talent will provide the greatest opportunities for achievement.

### **Is Having Talent Always a Positive Experience?**

Talent is always positive in the sense that it enables a person to do certain things very well. Your talents always hold potential for positive results in terms of achievements, success, personal fulfillment, and a better quality of life.

At the same time, talents place demands on the people who have them. And from that standpoint, talents can present a bit of a challenge.

Some people honestly say that they wish that their talents weren't so powerful in certain themes because they make their lives more demanding. They simply may experience more pressure because other people place higher expectations on them to achieve.

### **Action Items**

To get your personal action items for this chapter, log on to [www.strengthsquest.com](http://www.strengthsquest.com) and click Strengths, then Student Action Items.



## Chapter IV

# Relationships From the Strengths Perspective

When we first began to talk to college students about strengths, an interesting thing happened. All along we had been focusing on how discovering talents and developing strengths could lead to excellence in terms of academic success in college. Our research had shown that this was indeed happening. But when we talked to students who had been through some of the earliest strengths-development programs with us, they always began by telling us how it had affected their relationships with others. A word that kept coming up in their conversations was "see."

Students told us that as a result of focusing on talents — the foundation of strengths — they were seeing themselves in a new way, as individuals with powerful talents in particular areas. Qualities that they'd been forever teased about or criticized for were seen from a different angle — as their greatest talents and their potential for strengths.

They told us they saw others differently as well — in light of *their* talents. Behaviors that used to annoy or irritate them simply because they were unfamiliar were seen from a different perspective and recognized as talents that could lead to excellence. Conflicts with others that previously had been viewed as crises or disasters were now regarded as opportunities to find common ground, because they realized they now had a new way of understanding others who were different from themselves.

We were thrilled! This new way of seeing things was a bonus, an unexpected finding. Psychologists have always emphasized that seeing things from a different perspective — what is sometimes called "reframing" — could help resolve conflicts and improve relationships. We knew this could be a powerful insight for students.

Chip Anderson, one of the authors of this book, took this insight and decided to apply it in a compelling way. We were gathered at a large conference for college faculty and staff. In walked Chip, larger than life, carrying sacks of colorful plastic glasses. As he handed them out to everyone in the room, he shared insights about how becoming aware of one's talents and seeing the areas of greatest talent in others could lead to dramatic changes in relationships. He challenged all of us to see our students through "strengths-colored glasses" and discover for ourselves how this would change and enrich our interactions with them and our ways of educating them.

Sadly, Chip died in July of 2005. At his funeral, some of the educators who had attended this conference brought those same plastic glasses with them. They told others how that simple visual image had been a turning point for them both professionally and personally.

So imagine you have in your hands a new pair of glasses. Put them on for a while and see how your world changes.

### **The Lenses of Reality**

Part of being human is having a lens through which we view reality. An old Chinese proverb states, "Two thirds of what we see is behind our eyes." Our family of origin and our culture have crafted these lenses to a certain extent, as have our own experiences and thoughts. Our lenses determine how we emotionally respond to an event; the same incident can happen to two people who interpret it very differently, leading them to respond differently as well.

For example: Jake, Mike, and Tim are buddies who are supposed to meet at the local coffee house to work on a class project. Jake and Tim are there on time, but Mike is 30 minutes late. Jake shrugs it off — after all, who knows the things that might have come up at the last minute? But Tim, who sees through different lenses, is fuming. He's frustrated and angry at what he sees as Mike's lack of consideration.

Now take the situation and heighten the sensitivities and even prejudices. When we don't know someone very well and the person is different from us, we may tend to jump to some conclusions about him or her based on what we *can* see — general appearance, hairstyle, accent, demeanor, race, or gender. So suppose Mike is someone from class

who has been assigned to a group project with Jake and Tim. Mike commutes from off-campus because he has a part-time job and can't afford to live in the residence hall; also, he was born and raised in a "sleepy" rural town. Mike is 30 minutes late and saunters into the coffee house, sliding casually into a comfortable position on the nearest couch. How will Jake's and Tim's lenses interpret what they see? What prejudicial conclusions might they draw about Mike's commitment to the group project?

Now, suppose for a minute that in the same class the professor had taken the time to explain to students how talents affect relationships. Further, suppose the professor had designed some group exercises that would help the students get to know one another and figure out how they could best use their talents to work together. With those talent insights in mind, when Mike slides onto the couch 30 minutes late, Jake and Tim are laughing good-naturedly. That's because two of Mike's Signature Themes are Adaptability and Input. Not uncharacteristically, Mike had lost track of time while his Input talents drove him to surf the Internet for in-depth and comprehensive research for the group project. Jake and Tim were eager to hear about what he had found.

### **Seeing Differently**

There are three ways that we see people's vision changing when they wear strengths-colored glasses: (1) they see themselves differently, (2) they see their futures differently, and (3) they see others differently.

### **Seeing Yourself Differently**

We each have a view of ourselves that has developed since early in life. This view, known as our self-concept, is how we answer the question "Who am I?" In many ways, it determines the lens through which we view others and the world as a whole. When our self-concept is mostly negative, we tend to see others negatively as well and view the world pessimistically. When our self-concept is mostly positive, we give others the benefit of the doubt, are more optimistic about the future and the world, and enjoy more positive relationships. As the author Anais Nin has said, "We don't see things as they are. We see them as *we* are."

Self-concept is a combination of what other people have told us about ourselves, what we have discovered about ourselves through our experiences of success and failure, what we've learned about ourselves as we compare ourselves to others, and what our culture has told us about ourselves. We are bombarded with advertising that encourages us to compare ourselves to others who are prettier, smarter, more athletic, make more money, or are with someone more attractive. Too often the focus is on who you *aren't* rather than on who you are. This focus on "not enough" is meant to get us to buy things, but it has the side effect of shaping our view of ourselves and the lens through which we view others.

### **The Impact of Culture on Self-Concept**

Our culture contributes to our self-concept by sending us messages about what is most valued by others in the culture and by providing role models. Some cultures emphasize independence, being your own person, and making your own way, while others stress your connections to others and what you contribute to your family or to society. These become lenses through which you view yourself and others, and by which you make judgments about those who are different.

When you learn to take a strengths approach to life, you see yourself through a different set of lenses. Where you once focused on all the things you couldn't do as well as someone else, you now see that there are areas of talent within you that have always been there and that flourish best in certain kinds of environments. Where before you might have been afraid to try new things, now you realize that you are capable of succeeding in your areas of greatest talent — so you have the courage to rise to the occasion as you recognize where your talents are needed. As a result, we've found that college students who are aware of their most powerful talents and who learn how to develop strengths become much more self-confident, which in turn provides the motivation to take on new challenges and achieve excellence.

## Self-Knowledge and Self-Acceptance

The foundation of mental health is self-knowledge and self-acceptance: knowing who you are and being okay with that. Healthy relationships depend on being comfortable enough with yourself that you are able to share yourself with another person. Optimal functioning — getting the most out of your life — starts with a realistic awareness of who you are and what you have to offer others. "Love your neighbor as yourself," a value that is common to many faith traditions, is built on the assumption that you cannot love someone else until you love yourself — not in an egotistical, self-absorbed way, but genuinely appreciating who you are inside your own skin. That's where it all starts.

Self-awareness means you see your talents and strengths clearly, but it also means you are aware of your weaknesses. By weaknesses we simply mean *any lack of knowledge, skill, or talent that negatively affects your performance or that of others*. Note that areas of lesser talent are not the same as weaknesses. For example, a doctor who can't carry a tune does not have a weakness; she just has lesser talent in singing. But if that same doctor possesses lesser talents in communicating, that's a weakness — it interferes with her ability to effectively communicate with her patients.

Weaknesses can't be ignored, because they prevent you or another person from performing with strength. Focusing on building strengths does not mean your weaknesses no longer matter. The difference is that you now see these weaknesses as obstacles to be managed, skills to be learned, or knowledge to be acquired. A large part of the secret of success in life is learning to apply your areas of greatest talent to manage your weaknesses.

Here's an example: Suppose the same doctor recognizes that her lack of clear communication with her patients hampers her effectiveness as a physician. She can manage this weakness in any number of ways. One way is to partner with someone else; she could choose to hire an outstanding empathic communicator as a personal assistant who is always in the room with her when she needs to talk to her patients. This partnership is not particularly cost-effective, but it is one way to proactively manage the weakness.

The second option is to recognize that though consistently near-perfect communication requires exceptional communication talents, skills can be learned, allowing the doctor to at least improve her communication.

This doctor, whose greatest talents happen to be in the Strategic and Analytical themes, weighs the evidence and realizes that effectively communicating with her patients is crucial to helping them heal quickly. So she learns some basic communication skills and asks her head nurse, a somewhat more talented communicator, to follow up with all her patients to ensure that they have understood her instructions to them

This doctor has used her Strategic and Analytical talents to see that there is a problem, and to recognize that she must keep clear communication at the forefront of her mind because it will help her be more effective. Will she ever be a world-class communicator — communicating at the level of strength? Probably not. But she can learn to strategically manage her relationships with patients and become a more effective doctor by gaining some fundamental communication skills.

This whole process of learning about yourself, of becoming more self-aware, is a key task during the college years. It's one that takes a while to master. Benjamin Franklin once said, "There are three things extremely hard: steel, a diamond, and to know one's self." In our research with college students, we've found that those who like learning about themselves are those who gain the most from a strengths approach to their education and their relationships. When you start seeing yourself as possessing natural and exceptional talents, you realize you are already on the way toward achieving your goals.

## Seeing Your Future Differently

Once you see yourself differently — as a person with valuable talents — you also begin to see your future differently. Hazel Markus, a psychologist at Stanford University, refers to the concept of "possible selves," which

are ideas you have about what you might become in the future. Her research shows that having this vision of what one can become motivates students to set and achieve goals.

Students who view themselves from a strengths perspective see many possible selves that they could become. Markus and her colleagues have demonstrated that programs that help students see these possible selves lead to higher grades and a greater likelihood of graduating from college.

This vision for the future generates hope. Rick Snyder and Shane Lopez, two psychologists at the University of Kansas, have studied hope in college students. They've found that the level of hope a student possesses predicts how well that student will do in college and how likely he or she is to graduate.

But hope doesn't just affect your grades and graduation chances; having a high level of hope also is related to better health, a stronger sense of purpose in life, higher self-esteem, and less depression. Snyder and Lopez also discovered that an awareness of your talents and strengths creates pathways that lead to hope. You're far more likely to feel hopeful about the future if you see yourself as possessing the talents to get there.

### **Seeing Others Differently**

Not only do you start seeing yourself and your future differently as a result of strengths-colored glasses; you also see those around you differently. As you begin to think seriously about the unique constellation of talents that you have, you recognize that other people each have their own unique combination of talents as well. You begin to see them through a different lens. The things that used to annoy or irritate you are now seen as the very things that make the other person productive or successful.

This reframing may start with your roommate, if you live on campus, or with the people you share space with off campus. Learning to live with someone new, particularly someone who is a total stranger, can be challenging. The list of potential roommate gripes is long: One of you prefers to get up early to study, while the other is a night owl who likes to study very late at night. One is a neat freak; the other is the world's biggest slob. You may have differing needs for privacy, may prefer quiet or noise, and have different tastes in friends and music.

But when you start seeing your roommate through strengths-colored glasses, you learn that her greatest talents lie in the area of Discipline, for instance — which you previously saw only as her annoyingly compulsive neatness, her regular routine and schedule for everything, and the way she gets upset when you bring your friends into the room for a party during her scheduled study time. Now you realize that those talents are not only what enable her to make the grade as a pre-med major, but also could be of help to you as you are trying to juggle all the demands of your own schedule. You realize that by communicating clearly with her in advance about your plans, there really are very few remaining areas of conflict.

