

# Building a Team Through Strengths-Based Leadership in Higher Education

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## *Introduction*

University leaders face the challenge of building effective teams. The key to effectiveness is hiring well, providing ongoing training, and working intentionally at team-building. Effective team-building is more than off-site sessions with ropes courses and “getting to know you exercises”. With hundreds of campuses across the US choosing to have a strengths-based leadership model --among students and employees -- a new approach to leadership is developing, with some promising results. It begins, however, with the leader knowing her/himself.

## *Understanding and Managing Self*

The field of positive psychology has given insights into how one’s mental models, self-awareness, self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence can poise an individual for enhanced success. Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory is rooted in the concept that self-reflective thought affects one’s behavior. It posits that belief in one’s capacity to produce will result in the desired effect. In short, if you believe you can do something, your likelihood to succeed is enhanced.

Dweck (2006), in looking at the differences between students with a fixed mindset (i.e., belief in pre-determined and limited intelligence) versus growth mindset (i.e., belief

that intelligence is able to be changed or improved) reports that those with perspectives of growth or malleability are higher achieving than are those believing in a fixed entity. So, those who believe that they can learn and change have greater levels of achievement than those who believe that they have no choice and are “just the way they are”. Thus, in addition to positive beliefs about one’s ability to shape one’s thoughts, higher achievement is reached by those who think properly about what it means to be successful; they continue to learn and grow.

However, all of this must be rooted in a clear understanding of self. Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) explain

Self-awareness means having a deep understanding of one’s emotions, as well as one’s strengths and limitations and one’s values and motives. People with self-awareness are realistic - neither overly self-critical nor naively hopeful. Rather, they are honest with themselves about themselves (p. 40).

Goleman et al. define self-management as

... the component of emotional intelligence that frees us from being a prisoner of our feelings. It’s what allows the mental clarity and concentrated energy that leadership demands ... Leaders with such self-mastery embody an upbeat, optimistic enthusiasm that tunes resonance to the positive range (p. 46).

Ideally, leaders are able to know themselves, their strengths, and to build on those strengths with an optimistic outlook related to their ability to succeed.

New neurological research has shown the power each individual holds to actually change the molecular structure of the brain by refocusing their attention. Jeffrey Schwartz (2002), writes

I propose that the time has come for science to confront the serious implications of the fact that directed, willed mental activity can clearly and systematically alter brain

function, that the exertion of willful effort generates a physical force that has the power to change how the brain works and even its physical structure” (pp. 17-18). Therefore, to continue to rehearse counterproductive behaviors reinforces the physical structures in the brain that create the urge toward that behavior. A strengths approach encourages individuals to focus on the correct use of their innate abilities which subsequently reorders the brain to produce behaviors indicative of excellence.

Through the use of the Clifton Strength Finder (CSF) instrument, individuals are given a tool that provides insights into their strengths. This can be used to enhance a positive approach to their life and work, as well as an increased optimism related to their ability to succeed.

### *Understanding Others*

Beyond the understanding of oneself, leaders need the ability to empathize or to understand others. “Saarni (1999) posited that the related construct of emotional competence is a crucial component of social development and contributes to the quality of interpersonal relationships” (Schutte, Malouff, Bobik, Coston, Greeson, Jedlicka, et al., 2001, p. 523). And, Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) in speaking of resonant leadership, emphasize that

Empathy, which includes listening and taking other people’s perspectives, allows leaders to tune in to the emotional channels between people that create resonance. ... To guide the emotional tone of a group, however, leaders must first have a sure sense of their own directions and priorities - which brings us back again to the importance of self-awareness (p. 31).

To develop this further, we learn that understanding the dynamics of team building is enhanced by looking at collective dynamics. Bandura (1997) expanded the concept of self-efficacy to one of collective efficacy which “represents a group’s shared belief in its conjoint

capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainment" (p. 477).

Optimally, members of a team know themselves individually and are focused on their own strengths development. They have empathy and enthusiasm as they learn the perspectives and strengths of others, and are committed to the concept of shared goals and vision, while working cooperatively together.

#### *A Strengths Approach to Self- and Other-Awareness*

When introducing the concept of strengths identification and training to leadership development and team-building, we begin to envision a new way to see the potential of human resources --in the workplace, the classroom, or one's personal life. This is only magnified when one considers the concept of team-building with a group of people who are aware of their natural strengths and interested in working together to develop them to their best potential -- individually and collectively. A strengths perspective provides an opportunity for individuals and groups to be self-aware and to envision "what could be" as they focus on developing their strengths. It values differences, while allowing each member of the team to focus on what they do best.

