

Strength-based Leadership

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During the Principals' Workshop held at Andrews University this past summer, I was introduced in a breakout session to a little book and a big concept that has subsequently impacted the way I view myself, my colleagues, and my approach to students. The book is *Strengths Finder 2.0* by Tom Rath. And the concept is that instead of focusing on strengthening our weaknesses, we should be focusing on further developing our strengths. I have always been one of those students and parents who believed that more time should be spent on strengthening the weak areas, but as I read *Strengths Finder*, I have come to believe that this is what the Bible teaches in Ephesians 4:11 about all of us being called to play different roles in this world.



The original online *StrengthsFinder* assessment was created in 1998 by Donald O. Clifton, Ph.D., along with Tom Rath and a team of scientists at The Gallup Organization. In 2001, they included the first edition of *StrengthsFinder* with the bestseller *Now, Discover Your Strengths*. The 2007 edition builds on the initial assessment and language which is rooted in more than 40 years of research. This research demonstrates that people who have the opportunity to focus on their strengths every day are “six times as likely to be engaged in their jobs and more than three times as likely to report having an excellent quality of life in general” (iii). “Each person has greater potential for success in specific areas,” he says, “and the key to human development is building on who you already are.” (8) Now before you assume that this is common sense and you have always practised it, ask yourself the following questions: Have you ever told a student (or a son or daughter) that they can be anything they want to be? Do you believe that you (and your students) should spend the most time on the subjects they earn the lowest marks in? Have you ever written comments like “needs to work harder” on report cards?

I know I have. I tend to give more attention to what's wrong than to what's right. At times I brush over the high achievement (“That 95% doesn't surprise me; I know that's what you're capable of doing”) and dwell on the areas of low achievement (“You need to spend more time and effort on raising that 65% . . . you're capable of more”). I've encountered several students who choose careers based on the anticipated salary rather than on matching their strengths with the qualities and talents required for the job. I've met even more parents who, in their sincere desire to have the best for their children, force them to take subjects and pursue careers that they have no interest in or natural talent for. If, instead, we all focused on further strengthening our natural gifts, extraordinary potential exists for us to grow and contribute.

After the initial introduction, Rath directs his readers to his online *StrengthsFinder* test which identifies a person's top five areas of strength out of the 34 main theme areas he describes. The rest of the book, along with the printout that can be produced from the website, describes each of these areas and provides suggestions for building on these strengths and working with others who have this strength. A personalized Strengths Discover and Action-Planning Guide helps you to set specific goals for applying your strengths both on and off the job. The companion website features even more resources.

I'm not suggesting that we should avoid doing anything that doesn't come naturally. After all, few of us will find ourselves in jobs that allow us to avoid our weak areas all together. But if we can identify our innate talents and spend most of our energies further developing these talents into strengths, we can

improve our performance, increase our job satisfaction, and provide better service to God and humanity. According to Rath, “having the opportunity to develop our strengths is more important to our success than our role, our title, or even our pay” (11). And if we can help our students to discover their natural talents and to focus on developing these and using them to serve others, they will ultimately experience greater job satisfaction, fewer frustrations in school, and more joy in service. Instead of “you can be anything you want to be,” Rath suggests that a more accurate maxim would be, “You cannot be anything you want to be—but you can be a lot more of who you already are” (9).

Resources:

- Rath, Tom. *Strengths Finder 2.0*. New York: Gallup Press, 2007.