Not only do you view your roommate differently when you start seeing through strengths-colored glasses; you also start seeing your family differently. Mark Twain famously said, "When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years." Seeing your parents differently will happen naturally in the college years. But seeing all members of your family differently will happen more quickly when you view them in light of their talents and strengths. By sharing with them your areas of greatest talent, they may begin relating to you differently as well.

We have worked with parents as part of the strengths approach to the first-year experience in colleges. Sometimes today's parents are labeled "helicopter parents" — they hover protectively around their son or daughter even when the child has left for college, often rushing to the rescue in inappropriate ways. We heard of one first-year student in Michigan who couldn't find the building where his first class was scheduled. He called his mother in Georgia on his cell phone and she downloaded a campus map off of the Internet, giving him directions until he found the classroom.

For helicopter parents, viewing their children as independent adults is a difficult task. But once they start seeing their son or daughter through the lens of strengths, they realize their child has talents that will enable him or her to survive in the world. One parent said to us, "My son has some abilities I never knew he had. He has powerful

Developer talents: I used to see that as taking too long to finish things and taking too much time with people who were struggling. Now I see how many people he has helped and how much other students here enjoy having him around. He views life and the world differently than me; understanding this will help me support him as he launches out on his own."

Seeing the significant people in your life differently also extends to those you are interested in dating — or to whom you are already married. When you care about someone, you want to see them become all that they are capable of being. When you see someone as exceptionally talented in the Empathy or Relator theme, for instance, it's harder to objectify them — they are still physically attractive to you, but you begin to relate to them as a unique human being that you want to know and understand more fully.

Marriage researcher John Gottman has made headlines with his ability to accurately predict couples who are likely to divorce just by watching how they interact with one another for as little as 15 minutes. When he first started his research, he studied failed marriages to learn something about successful ones, assuming that happy marriages were simply the opposite of unhappy marriages.

Gottman knew that in unhappy marriages both partners tended to have distorted and negative views of each other; they were often highly critical of one another. So he assumed that in happy marriages each person saw the other "realistically" and accurately. But he was wrong! In studying the really happy marriages, he noticed an intriguing dynamic: The husband saw his wife as possessing more talents and strengths than she saw herself possessing — and vice versa. It was as if they were seeing each other through rose-colored glasses — or as we would say, through "strengths-colored" glasses.

This is why studying success makes so much more sense than studying failure. Gottman and his colleagues would've missed this important point about happy marriages if they were focused on only the unhappy ones.

## **Cleaning Your Glasses**

When asked what makes life meaningful, most people mention satisfying relationships before anything else. Ed Diener, a psychologist who has studied well-being across dozens of different countries, has found that only one factor consistently predicted feelings of well-being in every country he studied: social relationships.

The quality of your life is directly related to the quality of your relationships. So here are some tips for *how to clean your glasses* and see things from a different perspective that will enable you to have more satisfying relationships with others for a lifetime. To help you remember the connection between these five tips and "seeing," we've started each tip with a "C." (Excuse the aural pun — one of us has Ideation as a Signature Theme!)

### **1. Connect.**

Start by recognizing how important it is to your physical and mental health that you have solid relationships with others. Relationships matter — not just for those who are in a new environment or are lonely, but also for those who have worked at the same job for decades or have been married a long time. You are more productive at work, get sick less, and change jobs less often when you have solid relationships with your boss and co-workers. Research shows that as a student you'll miss fewer classes, learn more, and be more likely to graduate if you develop relationships with your professors, other students in your classes, and students in campus organizations.

**With Professors.** Richard Light, a professor at Harvard University, was part of a team that interviewed hundreds of successful students. The best advice these students offered to new students was to get to know their professors. One of the many beneficial results of developing a relationship with at least one professor each semester is the possibility of eight or more letters of reference and connections to jobs and grad schools when graduation rolls around. But more importantly, seeing your professors as unique human beings — many of whom have some of their greatest talents in the Learner theme — can help you learn better. After you've spent time with your professors and have come to know them as unique human beings whom you respect, you'll feel more comfortable asking questions in

class or going to their offices to discuss something that sparked your interest. You'll become more engaged in your own learning because you have a relationship with the people who are there to facilitate your learning.

Some of the newest brain research shows that learning involves both emotional and intellectual connections. When you connect learning to *who you are* and *who you are in relationship with*, the learning process becomes personal, which makes it not only more enjoyable but more efficient and effective. So find out what makes your professors tick — ask them what they enjoy most about their work. See them as the unique persons they are — with particular constellations of talents and ways of seeing the world. Think about how knowing them as individuals helps you to relate to them and learn more from them.

**With Other Students.** Being able to connect to others and work well together is one of the most prized abilities that employers are looking for in new hires, according to research conducted by the National Association of College Employers. Those who have learned how their talents interact with the talents of others and what brings out their best are in a better position to connect.

This interdependence is a hallmark of a mature person; there is the recognition that other people are necessary in order to produce excellence. Knowing you have similar areas of exceptional talent gives you common ground for connecting. For instance, if both you and someone you meet in class are particularly talented in the Achiever theme, you understand each other's need for goals and you appreciate each other's commitment to hard work.

But if one of you is highly talented in Achiever and the other's top theme is Arranger, you can also recognize the potential power of partnering with one another. You recognize that although you approach life differently when it comes to goal-setting and structure, you both have in common the fact that you respond well under stress. Working on a group project together, the achiever can keep the group on task and map out all the things that need to be done, while the arranger can deal with the unexpected things that happen at the last minute, juggling all the pieces to pull the project together and turn it in on time.

## 2. Communicate.

While we've pointed out that teamwork is highly prized by employers, organizations most desire people with the ability to communicate. Surveys of top executives in the world's best companies have shown that these high flyers believe their communication abilities were the number-one factor that led them to the top.

So what are the building blocks of good communication?

**Respect.** The foundation of communication is respect for the person with whom you are communicating. Seeing each person as unique and of value enables you to communicate on an equal footing. Researchers believe one of the most basic building blocks of effective communication is this ability to see the other person as unique and of value.

This respect for the other person means that the first step in good communication is listening. Stephen Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, says, "If I were to summarize in one sentence the single most important principle I have learned in the field of interpersonal relations, it would be this: Seek first to understand, then to be understood."

**Listening.** Seeking first to understand — before making sure that the other person understands you — means that you listen more than you talk. Referring back to the survey of top executives, research shows that on a typical day the average executive spends 60% of his or her time listening to others. Active listening is the term that describes what good listening is all about. It doesn't mean you sit there silently; you are actively involved in trying to understand where the other person is coming from. You listen for the meaning and the emotion behind the words. You are able to put into your own words what you've heard them say, rather than rehearsing what you are going to say next.

The Chinese character for "listen" reflects their cultural view that listening is a whole-body experience. The character is a combination of the characters for ears, eyes, heart, and undivided attention. The next time you're in a conversation with someone, let the other person speak first, and with your whole body listen actively to what they have to say. Notice the nonverbal cues they give you — how her arms are crossed or his foot is tapping. Try to understand what the other person may be feeling — what the Native American culture sometimes refers to as "walking a moon in my neighbor's moccasins." Realize that other cultures may value certain types of communication differently; as a result, persons from some cultures may forcefully argue an issue with you, while those from other cultures may prefer to save face or avoid eye contact when conflict arises.

**What You Say and How You Say It.** Communication is not just about listening, though. It's also about what you say and how you say it. Because our brains seem to be wired to pick up negative cues more easily than positive ones — and we tend to interpret negative communication as evidence of people's "true character" — it isn't enough to learn positive communication habits. We also have to learn to avoid the negative ones. In the most successful relationships, the ratio of positive to negative statements that couples make to each other is 5:1, according to John Gottman. Marriage experts Clifford Notarius and Howard Markman say it more boldly: "One zinger will erase 20 acts of kindness."

Those zingers are part of a negative communication pattern that demonstrate a lack of respect for the other person — a belief that your needs are more important than theirs or that the other person is not your equal in some way. Gottman says that *criticism, hostility, defensiveness, and stonewalling (refusing to talk things out)* are deadly to relationships. In fact, he calls these behaviors "the four horsemen of the Apocalypse," because they are such harbingers of doom.

**Positive Communication.** So what do positive communication abilities look like, and how do they compare to the negative ones? It's not just refraining from criticism or hostility — although that's a good start that will keep you physically as well as emotionally healthy!

Positive communication involves sharing yourself and your feelings with another person. This self-disclosure is part of what author Harriet Lerner calls "the dance of intimacy." When you first get to know someone, each person tends to share something about themselves that is fairly superficial — where they're from, what their major is, or how many siblings they have. Then the dance begins; as each person shares something a little more meaningful about themselves, the other person reciprocates. One shares that they are a first-generation college student; the other shares that this is their first time they've been away from home for more than a week. Each person shares something a little more meaningful about themselves in proportion to what the other person shares.

Going too deep too soon can scare the other person. Somehow, communicating that you are a recovering addict when the other person has simply shared that he is a big fan of the Boston Red Sox can put an end to the conversation, and even to the budding relationship. But if you continue to share only superficially when the other person has started to share something a little more meaningful, that can also put an end to the conversation. That's why Lerner calls it a dance — the interaction is almost choreographed in steps that enable people to mirror one another and develop a deeper relationship while still feeling comfortable and secure.

Self-disclosure often happens most effectively when people talk to one another about their talents. For example, when someone with exceptional Intellection talents is able to explain how much he or she enjoys mulling things over, the person with powerful Communication talents realizes that what originally seemed like an awkward silence between them is really just the other person taking time to carefully think about an issue before talking about it. Suddenly the silence is seen as valuable and as an indication that there is thinking going on.

**Validation.** Positive communication also involves letting people know you have heard them and understand them — regardless of whether you agree with them. Validation is an important human requirement; we all need to know that we matter to someone else and that our opinions count. Effective communicators find common ground. They look for areas of agreement and search for win-win solutions to problems. They let others know they respect their opinions and care enough to stay in the conversation. Rather than trying to change the other person, they focus on

understanding where the other person is coming from and what kind of solution will enable them to continue working together.

Knowing the Signature Themes of the other person can be helpful in this process. When you learn that your friend's greatest talents lie in the Restorative theme, for instance, you can affirm his or her terrific problem-solving abilities. You also know that their commitment to your relationship will be strong even if things are strained between you, because they love to "bring things back to life." They'll stay in the conversation with you, even though your friend's emphasis may be on the problems in your relationship and what it will take to fix them.

### **3. Collaborate.**

Earlier we mentioned how important it is to make connections with other people. This is especially true when you are in a learning environment. And with the rapid pace of change in our society, virtually every environment has become a learning environment.

**Cooperative Learning.** Cooperative learning is one of the best ways to capitalize on talents and optimize your learning. It starts with the recognition that learning is not a one-way street — it's not about the professor transmitting knowledge to the student. Learning is more complex: Students learn from professors, but professors also learn from students, and students learn from each other. Particularly in a culture as diverse as ours, there is a richness of experience that each member of a class brings to the learning environment. When we are able to hear these different voices and learn of perspectives on the world that are different from our own, our brain power expands exponentially.

In essence, all learning starts with dissonance — a realization that something is not what you thought it was. When your brain tries to figure out what's different and how it might be related to what you already know, an amazing amount of learning occurs. When the recognition of those differences happens in the context of positive emotions, our capability expands even further. Barbara Fredrickson at the University of Michigan calls this the "broaden and build" theory. That is, positive emotions open people's receptivity to new ideas and result in greater levels of creativity and problem-solving. Learning about one another and seeing each other's talents and strengths typically creates positive emotions, which can then form the basis for a solid learning experience together.