A strengths philosophy on leadership calls into question the prevailing cultural assumption that individuals must work on their weaknesses to improve their effectiveness. A strengths perspective is grounded in the belief that focusing on one's assets will result in the greatest growth. However, this perspective does not negate the reality that weaknesses exist. Donald O. Clifton, the late CEO of the Gallup Organization and creator of the Strengths Finder inventory writes:

Each of us has weaknesses, of course. Activities that are effortless for some may be frustratingly difficult for us. And if these weaknesses interfere with our strengths, we need to develop

strategies to manage around them. ... To clear our skewed perspective, however, we must remember that casting a critical eye on our weaknesses and working hard to manage them, while sometimes necessary, will only help us prevent failure. It will not help us reach excellence (2001, p. 124).

While a strengths perspective does not preclude an individual striving to improve, it does refocus the effort from working on one's weaknesses to addressing the "shadow side" of one's strengths. For example, individuals with the "Achiever" strength, as identified by the Clifton Strengths Finder (CSF) instrument, may have the capacity to work long hours without tiring. However, this focus on achievement may be to the detriment of their families, community organizations, churches, and other important social networks. Additionally, Achievers may find that the constant drive to achieve may leave them with a deep sense of discontent when their goals are not met. This discontent may, in turn, lead to a lower sense of life satisfaction and personal well-being.

Each strength presents an opportunity for the achievement of excellence or the experience of failure. Leaders most often make their greatest mistakes from a misuse of their strengths as opposed to the mismanagement of their weaknesses. This phenomenon occurs because a person's strengths have a direct effect on one's value system. For example, a person possessing the CSF strength of "Relator" has the capacity to build intimate, genuine relationships that are characterized by a high degree of trust. While this strength is extremely helpful in building strong teams, the Relator leader may also have a difficult time making unpopular decisions that may affect their close relationships. The desire to maintain the relationship may take precedent over doing what is essential for organizational success.

Managing the shadow side of strength is most productive when the focus remains on the positive as opposed to focusing on the negative. Individuals that need to improve in

certain areas should focus on the optimal use of their strengths. This enhances both individual and group performance.

### *Self Transcendence*

One of the most critical aspects of effective leadership is rarely discussed in the formal literature on leadership. Yet, Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*, coined the term “Level 5 Leaders” to discuss the characteristics present in those individuals who led organizations so as to sustain significant market position and financial success over a twenty-year period. The Level 5 Leader is a person who is remarkably free of the need for recognition and ego enhancement. Their ambition is turned toward the goals of their company and the promotion of others. This type of leader has developed the ability to transcend the self and work at a level of increased awareness. “Self transcendence reflects a decreasing reliance on externals for definition of the self, increasing interiority and spirituality, and a greater sense of connectedness with past and future generations” (Levinson, Jennings, Aldwin, & Shiraishi, 2005).

It would appear that a focus on strengths would be irrelevant to self transcendence because the essence of transcendence is to decrease reliance on the social definition of self. However, self transcendence is also marked by a heightened sense of spirituality. Our personal spirituality is not divorced from our personality or values. Our personal strengths inform our spirituality in that they reflect our essential human tendencies and values. These values shape the behaviors used to connect to one’s spirituality. For example, individuals who exhibit the CSF strength of “Intellection” enjoy the process of thinking and musing. Because people possessing the Intellection strength value time alone and reflection, they are often drawn to the process of meditation. A strengths-based approach to self transcendence enables one to acquire an understanding of how particular strengths may serve as conduits to a realm beyond self.

### *Conclusion*

Education, in particular, has historically focused on remediating weaknesses and allowing students to “waive out” of assignments where they have already demonstrated proficiency. Strengths based leadership provides a remarkably different approach.

By identifying individual strengths, providing training in strengths development, giving assignments that allow employees and students to build on their strengths, providing encouragement that enhances self-efficacy, and intentionally building teams based on collective strengths, hundreds of universities are reaping the rewards of this new leadership approach.

No punch clocks  
Means  
I produce of  
My own accord

You bestow credence  
On my talent  
So I give my best  
Willingly

Not asking what  
I cannot produce  
But rather that  
Which I can

Offering a chance  
To be and do  
Here it feels as if  
My efforts count

And mostly  
I can build a fortune  
Not from money  
But respect (Snyder & Lopez, 2007, p. 407)

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