**Group Projects.** When group projects operate from a strengths perspective, the first discussion is about the particular talents that each group member brings to the project. The process of doing the project is just as important as the final product. So the student with powerful talents in Focus or Analytical maps out the parts of the project, while the student particularly talented in Responsibility helps assign roles and deadlines. The student with exceptional Includer talents makes sure everyone is satisfied with the role they're assigned, and the student highly talented in Consistency makes sure everyone is doing an equal amount of work. The student with Discipline talents at the forefront ensures that the professor's instructions are being followed to the letter, and the student who leads with Ideation talents helps the group see the big picture and brainstorm all the ways the project could be done.

The result? As the research we've done clearly shows, groups perform more effectively and the final product is much better. When a classroom operates from a strengths perspective, the students are more engaged in their own learning and tend to get grades better than those earned by students in the same classes that are not taught with this insight.

**Other Ways to Collaborate.** Even if your professor doesn't organize the class in this manner, you can still use the strengths perspective to collaborate with others. If there are group projects, you can encourage your team to talk about their talents and what each person contributes to the project. You can create your own study groups outside of class, to capitalize on the diverse talents of others in your classes. You can collaborate with others in your clubs or athletic teams by focusing on what each member contributes to the group's overall success. Talking together about how your talents complement one another can lead to what is called "synergy" — the tremendous result that occurs when a group of people discover and maximize their talents as a team, rather than simply contribute their talents as separate individuals. Something different and better happens when everyone's talents work together in sync toward a goal.



We've seen this happen with a women's softball team, for instance. When the coaches decided to set aside some time at the team retreat to identify and affirm the Signature Themes of each player, there was an amazing response. Not only did the coaches feel they knew their players better and could motivate them more effectively; the players also felt they knew their coaches better and trusted them more. The players felt they were more of a team once they understood the ways in which they each most naturally thought, felt, and behaved. This team cohesion can be a major contributor to a winning season.

**Collaborating with Your Partner.** Collaboration also operates in personal relationships with the significant people in your life. Over and over people have told us that learning about their talents changed their marriage, their relationship with their child, or their friendships. This change occurred as they saw the potential advantage of having complementary talents.

For example, Tamara and Will had been married for a while and seemed to have the same basic conflict on a continuing basis: Tamara would get enthusiastic about all the things they could do together, ways of redecorating the house, places they could travel on their next vacation, ways of investing their money, new ideas for raising the kids — the list went on and on. Will would critique each one, pointing out why it wouldn't work. This response deflated Tamara; she felt as if he was criticizing her and squelching her enthusiasm. Will, on the other hand, said all of her ideas just made him tired and most of them were beyond what they could afford to do.

But once they learned about each other's Signature Themes, Will recognized that Tamara's seemingly far-fetched dreams of all the things they could do were evidence of Ideation talents. They were simply her naturally powerful way of thinking through things — a brainstorming approach that would eventually lead her to something that would be great. Tamara then recognized that what she saw as criticism from Will was actually his Strategic talents at work: finding the best path in the quickest amount of time. When they understood this about each other, they realized what a great team they made — Tamara's ideas combined with Will's strategies meant that together they came up with the best ideas that could be implemented. They saw each other differently — and that changed their marriage for the better.

#### **4. Control.**

It may sound strange to include the word "control" in our list of ways of cleaning your glasses so that your relationships thrive. But if you remember our earlier comments about the way our brains tend to notice the negative more than the positive, you'll see why we've included a section on control in this chapter.

**Control the "Shadow Side."** We want to highlight two aspects of control. The first is the self-discipline to control the "shadow side" of the talents in your Signature Themes. To contribute at a refined level, all talents likely require complementary knowledge and skills, and your most powerful talents are not exempt. When you use your Signature Themes as an excuse for not treating others appropriately or for not doing a job that is expected of you, a rather obvious "shadow" is the result.

Here's an example: Someone whose greatest talents are in the Self-Assurance theme likely has a wonderful internal confidence that does not need to be fueled by the approval of others. As a result, this person is highly resilient, bouncing back from failures and difficult situations more easily than most. But what if this person with such wonderful internal confidence lacks sensitivity to other people's opinions or feelings, or stubbornly resists being "told what to do"? The "shadow side" of Self-Assurance talents could be an insensitivity to others or a resistance to being given instructions. When particularly powerful Self-Assurance talents are not managed through partnership with talents from other themes — such as Empathy or Adaptability — the confidence is there, but the insensitivity or resistance to others can harm or even eliminate its effectiveness.

Powerful talents from every theme have a shadow side that can be revealed when they operate in isolation. Command becomes bossiness; Significance turns into egotism; Maximizer manifests as relentless perfectionism; Belief becomes a judgmental attitude; Futuristic becomes the inability to enjoy the present moment. But never forget that when talents from these themes are productively partnered with those from other themes, little shadow is seen, and the potential for strength is greatly heightened. So Command rises to the occasion when courage is needed to

right a wrong, and wisely does it without abusing others. Significance performs in a way that makes a real difference in the world, while Maximizer focuses on others' talents and coaches them to strength. Belief is rock-solid about what is most meaningful in life and actively lives through those beliefs, and Futuristic paints pictures that inspire "today" people to build the future.

**Control the Conflict.** The second aspect of control that we want to highlight is the ability to limit the damage that conflict can cause in our relationships by proactively resolving conflicts before they escalate. Conflict is inevitable in any relationship and simply means that there appear to be incompatible goals. But as any person with powerful Harmony talents will tell you, what appear to be incompatible goals can often be turned into win-win solutions.

Sometimes simple recognition of one another's uniquely powerful natures will make this happen. A person whose greatest talents are in Deliberative, for instance, may bump up against someone with dynamic Activator talents. The Activator is always ready to jump right in and may not understand the Deliberative person's need to carefully think things through. The talented activator may become impatient with what he or she sees as unnecessary delay, and the deliberative person may become frustrated at feeling rushed or pressured to take perceived "shortcuts." Conflict could easily result.

But when these people understand one another's greatest talents, the activator is able to see that the deliberative process results in excellent decisions and very few regrets, and it is valuable in making important decisions. And the more naturally deliberative person can learn to trust the activator's valuable sense of what needs to happen right away. By focusing on what each brings to the table and by finding common ground — both want to make a good decision and create a good outcome — the conflict can be managed proactively and productively.

**Win-Win Strategies.** This win-win strategy is one of several ways to manage conflict. Because conflict escalation creates some of the most damaging effects on people's relationships and physical as well as mental health, finding ways of averting or resolving conflict is important. In essence, escalating a conflict means returning fire with fire: Someone criticizes you or blames you for something and you reciprocate with nasty zingers of your own. This is a "no win" situation. Conflict and hostility have a dampening effect on your immune system, which means you're not protected against those cold and flu viruses that run rampant on college campuses. The bottom line: Unless you find ways of managing conflict in your life, you'll find yourself sick in bed much more often than you'd like.

When it looks like there is a potential conflict, keeping the focus on the problem rather than on the person is a first step to managing the confrontation effectively. Rather than blame the person, simply describe the situation and how you feel about it. The appropriate use of "I messages" can defuse a conflict. An "I message" emphasizes that you are taking responsibility for your own feelings about the situation. The basic recipe for an "I message" is this: "I feel (describe the feeling) when (describe the situation)." For example: "I feel hurt when you don't include me in your plans."

Many areas of potential conflict can be resolved by using "I messages." They become even more powerful conflict management tools when they are combined with an understanding of where the other person is coming from. Add to the equation an understanding of how the other person's unique combination of talents is shaping the way they see the world and how they communicate with you, and you have a recipe that can resolve most conflicts before they escalate.

For example, suppose you and your significant other have agreed to get together for dinner. Your greatest talents lie in Connectedness and Individualization; your significant other's most natural ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving come from the Consistency and Focus themes. Just as you are leaving work to get to the restaurant on time, one of your friends stops you in the parking lot to catch you up on the latest trauma in her life. With your Connectedness talents, you see the significance of each person who crosses your path. This interruption has happened for a reason — you are sure of it. Your Individualization talents lead you to focus in on what she is feeling and to become absorbed in her story — and to lose track of the time. Meanwhile, your significant other is waiting at the restaurant, exactly on time and hungrily concentrating on the menu — and how late you are. When you finally show up, the potential for a conflict is high.

But suppose you refine your Connectedness and Individualization talents by recognizing the importance of being on time and keeping your promises to your significant other. How would you have handled the situation differently, given that you still will see your friend's crossing your path as providential and will have a natural inclination to become absorbed in her story?

The situation has two possible endings. In one ending, there is conflict: The person who was kept waiting explodes, "You never think about anyone but yourself. I'm starving while you make time for everyone but me." The conflict escalates when you say, "There are more important things in life than your stomach. At least I have friends who need me."

But the ending could be entirely different if the waiting Consistency/Focus-talented person uses an "I message" such as, "Wow — I was worried something had happened to you when you were so late. I wish you had called to let me know what was going on. Were you delayed by someone who needed to talk to you?" And rather than escalate the conflict, the Connectedness/Individualization-talented person could say, "You're right about a friend who needed me — I felt it was important to make time for her. But it wasn't fair for you to be kept waiting — I should've called you and let you know what happened."

Whenever you feel a need to confront someone, think about it as an act of caring. Confrontation should not be a hit-and-run sport. Any confrontation should be conducted in the interest of maintaining and developing the relationship. Confrontation might hurt, but it should never be an attack on a person. Instead, the "attack" should be focused on the problem between you. This approach allows for win-win solutions and provides a positive future for the relationship. And as Archbishop Desmond Tutu said about his beloved South Africa as it tried to recover from decades of racial apartheid, "Without forgiveness, there is no future." You have to be willing to forgive a person who has wronged you, and to move on to a better place in the relationship.

## **5. Commit to cultivate.**

The final action to take to clean your strengths-colored glasses and help your relationships thrive over the long haul is to commit to cultivate the relationship. Relationships are living, growing organisms. They require active nurturing to thrive, and they can die from neglect. The word *commit* implies intentional and lasting action. A commitment to cultivate a relationship means that you see the other person as worth an investment of your time and effort. That person matters to you.

People who show this level of commitment make great friends and lifetime partners. They know that affirmation of another person is what builds healthy relationships. They understand how important it is to express appreciation for the other person. But they recognize that no single other person can meet all their needs, so they cultivate many relationships. They have numerous "vital friends," as author Tom Rath calls them in his book of that name — different types of friends that meet different needs but are each necessary for feeling fully alive.

And even though 95% of people these days get married at least once, the research shows that a good friend can be just as good for your emotional and physical well-being as a good partner. The best predictor of positive relationships is emotional intimacy, not physical intimacy. Emotional intimacy involves disclosure of your feelings and what matters to you, being responsive to another person's needs, and feeling understood and cared for — all aspects of the best friendships as well as the best marriages and lifelong partnerships.

### **The "Real" You**

And now it comes back to you. For any relationship to flourish, the people in it need to relate to one another authentically. When you clean your glasses so that you can see the talents and strengths in others, you also become a better version of yourself. In the words of the Velveteen Rabbit, you become "Real." If you remember that story from your childhood, you'll remember that the old Skin Horse tells the Velveteen Rabbit what it takes to become Real:

. . . when someone loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but *really* loves you, then you become Real. . . . It doesn't happen all at once. . . . You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.

## Chapter V

# Insights Into Strengths Development

So far you have identified your areas of greatest talent in your Signature Themes and you have affirmed those with the significant people in your life. We've explored together the difference that strengths development can make in your relationships. Now it's time for the next step: strengths development itself.

A strength is the ability to consistently provide near-perfect performance in a specific task. You've learned that to build a strength, you first identify your dominant talents, then complement them with knowledge and skill.

Your ability to achieve excellence and get the most out of your life is connected to the extent to which you develop strengths. It all starts with talent, but it finishes with strength. That is, your Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment has helped you discover the themes in which your greatest talents probably lie, based on how you responded to the statements. But you have talents in all the themes — talents that can combine with your dominant talents in your Signature Themes. Combining talents, refining them with skills and knowledge, and then applying them to achieve excellence is what it means to build a strength.

To this point, we have focused on helping you identify, affirm, and celebrate your greatest talents. Now, it's time to focus on using them as the foundation of strengths development.

### **Principles and Strategies for Using Your Talents as the Foundation of Strength**

Talents are like muscles. If you use them, they will help you achieve. Further, as you refine them, they will become even more capable of helping you achieve. Essentially, what you are able to achieve depends on the preparation and hard work you invest in building on your greatest talents by using them as the foundation for strengths.

Here are seven principles that you can use to make the most of your talents as you seek to develop strengths. Specific suggestions follow each principle.

#### **1. Know your talents.**

Of course, before you can begin to develop strengths, you must have somehow identified your greatest talents. By taking StrengthsFinder and affirming the talents in your Signature Themes, you have taken steps toward doing exactly that. As you continue reading and reflecting, you will refine that self-knowledge and solidify a foundation for strengths development.

Here is a simple exercise that can help clarify your talents. Take a piece of paper and write down each of your five Signature Themes. Next, write down at least one of your most powerful talents within each of those themes. Finally, write down an example of a time when you used each of those talents. If you can complete this exercise, you are building your awareness — and solidifying a foundation for strength.

#### **2. You must value your talents and assume personal responsibility for using them in strengths development.**

If you do this, you will invest the time, energy, and other necessary resources. If you don't value your talents, you won't make the investments that their development requires. At first you may not see the value of your talents. To correct this misperception, please think of the two or three most important things you have ever done. Or ponder your proudest moment, the time when you were at your best, doing what you do best.

Next, identify a theme of talent that was at work in that situation. Then imagine having very little talent in that theme. What would have happened?

Now, from this perspective, do you value your talents enough to assume personal responsibility for making the most of them through strengths development?

### **3. Talents are most powerful when inspired by a personal mission.**

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was quoted as saying, "He who has a 'why' to live for can bear almost any 'how.'"

What is the big "why" of your life? What are you ultimately trying to get done? What mission, purpose, or ultimate objective do you want to accomplish during your life?

These are the questions of "mission." A personal mission is the all-important task that you want to complete during your life. Your mission reflects what you hope will happen as a result of your actions. It is what brings meaning to your life.

Once you have formulated and clarified your personal mission, think about how your talents can help you fulfill it. Connecting your talents to your mission is critical because your mission motivates you to build on your talents by creating strengths, and your strengths will empower you to fulfill your mission. Also, new ideas about how you can develop strengths while fulfilling your mission might emerge. Make sure you write down these ideas and follow through on them.

### **4. Healthy, caring relationships facilitate the development of strengths.**

Having at least one healthy, caring relationship while developing strengths is enormously helpful. Here are some characteristics of the empowering relationships in which talents seem to best flourish.

- There is mutual respect between you and the other person.
- You sense that he or she cares about you as a complete person.
- You can be open and honest with this person.
- You feel encouraged by being around this person.
- This person actively seeks to understand you.
- This person is a good listener.

In a healthy relationship that encourages strengths development, certain events likely will occur.

- You will talk about your talents and where you see them already working in your life.
- You will express the specific talents you want to build on and how you plan to go about doing it.
- You will report on your efforts and experiences as you try to develop strengths.
- You will receive feedback based on your reported efforts and experiences as you try to develop strengths.
- You will work together to form expectations about your talents, the tasks to which you want to apply your talents, and how you will develop strength in those tasks.

In essence, you will be trying to form a relationship with someone who inspires you to greatness.

## **5. Reliving your successes helps you develop strengths.**

Every time you have performed with excellence, you have employed some of your greatest talents. Consider those successes for a moment. Can you recognize specific talents that played roles in your successes? If you can, you are claiming ownership of those talents, and you are building confidence in them — and in the process, you are building on those talents in strengths development.

To consider the roles your talents have played in your successes, try either talking or writing about them. As you try to capture in words the interplay between your talents and your successes, some powerful insights can occur.

## **6. Practice your talents.**

As you use your talents over and over again, they will become refined. You will gain experience, and through that experience you will gain the knowledge and skills that will combine with your talents to create strength. Practice, practice, practice.

## **7. Teaching leads to learning.**

To gain further understanding of talents, teach others about them. When you teach what you are learning, you are forced to learn it well enough to explain it to another person and answer his or her questions.

Now that you have gained a few insights into developing strengths, here's a challenge for you: Identify one specific task that you would like to perform at a level of excellence. Next, identify a theme in which you have talents that you believe can contribute the most to excellence in this task.

Finally, set a goal of refining that talent by using it at least twice as often as you are using it now.

Consider starting with one of your most dominant talents, possibly from your top Signature Theme. Beginning with the theme that brings you the greatest fulfillment would be a good idea, too.

For the rest of this chapter, we would like you to consider another set of strategies that offer insights and action ideas for developing strengths. Please locate and examine the strategies that are customized to your Signature Themes. As you examine them, try to select those that best fit the talents within your Signature Themes.

For each theme, we've identified several ways of refining those talents. Some of the strategies we list involve partnering with people who possess exceptional talents in other themes or managing the "shadow side" of the talent in order to create strengths.

### **Action Items**

To get your personal action items for this chapter, log on to [www.strengthsquest.com](http://www.strengthsquest.com) and click Strengths, then Student Action Items.

## Chapter VI

# Considering Your Strengths When Planning Your Education

Personal excellence should always be at the forefront of your mind when you're planning an education. Accordingly, each and every step in the planning process should lead to higher and higher levels of personal achievement.

The essence of planning every aspect of an education that will lead to personal excellence, right down to each course you select, lies in answering one question:

*Will it help you become all that you have the talent and opportunity to be?*

To help you answer this question in planning your education, we will share the lessons we have learned about excellence from studying great learners, educators, and leaders.

### Five Truths That Great Learners, Educators, and Leaders Know About Excellence

#### 1. Our talents hold the key to excellence.

Many people mistakenly think that their greatest potential for growth is in their weakness. But this is not true. We grow and develop most when we are working on and working with our most natural talents.

#### 2. Simply having talents isn't enough to produce excellence. Talents must be built upon in strengths development, and the resulting strengths must be applied. This requires practice and hard work.

Some people think that merely possessing talents ensures easy achievement of excellence. But great learners, educators, and leaders know that this is pure myth. As in any area of life, achieving excellence in education requires meticulous, painstaking preparation and hard work.

#### 3. Excellence requires that you have a clear idea about what excellence is, what it looks like, and what is required to reach it.

For example, as a student, you should know what an excellent paper or essay reads like in order to write one. The image of excellence must be crystal clear.

One "straight A" college student developed a unique way of forming such a mental image of excellence that helped him write papers. First, he reasoned that if an article or a book gets published, at least one person must think it's excellent. But he further reasoned that different people might have varying ideas about excellence. So, this young man went to the library and found book reviews on each of the books he was assigned in his classes.

By reading book reviews on the books in his classes, he was able to form a mental image of what was, and what was not, excellent about a particular book. This also gave him ideas about how to critically analyze the materials presented in his classes. Armed with this information and the mental images that had emerged, this young man was prepared to write papers and essay examinations on the texts assigned in his courses.

#### 4. Focusing on one area of talent at a time is the best route to excellence.

There is a danger in diffusing your attention and effort by focusing on too many things at once. Taking one area of talent at a time and developing it to the maximum moves you to excellence most efficiently. Once a person has reached excellence in one area, a framework for and an understanding of excellence in other areas is likely to



emerge. Your own questioning mind sets a direction and can fuel your pursuit of excellence. Your curiosities reveal where you want to grow, develop, and learn more.

**5. It is also important to realize that many talents — all working together and strategically applied — are necessary to produce excellence.**

Achieving excellence isn't easy. Most strengths are rooted in not just one talent, but two, three, or even more. This is one of the reasons why reaching levels of excellence takes considerable time and practice.

Think about the meaning of your talents in combination. Begin by focusing on your two most powerful Signature Themes. How do your talents within these themes interact with one another? What does that interaction tend to produce? Now, consider your talents in your third Signature Theme. How do your talents in these three themes interact and influence one another?

Consider what you want to get out of college. In essence, what are your desired outcomes? Ponder the ways in which you want to develop as a person.

Think about the skills you'd like to develop. For example, do you want to hone your writing, mathematical, and/or problem-solving skills? Perhaps you are most interested in developing your thinking skills. Consider the knowledge you want to gain. In what areas do you want to be more knowledgeable than you are today? What information, insights, and understandings will you need for the future?

Now, think about the matter of awareness. Perhaps you would like to learn more about your own culture and the meanings of various traditions. Maybe you'd like to gain more knowledge of various modes of artistic expression or understand the nature of science.

Consider career outcomes. Do you hope that college will help you identify a career, or prepare for it? If so, what do you need to learn while in college to be effective in your career?

On an entirely different level, you might look at the college experience as a time to clarify or affirm your values. Maybe you see college as a time to set a direction for your life and make a group of commitments regarding yourself and your future.

Whatever the case, the first focus of planning a college education should be on your desired outcomes. Clearly, those outcomes are directly related to the decisions you make not only before you begin college, but also while you're in college. Each term, you will make a group of decisions regarding what classes you will sign up for and who your professors will be. We urge you to make informed choices about classes and professors, as they will have a direct impact on your outcomes.

Last, but not least, consider graduation requirements, the structure of the degree, and requirements you may need to fulfill to enter a particular career or graduate-school program.

### **Questions to Help Your Educational Planning**

Academic advisors are marvelous college resources. Staff and advising faculty offer a great deal to your educational planning process.

To help you prepare for meeting with your advisor and to help you make wise involvement decisions, we have listed several questions for your thoughtful reflections.

#### **1. Self-Assessment of Talents**

- Which of your Signature Themes describe you best?

- Which of your Signature Themes hold the talents you use most frequently?
- In which of your Signature Themes are your talents most highly refined?
- Which talents do you want to maximize the most in college?

## **2. Motivations, Dreams, and Desires About College**

- What are you hoping will happen while you are in college?
- What do you want to be able to do as a result of going to college?
- Imagine that you have graduated from college and you feel great. What would make you feel so great about your experience?
- Which of your talents do you believe will be most instrumental in helping you fulfill your dreams and desires for college?
- Which of your talents will you be planning to develop through classes and extracurricular activities?
- What images come to your mind when you think about fully maximizing your talents through strengths development?

## **3. Self-Assessments of Intellectual Interest and Curiosities**

- What do you seem to learn with the greatest ease?
- What have your teachers complimented you about?
- What do you have a burning desire to know and understand?

## **4. Vocational, Career, and Graduate School Aspirations**

- To date, what experiences have been your most fulfilling?
- Which careers seem most interesting and attractive to you?
- In what career would you be able to best use your greatest talents?
- Given your general career interests and vocation, what types of graduate-school training will you need?
- Which courses and college opportunities can help you best prepare for your vocation, career, and graduate school?

## **5. Time and Energy Demands**

- What are your family responsibilities, and how much time will they require each week?
- How many hours per week must you work to meet your financial responsibilities?
- To achieve highly in each of your classes, how much time will be required each week?

- Which of your most natural talents can you count on to make your efforts time- and energy-efficient?

#### **6. Self-Assessment of Academic Abilities**

- In what areas do you have the greatest academic abilities?
- On what types of tests do you score highest?
- What has been your favorite type of assignment?
- What subjects do you most enjoy studying ?
- How have your greatest talents helped you succeed in the past?
- What academic tasks employ your most powerful talents?
- In which academic tasks would you like to discover how to better apply your greatest talents?

#### **7. Degree Structure and Requirements**

- What courses must you take to graduate?
- Where do you have flexibility in fulfilling your graduation requirements?
- What are the graduate-school entrance requirements for the programs you are considering?
- What classes will best prepare you to enter the career or graduate schools you are considering?

#### **Final Considerations in Planning Your Education**

Your answers to the previous questions will help you create a plan to achieve your desired educational outcomes — but there certainly is more to consider.

Equally important is the issue of timing. When should you take certain college classes? When should you become involved in the various college programs, services, activities, and resources that are available?

In answering each of these questions, and in making your plan for education a reality, you should make strengths development "priority one." Doing so will help you gain confidence, build your motivation, heighten your sense of direction, and lead you to an enjoyable experience in taking on the many challenges and opportunities offered by the college experience.

## Chapter VII

### Developing Academic Strengths in College

You have considered the importance of talents in planning your education to achieve personal strengths. Now, it is time to plot out how to build on your talents to develop leadership and other strengths directly related to your college experience.

Four key factors capture the basic aspects you should consider when planning an education that will lead to personal excellence.

#### **Four Key Factors That Will Determine Your Achievements in Academics, Career, and Beyond**

##### **1. Your beliefs about your talents to achieve**

Never underestimate the power of what you believe — it will directly affect your achievements. What you believe about your talents can affect *whether you will even attempt to achieve*. Your beliefs directly influence your emotions, attitudes, behavior patterns, and motivation.

##### **2. How well you know, understand, and value your talents**

One of our primary goals is to increase your understanding of and appreciation for your greatest talents. This forms the basis for increasing your confidence and for building achievement patterns.

##### **3. The extent to which you apply your talents through strengths**

You should provide the initiative for designing your education around your talents. This is likely to produce superior results, because you won't be "getting" an education, you'll be creating one. And it will be based on who you really are and the person you have the capacity to become.

##### **4. Your motivations, desires, and goal-setting practices**

Numerous studies identify motivation as the single most important factor in academic achievement and graduation from college. Specifically, they point to two important motivational dynamics: First, you must have multiple motives for achieving and persisting. Second, these motives must be important to you personally. Having only one reason for achieving (for example, to make more money or to please someone else) usually results in lesser achievement.

#### **Four Tips for Developing Academic Strengths in College**

Your overall academic experience can be greatly enhanced by the perspective and direction you take in setting goals and making key decisions. Consider these four suggestions.

##### **1. Define college success in terms of maximizing your talents through strengths development.**

If you are going to assume responsibility for your college experience, you must come to grips with defining success for yourself.

So, what is the best outcome of college that you can imagine? Most people would say getting a 4.0 GPA, graduating Magna Cum Laude, getting a well-paying job, or gaining admission to medical school, law school, or some other graduate or professional school. These are good, but your considerations should go well beyond your college years.

Defining college success in terms of identifying and building upon your greatest talents emphasizes *building yourself into a person of excellence*.

## **2. Select classes on the basis of your talents and strengths.**

Considering your talents is particularly important as you select classes for the early portion of your college education. In these first couple of years, it is especially important to build your confidence by following your talents. Far too many students who enroll in college never graduate, and many of those who drop out do so in the first year. Why? Quite frequently, the reason is that they have selected classes that don't suit their talents. As a result, they don't experience the success they expected, and then they become frustrated and disillusioned and eventually give up.

Be sure to continue to apply the strengths approach during the rest of your college career. This means that *every time* you select your classes, ask yourself two questions: (1) Which of my talents will I be able to apply in this class? and (2) What strengths will this class help me create? If you don't know the answer to either of these questions, get more information about the classes you are considering. If you have to say "none" to both questions, you must ask yourself why you are enrolling in the class in the first place.

These comments may be controversial, so let's be clear: We are not anti-liberal arts, nor are we trying to undermine the need for all students to have certain basic skills. We are certainly not trying to limit students' exploration of new fields.

What we oppose is educational practices that give students placement tests to find out what students *can't do or don't know* — and then force them to focus first on where they struggle before they can learn about their most naturally powerful talents.

## **3. Consider your talents when selecting extracurricular activities.**

To gain maximum benefits from college, think about college as a total experience in which you *purposely become as deeply involved as possible*. This means making college the focal point of your life. Becoming personally involved might include forming study groups, meeting with professors, and making use of campus programs and services. If possible, live on campus or near campus — and with other students — or at least form close relationships with people from college.

As you make decisions about extracurricular involvement, seek opportunities to build on your talents in strengths development. For example, form relationships with professors and students who share your talents. Become involved in clubs and organizations that provide opportunities for you to use or develop strengths.

## **4. Choose your college jobs by considering the opportunities they provide to develop strengths by following your talents.**

Most college students must work in order to make ends meet. That is a reality, but it is also true that employment during college presents another opportunity to build on your talents. Therefore, carefully consider where you'll be employed and what type of work you'll do. The most ideal situation would be (1) to work on campus so you can increase your involvement, and (2) to work in a job where you can use and build on at least some of your most natural talents. That way, you will be doing more than just earning money.

### **Strategies for Applying Your Talents in Academics**

To help you determine how you can best apply your greatest talents toward strengths in academics, we have collected feedback from thousands of top-achieving college students. Through interviews, focus groups, case studies, and surveys, we have gathered insights about how these successful students perceived and applied their most powerful talents in several areas of academics.

Now, it's time to take a look at strategies that can help you use talents in your Signature Themes for achievement in various aspects of your academic life. Once again, locate and examine the strategies that are customized to your Signature Themes. As you do this, you may want to consider the items that are already helping you achieve and those that may help you achieve at an even greater level of excellence.

### **Action Items**

To get your personal action items for this chapter, log on to [www.strengthsquest.com](http://www.strengthsquest.com) and click Strengths, then Student Action Items.

## Chapter VIII

### Developing Leadership Strengths in College

For many people, college is a stepping-stone to careers in which they will be leaders. They might hope to lead in a classroom, a courtroom, a corporation, a community, a hospital, an agency, a ministry, or their own business. Also, many college graduates will move into supervisory roles. Both of these facts point to the importance of learning about effective leadership.

All of the talents in the themes measured by the Clifton StrengthsFinder can be applied to leadership roles and responsibilities. Therefore, if you assume any leadership roles in college, you will have opportunities to develop leadership strengths.

Take mentoring, for example. Often, when a college student is mentored by a professor or staff member on campus, that student's intellectual and personal development increases significantly. Even fellow students, especially those who are a year or two ahead of you, can be very helpful as mentors. You would probably find it very beneficial to have a peer with whom you can continually reflect on your college experience.

But being a mentor is just as important as having a mentor. If you truly want to develop leadership strengths, you must seek out people to help you — and find people who would benefit from what you have learned.

The college experience provides a magnificent opportunity to develop leadership strengths. The key is to be intentional. Talents within each and every one of your Signature Themes can be applied in college, and many can be applied in multiple leadership functions. Look for every opportunity to refine your greatest talents in leadership roles.

In our work with thousands of college students, we have identified several ways in which you can intentionally develop leadership strengths in college. We present these suggestions to stimulate your thinking.

There certainly are many more ways to use the college experience to build leadership strengths. Let your imagination devise the approach and the activities that are best for you.

#### 1. Leadership development and the college experience in general

Pay particular attention to when and how you influence others and how you are able to rally others to make changes. Conversely, note when and how others influence you and rally you to make changes.

#### 2. Leadership development and the classroom experience

Classes and the work of instructors in the classroom provide wonderful opportunities to learn about leadership. Because learning always involves changing — and because leadership is designed to produce measurable change — you will want to note when and how instructors influence students to change. Here are some questions that will stimulate your thinking as you learn about leadership from observing and reflecting on the work of educators as leaders.

- What are the differences between effective and ineffective instructors?
- What talents do the best instructors seem to have?
- How do the best instructors interact with students?
- How do the best instructors organize lessons and classroom activities?

- How do the most effective instructors persuade others?
- How do effective instructors use their talents when they teach and interact with students?
- Which talents do you have in common with the most effective instructors?

### 3. Leadership development and class selection

Almost all the classes in a field of study can provide valuable insights for the learner who intentionally wants to develop leadership strengths. Here are some examples:

- any classes in communication studies or speech
- any classes in leadership studies or management
- almost all classes in sociology or social psychology
- most classes in organizational development, organizational psychology, and community development
- humanities classes that focus on rhetoric and persuasion
- philosophy classes in argumentation and logical reasoning
- mathematical reasoning and patterns in scientific problem-solving classes most classes in political science
- many classes in cultural anthropology
- many classes in ethnic and cross-cultural studies
- history and other social science classes that focus on the dynamics of change and/or the influence of particular leaders in the change process

### 4. Leadership development in class assignments and independent studies

Make class assignments work for you by applying them to the study of leaders and leadership. We recommend you focus your studies on the best leaders and the reasons for their outstanding performances. You may be able to do library research and study historical or current leaders. You might even conduct your own investigations of the best leaders you know or those who are superior in a particular field. As you study, here are some questions to consider. What is it that makes these leaders so effective? What are their greatest talents? In what environment and with what groups of people do leaders with certain talents seem to be most effective?

### 5. Leadership development in athletics

On the most basic level, athletics can help you understand a lot about leadership and the concept of talents and strengths. You also learn about how you need different types of talent to play different kinds of sports and positions. There's also the whole challenge of developing strengths and the taking the right attitudes.

Additional insights about leadership can be gained from asking the following questions about sports and athletic competition. What makes a great coach? How do effective coaches work with their players?

- What are effective coaches doing during practice and during a game?



- What are the most important elements of preparation?
- What are the most important things to do and not do during training?
- What is the best way to learn a new approach, a new play, or new moves?
- What is involved in changing old habits and developing new ones?
- What are the best ways to formulate goals?
- How can you best develop a team and "team spirit"?
- How can you best deal with discouragements, injuries, and setbacks?
- What are the most effective ways to maintain motivation?

#### 6. Leadership development through internships and experiential education opportunities

Most colleges and universities offer internships in which you can work with professionals in a given field. These provide up-close and personal looks at how leadership works in real life. Even if the internship isn't the most positive experience, you can learn what not to do when you are a leader. Also, you may have opportunities to perform several other leadership functions through your internship or experiential education opportunity.

#### 7. Leadership development in study groups

As you work with other students in study groups, use your various talents to help yourself and others learn. For example, an effective leader helps others use their talents to help the group function better and to move toward a desired goal. Likewise, consider the talents of other members of your study group, and try to allocate the tasks of the study group according to those talents.

As you use study groups to develop leadership strengths, look for every opportunity to help other people learn more about their most natural talents. In the process, you will be learning more about your own.

#### 8. Leadership development through student organizations

Student clubs, organizations, and service projects provide some of the best leadership development opportunities available on campus. But this also presents a massive challenge because students have multiple commitments and competing priorities, and their work in student organizations is almost exclusively unpaid. However, students who meet the challenge of providing appropriate attention to each of their responsibilities receive excellent opportunities to develop leadership strengths.

#### 9. Leadership development through employment experience

Nearly every college student works to pay for some or all of his or her college and living expenses. But rather than considering employment as only a job for earning money, try to make it a learning experience through which you can develop leadership talents.

Managing others can be one of the most important aspects of leadership. From the strengths perspective, managers will be most effective if they capitalize on their greatest talents and consciously use them as they manage others.

The best management approaches take into account the talents of both the manager and those who are managed. One of Gallup's bestselling books, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, offers specific strategies for how a manager can use

his or her talents to best manage others. The same book describes how to take into account the individual talents of those who are being managed.

Armed with the knowledge contained in *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, you'll be able to see when people are and are not using their talents in management, and you can begin thinking about how you can best manage others by most effectively using your own talents.

#### 10. Other opportunities for leadership development within the college experience

In addition to the opportunities listed above, the college experience provides countless opportunities to develop your leadership abilities. For example, most colleges provide opportunities for students to become involved in musical performances, drama, theater, and other artistic modes of expression.

Developing leadership strengths is a process that begins with who you are, then moves to what you do. Here are principles that you can follow to become a person who leads on the basis of your talents.

- Realize that you do not need to be in a formal leadership role to provide valuable leadership. Identify the specific leadership tasks that you can perform with strength, and take them on when the opportunity arises.
- Lead with your talents as you work in groups to help them reach goals.
- Pay close attention to others in the organization, and try to identify their most powerful talents.
- Encourage others in the organization by helping them see the positive contributions they are making as they use their talents productively.
- Create opportunities for others to develop and use their talents — opportunities to do what they naturally do best.
- Become clear about your personal goals, and help the members of the organization focus on the goals they want to accomplish.

This aspect of becoming a strengths-based leader cannot be emphasized enough: Be intentional. Purposely look at each college experience in terms of learning something about how to be a leader. Whether you are a leader or a follower doesn't matter. In either role, you can learn something about leadership.

## Chapter IX

### Becoming Your Own Best Educator and Learner

For more than 30 years, Professor Robert Rosenthal has conducted experiments on the power of expectations to influence performance and intellectual competence. Here is a summary of one of his most famous experiments:

Oak School is a public elementary school with approximately 650 students. At the beginning of one school year, all of the students were pre-tested with a standard test of intelligence. The teachers were told that the test could predict "intellectual blooming" and also predict which students would soon experience "spurts" of intellectual development.

About 20% of the Oak School students were identified as "potential bloomers." Each of the 18 teachers was given the names of those "special" students in his or her class who would show dramatic intellectual growth in the academic year ahead. These predictions were allegedly made on the basis of these "special" students' scores on the test for potential "academic blooming."

However, the "special" students had actually been chosen randomly. The difference between them and the "ordinary" students was only in the minds of the teachers.

All of the Oak School students were retested with the same intelligence test after one semester and again at the end of the year.

When the test scores of the "special" students and the "ordinary" students were calculated, both groups showed an improvement in total I.Q., verbal I.Q., and reasoning I.Q. But when the two groups were compared, 47% of the "special" students had gained 20 or more total I.Q. points, while only 19% of the "ordinary" students gained 20 or more total I.Q. points.

#### **The Power of Expectations**

Research by Dr. Rosenthal and others clearly indicates that our expectations have a powerful effect on ourselves and others. These expectations influence our actions, attitudes, motivation, and perseverance. In fact, they influence every aspect of achieving, including whether or not we will even enter into activities where we can achieve excellence. Because of the critical importance of expectations, we want you to consider these questions.

1. Why do you think the "special" students at Oak School performed so well?
2. If these "special" students had the ability to achieve such excellence all along, why hadn't they performed as well before?
3. If these teachers were able to promote achievement among "special" students at this level, what could have happened if they had realized that *all* of their students were special?
4. Are there certain people whom you think are special? If so, what expectations do you have of them?
5. In what ways do your expectations of these special people influence their achievements and performance?
6. In what ways do you think you are special and have real potential for blossoming?
7. In what ways are your self-expectations encouraging your achievements and performance?

## **The Missed Opportunities Revealed by Rosenthal's Research**

Dr. Rosenthal's research has been very helpful in improving how teachers are trained and the expectations they have of themselves, their roles, and their interactions with students. But this research also shines a light on what we believe is a series of key points.

The first key point is that the "special" students always had the ability to blossom, but no one ever brought that ability to the surface. If the "special" students wouldn't have had the ability before the school year began, no amount of good teaching could have produced results that were more than double what the "ordinary" students achieved.

The second key point is that it took fraudulent information from a researcher to get the teachers to help their students blossom. The teachers already had the ability to produce academic achievements among their students. The teachers were not given any different curriculum, nor were they given any additional teaching methods, training, or new technology. Sadly, although these teachers already had within them the ability to inspire students to blossom, they had not put that ability to use.

The third key point revealed by Rosenthal's research was that the underperformance by both the students and the teachers stemmed from the teachers' "ordinary" expectations of their "ordinary" students. Just think about all of the students at Oak School who did not achieve their potential because their teachers didn't see them as being anything special. The sad thing about this is that normal expectations are usually low.

Some students experience only negative expectations every day. Some of these negative expectations are placed arbitrarily on young people simply because of how they look, their gender, socio-economic status, or ethnicity.

A great deal of research is now being conducted about the topic of "stereotype threat." This research shows that when people are in an environment where they perceive that they are being stereotyped with negative expectations about their abilities to perform, their performances confirm the negative expectations, like self-fulfilling prophecies. Research by Stanford University Professor Claude Steele and others reveals that environmental expectations form and reinforce self-expectations that directly influence performance.

## **What Really Happened in the Rosenthal Studies of Expectations?**

The teachers in Rosenthal's study acted differently toward the "special" students, both in how they taught and in how they interacted with these students. In essence, the experimenters had changed the teachers' approaches to their students by manipulating the teachers' perceptions of the students.

More than 400 studies have been conducted to document the powerful effects of expectations. Drs. Rosenthal and Monica Harris have synthesized the research findings from many of these studies to determine exactly what teachers do when they are given more favorable information about certain "high potential" students. What follows is a list of the teachers' behaviors toward the students who they were told had special abilities and special potential for achieving.

1. Teachers expressed more positive attitudes, behaviors, and emotional warmth toward the "special" students.
2. Teachers more frequently acknowledged, applied, and/or summarized what the "special" students had to say.
3. Teachers taught the "special" students more challenging material than they presented to the "normal" students.
4. Teachers interacted with the "special" students more frequently about both academic and nonacademic topics.
5. Teachers made eye contact with the "special" students more frequently.
6. Teachers asked the "special" students more questions.

7. Teachers gave the "special" students more positive feedback and praise.

### **A Radical Idea: Become Your Own Best Teacher**

Dr. Winston C. Doby has conceptualized a learning system based on a group of beliefs found among outstanding learners. In particular, he has found that top learners believe they are their own best teachers and take personal responsibility for their own learning.

Quite often, an ineffective relationship between a teacher and a learner is the result of miscommunication or a lack of communication. But when you are your own teacher and your own learner, there is very little chance of these communication problems. Your inner dialogue and your clear self-awareness are primary reasons why you can be your own best teacher and your own best learner. Also, the basis for your positive expectations about yourself is neither random nor fraudulent. You know you have talents of great value.

We challenge you to be at least as good with your "student within" as the teachers in Rosenthal's study were with their special students.

Putting this in practical terms, consider doing the following.

1. Express positive attitudes toward yourself as a learner.
2. Use challenging material to encourage growth.
3. Give positive feedback and praise to your learner within.

Know this: If you want to achieve excellence in education, you must assume the responsibility of being your own best teacher and your own best learner.

### **Perception of Talent**

Perception of talent plays an extremely influential role in a person's motivation to achieve.

When people perceive that they have minimal talent, they usually avoid any activity that may reveal that lack of talent. Procrastination is a typical manifestation of a perceived lack of talent. It's like a game in which you do everything at the last minute so that if you don't succeed, you can blame the failure on a lack of time rather than a lack of talent.

In our experience, most people perceive that they have little talent, if any at all. And even when people are aware of their talents, they aren't very clear about the nature of their talents or what to do with them. They also tend to believe that their talents have limited uses and are applicable in only one or two areas.

People may even totally misperceive a powerful talent, thinking it is a weakness.

We emphasize the perception of talent because when people decide to enter or avoid an achievement activity, they are not making their decision based on what their talents really are or what they are actually capable of doing through them. They make their achievement or avoidance decision on the basis of their perception of their talents.

### **Becoming Your Own Best Educator and Learner**

It's been said that there's no lasting change without a change of identity. Your identity is your perception of who you are, and it forms the boundaries of what you attempt to do. People seldom undertake tasks beyond their perception of who they are and what they can do.

Earlier in this chapter, we presented the radical idea that you are your own best teacher. This idea by Dr. Doby is similar to Parker Palmer's concept of the educator within. We would like to take these ideas to a higher level and encourage you to pursue a greater identity: *You are your own best educator and learner.*

Never forget that we live in a fast-moving world in which only three things are certain: (1) rapid change, (2) continuing knowledge explosion, and (3) increasingly complex relationships that are more difficult to maintain. To cope, let alone achieve in this environment, everyone faces the possibility of becoming "obsolete" if they don't keep learning.

Lifelong learning isn't a luxury; it's a necessity. Being a lifelong learner is your only way of coping with rapid change, knowledge explosion, and complex relationships. No matter what field you enter, you must forever be a learner, or you will be left behind.

## Chapter X

# Strengths and Career Planning

Mark Twain told the story of a man who searched his whole life for the world's greatest general. When the man died, he arrived in heaven and walked up to St. Peter and said, "I'm looking for the world's greatest general."

St. Peter replied, "I know. We've been expecting you, and I have good news. If you will look right over there, you will see the world's greatest general."

The older man excitedly looked over and said, "That's not the world's greatest general. That man was a cobbler on Main Street in my hometown." St. Peter responded, "But had he been a general, he would have been the greatest general ever."

This story is not meant to demean cobblers at all. The work of a cobbler is meaningful and requires very special talents. But the story does raise some fundamental questions: Did the cobbler know what he had the potential to do? Did he know that he had the talent to be the world's greatest general? Did anyone try to convince him that he could be destined for greatness?

Twain's tale points to a painful truth that's echoed in the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes: "Most people go to their graves with their music still inside them." There are plenty of perfectly good cobblers out there who could have been great generals, given the opportunity or encouragement. Maybe, given the choice, they would still have chosen to be cobblers. But they also could have pursued completely different, perhaps historic, careers.

Give this tale some thought when planning your own career. We want the music that is inside you to be heard!

### **It's a Question of Fit**

The Chinese philosopher Confucius had it right 2,500 years ago: "Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life." We spend half our waking hours at work — 90,000 hours of our lives, if we work from college graduation to retirement at age 65. That's a lot of time that can be spent either doing something you love — and marveling at the fact that you're getting paid for it — or dreading getting up every morning. In the United States, only 13% of workers say they find their work meaningful, and a mere 20% think they're in jobs that are using their talents (Miller, 1999). If you're like us, you want to be counted among the 1 in 5 that enjoys going to work on Monday morning.

From childhood on, your parents, teachers, and well-meaning friends and relatives have been asking you, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" The pressure to make the right choice only intensifies as you head to college. Many people think you should have it figured out by the time you arrive on campus. Yet the reality is that choosing a career is a daunting task, and you're not alone if you struggle with it. Anywhere from 60 to 85% of entering college students change their major at least once. So it's important to recognize that this is a big deal that people struggle with and that may take some time to figure out. Some avoid it as long as possible, and others take the easy road and choose whatever career they think their parents might like them to pursue.

Read just about any book on career choice and you'll find a theme that runs through them all: Choosing a career is all about the right fit. When you find a career that fits you, work doesn't seem so much like work anymore; work allows you to express the essence of who you are and brings you joy. Thomas Edison claimed, "I never did a day's work in my life. It was all fun."

Interestingly, he was also the one who said, "Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration." Interviews with people in their seventies and eighties have revealed that those who had a passion for their work were

also the ones who felt their lives were most fulfilling and meaningful (Leider & Shapiro, 2001). And at the end of life, that's what counts: looking back on a life well-lived and feeling that you made a difference.

Because this is an issue of fit, one question that comes to mind is whether there's one perfect fit, one right career choice. We might like to think that there is some career out there that will be just right. But we don't know of any cases where that is true. Our studies of the top achievers in most careers and professions indicate that they "invent" ways to apply their greatest talents and existing strengths as they work. If they can't, they move on until they find a career in which they can.

These superior performers know what we hope you'll soon discover — that the secret is to find a way to maximize your greatest talents where you are right now, in whatever you are doing. If you're a full-time student, your "job" is that of a student; how do you maximize your talents in that role? If you're also a parent or work in a clothing store to pay your way through college, how do you make the most of your talents in those roles?

Because of all the rapid change in our society, half the jobs that will exist in your lifetime don't even exist yet. Therefore, college is not about preparing you for a job, or even for a career. It's about preparing you for life, to become a lifelong learner who knows how to gain the knowledge and skills that are needed for new challenges. So relax — your choice of major and even your choice of career don't lock you in for life, and you have the rest of your life to adjust the fit. There are many careers that will allow you to develop and apply a great number of strengths.

Does this mean that you can be anything you want to be when you grow up? Well, that's certainly the American dream. But it's also the American myth! It's democratic and reflects our national character to say that anyone can become the next president or CEO or movie star. But the truth is you can become only a highly developed version of who you already are — you can only grow into your own potential. You've been wired from early in life, perhaps even from birth, to love certain things, to see the world a certain way, to blossom in particular environments, and to respond naturally and easily to specific opportunities.

Just as an acorn can't become a palm tree, you can't become something other than the very best of who you already are — which is not such a bad deal after all! Reaching your full potential, becoming the person you were created to be, is an aspiration that will take a lifetime but will be much more satisfying than unsuccessfully struggling to become someone you are not.

So what is "fit" all about? Exactly what are the pieces that must fit together for a satisfying career? There are really only two of them: who you are and what you do. Psychologists call it "person-environment fit." Theologians sometimes refer to it as a "calling." We like theologian Frederick Buechner's definition of calling: "where your deep gladness meets the world's deep needs." It's all about becoming the person you were created to be in order to do the work you were designed to do. It's that simple — and that complicated.

### **Your Deep Gladness**

It all starts with *you*. Any search for a good fit begins with a good look inside yourself. Or as Parker Palmer says, "Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am" (Palmer, 2000, p. 4). What is your "deep gladness"? What brings you joy? What energizes you and gets you up in the morning? These are helpful clues in your search for the right fit. We want to encourage you to see what's *right* with you. We want you to take seriously those most important and most precious parts of your identity, and then bring these aspects into the career-planning process.

If you can't think of anything that gets you up in the morning these days, reflect on when you were in fourth or fifth grade. What did you love to do? How did you spend your time? What could absorb you for hours? Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi talks about the concept of "flow" that occurs when we enjoy a task so much that we lose all track of time and aren't thinking about ourselves or our performance.

Interestingly, adults report this experience occurs during work three times more often than in any other activity. Flow happens when you're challenged and stretched, but are equal to the task. Athletes and musicians sometimes



refer to it as "playing in the zone." Everything falls into place, you don't exactly know how you did it, but you were able to excel in a way that brought deep satisfaction — that "deep gladness" we referred to earlier. People who have developed strengths and are in environments that allow their talents to flourish are far more likely to experience this "flow."

Watch any group of children and it will be clear what they love to do — and what they don't. The seeds of their future have been planted and are beginning to blossom. No one has yet told them that they can't get a job doing what they love and there's no pressure yet to follow in Mom or Dad's footsteps by becoming a doctor or lawyer. No teacher has yet said that they don't have what it takes.

There's a saying that goes, "Genius is childhood recaptured." Your childhood reflects the genius of your most naturally powerful talents. So think back to your childhood, put aside the fears that have come with growing a little older, and ask yourself, "*What would I love to do, if I didn't have to worry about making money and if I knew I could not fail?*" Your answer is a clue to your deep gladness, and it's the most important piece of the puzzle.

After you've had a chance to think about this question, there are some other things you can do to figure out who you are and where your deep gladness lies. Talking about your Signature Themes with the most important people in your life can help; taking career inventories and discussing the results with a career counselor can give you some clues; and discussing your dreams with your advisor or your favorite professor can aid you in pinpointing what's most important to you and what you're passionate about.

### **Meeting the World's Deep Needs**

If the first piece of the career-choice puzzle is knowing who you are and what brings you deep gladness, the second piece is connecting that to what you do — how you can meet the world's deep needs. Leaving the planet a little better off than you found it is a worthy goal. A sense of mission and purpose for your life can energize you and keep you going when you encounter the natural obstacles of life.

What kind of difference do you want to make in the world? What kind of legacy do you want to leave as your imprint after you're gone? The college years aren't usually a time when thoughts about the end of life are foremost in your mind, and that's as it should be. But the kind of life you live is being determined now by the choices you make every day. So what life are you beginning to craft for yourself? What are the first chapters of your legacy?

You've already begun to write the story that will become your life legacy. Look back over the jobs you've had, hobbies you've enjoyed, and memorable volunteer work. See any patterns? Can you put into words what you liked or disliked about each job or volunteer opportunity? On your best days, what were you doing? When you experienced a sense of fulfillment or satisfaction with work well done, what had you done to make that happen?

Some environments allow your talents to flourish more than others. Research has shown that most of the stress of life is due to the environments we're in, more so than what we are doing in those environments (Miller, 1999). Environments that reflect our values are more likely to enable us to capitalize on our talents. British author Samuel Butler said, "People are always good company when they are doing what they really enjoy." Finding the environment that brings out your best and that allows you to develop strengths by capitalizing on your most powerful talents is the secret to making a wise career choice.

So how do you discover the kinds of environments that are likely to allow you to maximize your talents? Your previous experiences offer a clue, as does what you learn from job shadowing — following someone who is in a career you think you might enjoy over the course of several days or weeks. But there's another way.

Psychologist John Holland (1992) devised a method of determining person-environment fit back in the early 1970s when he found that there were six basic types of people and there were specific kinds of environments that seemed to fit those types. He believed that people are happiest in their work when they are in congruent environments — environments that are a good fit for them. It's important to note that people don't fit neatly into boxes like this; most of us are not only one type but are a combination, and most environments also have a mix of characteristics. But

Holland's research on vocational types has stood the test of time and can be a useful lens as you think about environments that will allow you to best maximize and apply your talents. You can ask a career counselor how you take the Self-Directed Search, which is a measure of Holland's vocational types. We recommend that you take a number of different career inventories as part of your career exploration process.

A large group of college students from across the United States and the United Kingdom has taken both the Clifton StrengthsFinder and a measure of Holland's vocational types. Their responses give us some clues as to the types of environments that are a good fit for talents from certain themes. These results can be found in the appendix of this book and on the StrengthsQuest Web site. Keep in mind that each person has a unique combination of talents, so any connections between your Signature Themes and your Holland type are simply to give you a place to start as you think about meeting the world's deep needs. In the pages that follow, we've outlined some of the environments that are likely to allow your talents to flourish, based on the research we've done with the Clifton StrengthsFinder and Holland's vocational types.

It's important to remember that StrengthsFinder is not a career inventory, however, and does not tell you what career path to follow. It simply helps you discover the areas where your greatest talents lie so that you can build on them in whatever roles you're in throughout your life. Knowing more about yourself helps you in the process of figuring out the environments that are likely to bring out your best. This journey may begin in your teens, but it continues for a lifetime. Whether you are choosing a career for the first time or changing careers in midlife, the process involves knowing yourself and connecting that self-awareness to environments that will allow your talents to flourish.

Remember that strengths are developed when your greatest talents have been combined with skills and knowledge appropriate to the task. As powerful as talents are, they alone cannot allow you to experience deep gladness in your work. It's only when the talent has been honed with skills and knowledge to the point of strength that you will experience enough success to bring joy. Author Pearl S. Buck noted this when she said, "The secret of joy in work is contained in one word — excellence. To know how to do something well is to enjoy it." So the clues to the environments that might bring out your best are simply a starting place for you to consider as you begin the exploration for a connection between who you are and what you do. Gaining the skills and knowledge to do the job at the level of strength is what will allow you to achieve excellence.

## **The Good News**

The good news is that in your talents you already have within you what you need to become your best self and achieve in several different careers. Your greatest talents are simply waiting to be discovered. It needs to be *uncovered* rather than *discovered*. That's what the Clifton StrengthsFinder helps you do: It gives you some clues that help you discover your talents. Your Signature Themes are the areas where your greatest talents most likely reside, based on how you responded to the assessment.

On the following pages, we have outlined each theme and under each have described some environments that might encourage the talents reflected in the theme. We've also provided some suggestions that will capitalize on some of the talents within that theme throughout your career-exploration process. Keep in mind that your Signature Themes combine in unique ways; the talents that lie within the Ideation theme look different when combined with the talents from the Woo, Positivity, Communication, and Activator themes, and potentially would fit with different environments than if those talents were combined with the talents found within the Strategic, Futuristic, Intellection, and Input themes. The suggestions we give on the following pages are simply meant to provide you with a place to start exploring. They are meant to open the doors to a journey of uncovering your deep gladness and how it might meet some of the world's deep needs.

### **Action Items**

To get your personal action items for this chapter, log on to [www.strengthsquest.com](http://www.strengthsquest.com) and click Strengths, then Student Action Items.

## Chapter XI

### Further Insights Into Choosing a Career

In this chapter, we want you to focus on what you've learned about your greatest talents and how you might approach the career planning process based on your Signature Themes. You've had a chance to look over the suggestions in the previous chapter. Now we'd like you to complete some exercises that will help you dig deeper. At the end of the chapter, we'll encourage you to select at least one strategy to implement immediately.

#### Identify the Career Implications of the Deepest Aspects of Your Identity

Ancient writers pointed to four elements that comprise the core of a person. These include heart (your deepest feelings), soul (the innermost place that contains the spark of life), mind (a variety of inner mental activities), and strength (not just physical, but all of your capabilities). Although this approach puts a slightly different twist on the concept of strengths, it offers interesting insights.

There are groups of sentence-completion statements below that reflect the deepest aspects of your personhood. Take the time to honestly and spontaneously respond to each.

#### Heart

1. I am passionate about \_\_\_\_\_
2. The greatest tragedy is when \_\_\_\_\_
3. I would really love to \_\_\_\_\_

#### Soul

1. The most meaningful thing I've ever done is \_\_\_\_\_
2. I feel a sense of destiny when \_\_\_\_\_
3. I come alive when I'm \_\_\_\_\_

#### Mind

1. I like to think about \_\_\_\_\_
2. I wonder why \_\_\_\_\_
3. I really believe that \_\_\_\_\_

#### Strength

1. I am most capable of \_\_\_\_\_
2. I have a talent for \_\_\_\_\_
3. I seem gifted in the following areas: \_\_\_\_\_

Which questions created the strongest response in you? Which ones did you leave blank? What patterns do you begin to see as you spontaneously respond to these questions? How might those responses and patterns help you in the career planning process?

### **Always Have at Least One Mentor, and Always be a Mentor to at Least One Person**

A mentor is a person you respect for his or her wisdom and is someone from whom you are willing to learn. A mentor is a special type of advisor or counselor. He or she doesn't have to be "all-knowing" or a close friend, but should simply be willing and able to guide you in at least one helpful aspect. Often a mentor is someone who has "been there," in that he or she has done what you are interested in doing. While a mentor relationship is informal, its impact can be substantial.

Please note that we suggest having at least one mentor, but more than one is best because then you get additional perspectives.

In addition to having at least one mentor, you need to be a mentor to at least one other person. You doubtlessly have much to offer others.

You might want to start by mentoring someone who is three or more years younger than you. Mentoring does not need to be formal. Just offer friendship to someone you care about and would like to help.

### **Target Your Values Before You Target a Career**

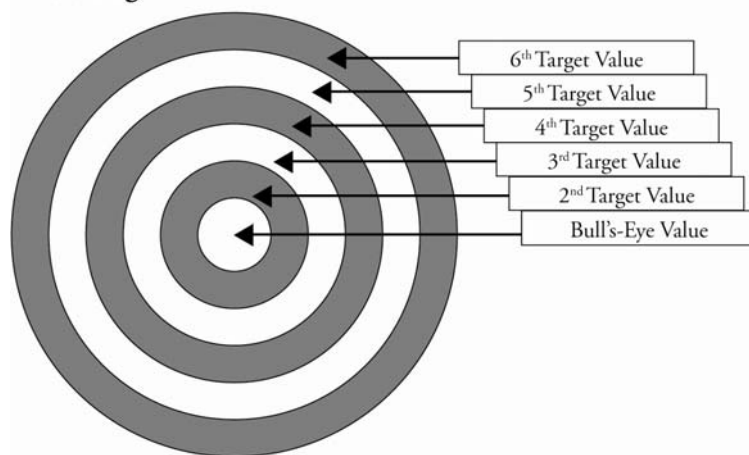
What do you value most? This is one of the first questions that you should consider in career planning.

Picture a target in your mind. It has five rings around a bull's-eye. The bull's-eye stands for the things that you value most.

Now, here is the challenge: Identify your six most important values, and then arrange them in order from the bull's-eye out, from your number-one (most important) value to number six.

#### **Values Target**

#### **Values Target**



Now that you have targeted your values, remember that any career that would cause you to "miss the target" of your most important values will produce value conflicts. On the other hand, a career that helps you hit your target values produces a synergy that will likely increase your determination to achieve.

**Imagine That Your Top Two Themes are Two People Who are Choosing and Planning Their Careers**

This career-planning strategy will require you to use your imagination. First, consider your top two themes. If those don't resonate with you, pick the two that seem to fit you best. Next, imagine that these two themes are two people who totally embody the talents associated with those themes.

Then go back into the action items from the previous chapter (Chapter 10) and list the strategies for career exploration that fit both themes:

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Now list the types of environments that bring out the best of the talents in these themes.

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Next, list the types of people you might interview or read about to learn how these talents are applied in their work.

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Finally, considering the strategies, environments, and people you just listed, identify ONE specific and realistic action step you can commit to taking this week as you begin the career exploration process.

This week I will \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Look to Your Greatest Successes for Clues to the Right Career**

The whole idea of applying your greatest talents to the achievement of excellence stems from studying successful people. Extending that logic, you would be wise to study your own success patterns and then think about how your successes pertain to career planning.

To help you think about your successes, answer these three questions about your greatest triumphs:

1. What has been your most successful experience in an employment, service, or volunteer work setting?
2. What has been your most successful experience in an academic, learning, or athletic setting?
3. What has been your greatest success in an interpersonal relationship, leadership role, club, team, or organization?

After identifying your greatest success in each of those areas, focus on each success, one at a time. Relive the experience in your mind. Imagine the events and interactions surrounding your greatest successes.

As you focus on each success, ask yourself five questions.

1. What was it about that experience that makes it stand out as one of my greatest successes?
2. What did I do that contributed to producing this success?
3. What was my mental approach to this success?
4. Which talents from my Signature Themes contributed to producing this success?
5. What clues to possible careers do these experiences provide me?

**Don't Plan Your Career as If It Were Some Future Event; Begin Your Career Today and Live Accordingly**

You can begin to employ each and every one of these strategies today. You can immediately start acting like the career professional you want to be in the future. Today, you can put forth the attitude that you know leads to success. You can begin to develop the strengths you know you will need to apply as a professional.

If you are in school, consider it your academic career. If you have a part-time or full-time job, approach your role professionally.

Do everything you can to be a person of excellence now. It is your best preparation for future excellence.



## **Chapter XII**

### **Let's Start a Revolution**

It's now time to travel into the future. Imagine what it would be like to live in a world in which we all knew and lived through our greatest talents. Imagine a society in which each of us would perceive others in terms of their unique talents and strengths. What would that be like? How would people feel? How would they act? What would our social systems and organizations look like? What would happen to the relationships among cultures in a strengths-based world?

Let's begin by imagining these possibilities on a personal level. Then, let's expand our thinking to include relationships, families, the world of work, organizations, and, finally, culture.

#### **The Impact of a Strengths Revolution on You as an Individual**

To consider the impact that a strengths revolution could have on you, let's start by just imagining that you are aware of all of your greatest talents. Knowing your Signature Themes alone is profound, but push your imagination to the point where you are aware of each and every one of your specific talents. Obviously, this tremendous level of self-knowledge would not come to you through one online assessment, or from reading several books, or even through an extended series of classes. This understanding would require a lifetime of learning.

However, if you were living in a society focused on strengths, people would have been helping you become aware of your unique talents all along.

To make the image of a strengths revolution more real, imagine that by age 20 you would know each of your greatest talents and have an idea of the potential for strength they offered. You would naturally have the great self-confidence that would come with awareness of your potential, and you would likely feel humility at having been given such gifts. Awareness of your talents would also bring you a sense of identity and direction.

If you were raised in a society that rigorously helped its youth fully know and understand their talents, a lot of things would change. You would be more energized to fulfill your potential. You would be less frustrated because the trial-and-error process of discovering your talents would be greatly diminished. All in all, you would be more vibrantly alive.

#### **The Impact of a Strengths Revolution on Relationships**

If everyone were aware of their own talents and those of others, we would likely place much greater value on each other and have a new basis for forming relationships in all levels of society.

Within large or small groups, entire organizations, or even couples, two things often happen when people become aware of each other's talents. First, there is increased understanding of each other. Second, people gain greater respect for each other. Can you imagine what it would be like to live in a world where everyone understood and respected each other? Phoniness, façades, and pretense would become things of the past. Authenticity would be the new norm. And of course, with more authenticity would come greater interpersonal closeness and cooperation. This would be a tremendous benefit of a strengths revolution.

#### **The Impact of a Strengths Revolution on Families**

Starting with the most basic family unit, let's think about choosing mates. If everyone knew their own talents, and if we were able to know the talents of others, we could make better decisions when selecting a mate. We would undoubtedly want to take into consideration our areas of greater and lesser talents and then look for a mate whose talents complemented our own. We would also want our own talents to complement those of our mate.

The quality of a marriage would be better if partners knew their talents and those of their mates. This knowledge would undoubtedly result in greater cooperation. If each were working from his or her talents, they could be more effective as they worked together to reach their common goals.

If a couple really understood each other's talents, roles and responsibilities could be shaped around who they each were rather than preconceived notions about gender roles. Surely, this would reduce frustration in a marriage and increase the satisfaction that the couple would experience.

By taking the strengths perspective, individuals would feel increasingly grateful for their mates, and they would realize that together, their talents could produce at even greater levels. Their intimacy would increase as they worked together.

After the strengths revolution, married couples might have a new view of their most important roles. Wouldn't it be fantastic if spouses thought that their most important responsibility was to bring out the best in each other? Love would be expressed and experienced in the nurturing of one another's talents.

Moreover, a strengths revolution would inspire parents to identify talents in their children. And maybe this would become the new standard of parenting. Indeed, families would be much healthier if everyone knew their own talents and the talents of the other family members.

### **The Impact of a Strengths Revolution on the World of Work**

Consider what Gallup discovered in an October 2005 survey of U.S. employees: Only 31 percent were "engaged" at work, while 52 percent were "not engaged" and, most distressing, 17 percent were "actively disengaged."

Let's look at that 17 percent. These aren't just people who don't do their work well — they actively disrupt the work of others. Companies would be better off paying them to stay home. And Gallup estimates that those actively disengaged employees cost the U.S. economy approximately \$300 billion per year in lost productivity.

Why are these employees disengaged? Gallup's decades of research suggest that it's because they're not in roles that match their areas of greatest potential, that they don't have productive relationships with their managers, or that their managers aren't in roles that are best suited to their talents. It is very likely that after a strengths revolution, the opposite would be true — and you would see dramatic increases in employee satisfaction, productivity, customer loyalty, and profit.

### **The Impact of a Strengths Revolution on Schools and Colleges**

Schools and colleges typically focus on students (a) gaining the best possible education, (b) appreciating the best in art and literature, (c) developing composition skills, (d) learning important concepts and problem-solving skills in science and mathematics, and (e) developing personal qualities that promote achievement, civility, and personal well-being. We believe that after a strengths revolution, students would achieve in each of these areas at rates higher than ever before.

Of course, after a strengths revolution, a primary emphasis would be placed on helping students become aware of their talents. We imagine one-on-one sessions, group meetings, and even workshops devoted to building this awareness throughout each person's education.

Educational planning based on strengths naturally follows from building students' awareness. This planning process would help students form goals based on their talents. Even more important, strengths-oriented educational planning would continuously raise the challenge of developing strengths and inventing ways of applying great talents to increase learning and improve academic performance. Finally, students would be challenged to invent ways of applying their most natural talents in their courses of study.

We imagine that new learning paradigms may emerge as schools and colleges become focused on strengths. But the biggest change may be in the role of instructors. We can't help but ask, "What will educators need to do if they are to help students discover their greatest talents and develop strengths?"

First, they would need to know their own most powerful talents and existing strengths. Second, they would have to serve as examples. Therefore, they would have to be developing and fully applying strengths as they communicate and clarify the course content in the classes they would teach.

In addition, these educators would need to be able to identify the most powerful talents of students and encourage and assist the students in maximizing those talents through strengths development. In essence, educators would orchestrate opportunities and create activities that challenge students to apply their greatest talents as they learn.

### **The Impact of a Strengths Revolution on Society in General**

We wonder about what would happen to ethnic and cultural divisions if everyone first knew each other in terms of their talents and strengths.

How would service organizations operate after a strengths revolution? What types of services would we need? This makes us wonder about which services are most important today.

How about faith-based organizations? What would happen to them, and what would their role be after a strengths revolution? How could they be a part of developing strengths? How would people be affected in terms of their faith and their view of God after everyone came to know, understand, and appreciate their talents?

We wonder about civic organizations, local and national governments, and international relations after a strengths revolution. Would we need as much government? Would we need as much policing? Would we need as many levels of bureaucracy if everyone knew and operated from their talents and strengths?

Finally, we wonder about elected officials. What if we really knew the talents and strengths of those who run for office? How many of those in office today would have been elected? Also consider the many talented individuals who, because of a strengths revolution, would choose to run for office or aspire to leadership roles after becoming aware of their abilities to serve the public at levels of excellence.

Again, we must admit we don't know the answers. But we are sure that the differences would be substantial, and we believe that they would be overwhelmingly positive.

The truth is, learning about talents and using them as the foundation of strengths so that you reach your maximum potential isn't good just for you; it's good for everyone. Simply put, if we all focused our lives on making the most of our talents, the world would be a better place. And could there be an outcome more worthy than that?

Now it's time to create the future. You have your work cut out for you.

Let the strengths revolution begin!