

The Best of You and the Rest of You

Making the Most of Strengths-Based Leadership



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Your Leadership Coach - Dr. Joelle Jay

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A Coach for Strategic Leaders

Joelle advocates a reflective, strategic approach to leadership that helps leaders clearly and swiftly identify what they are doing and why, so they can more directly align their actions with the results they want. As an executive coach, she is often retained by senior management, high potential leaders, and rising stars to help them achieve and maintain their peak performance.

The 360 Advantage

Joelle believes that concrete, accurate feedback is essential to being one's best. A 360 Degree Profile offers an efficient yet thorough way to attain that feedback. However, traditional 360s often leave valuable information hidden. Joelle's unique approach to designing, conducting, and learning from 360s allows leaders to glean the maximum results – results that are personalized and powerful for each individual leader.

A Popular Speaker

Joelle is known for her signature talk, "Leading with Your Strengths: Using Strengths-Based Leadership to be a Better Leader," and speaks for corporations, associations, and large groups of leaders looking for a better, more efficient way to capitalize on their talent. To find out more about booking Joelle as a speaker for your next event, please visit www.pillar-consulting.com.

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A movement in the business world could fundamentally change the way we think about improvement. This revolution capitalizes on the unique contributions of each individual, leveraging their unmatched, powerful ways of being and doing. It results in increased efficiency, improved effectiveness and a happier way of life. The approach is Strengths-Based Leadership (SBL).

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of SBL for business leaders who truly want to be their best and to bring out the best in their people.

What is SBL?

SBL is a philosophy of leadership based on the belief that we are all born with unique strengths and talents, and that when we act in alignment with those strengths, we are at our best. We can understand it by studying its history, or context, and its key concepts.

The History of SBL

The idea may be revolutionary, but it's not entirely new. In 1966, Peter Drucker wrote in *The Effective Executive*, "The effective executive builds on strengths – their own strengths, the strengths of superiors, colleagues, subordinates; and on the strengths of the situation" (cited in Buckingham, 2007, p.3). SBL is one of at least three disciplines that share a common view: we are stronger and better where things are working than we are than where they're not.

Appreciative Inquiry

One of these disciplines is the field of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). AI brought Drucker's idea about management to whole organizations. AI is based on the work of David Cooperrider, who supported the basic premise that it was better "to build organizations around what works rather than fix what doesn't" (Buckingham, 2007, p.3).

Positive Psychology

A similar and related field is positive psychology. Positive Psychology, or as *Time* magazine once referred to it, "The Science of Happiness," studies what makes people happy and healthy. It was launched in Dr. Martin Seligman's (1999) speech to the American Psychological Association and celebrated in the following year's special issue of *American Psychology*.

The Strengths Movement

SBL builds upon these foundations of AI and positive psychology by looking at how people accentuate their strengths to improve their performance (particularly at work). SBL was

proposed by Donald O. Clifton, a researcher with the Gallup organization who wanted “to start a global conversation about what’s right with people” (Rath, 2007, p.i). Together with Gallup researchers, Clifton mined the existing database of Gallup’s 40 year study of human strengths. Based on their findings, they developed set of 34 of “the most prevalent themes of human talent.” Clifton and co-author Marcus Buckingham published their findings in the bestselling management book *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (2001). Since Clifton’s death in 2003, his work has been continued by his grandson, Tom Rath, author of *StrengthsFinder 2.0* (2007), and Clifton’s co-author, Marcus Buckingham, author of *Go Put Your Strengths to Work* (2007), in a continuing effort to provide concepts and processes that guide people in leveraging their talent to improve their performance.

Appreciative Inquiry, Positive Psychology, and the Strengths Movement all share a common assumption: there is power in what works. SBL applies the idea of emphasizing “what’s right” to leadership – specifically personal leadership in which one takes responsibility for their own growth and development.

Key Concepts

SBL is part mindset, part skills and practice. Two key concepts explain this approach, the understanding of which allow individuals to leverage the philosophy and play to their strengths.

1. Our strengths are enduring and unique.

Our strengths are enduring, because we are born with them. Strengths are things we do naturally. They’re easy for us, and we usually enjoy doing them. They’re unique, because no one else in the world has the same combination of strengths, expressed the same way, as anyone else.

2. Our greatest room for growth is in the direction of our strength.

For many people, this is a switch. Typically what people do is put all of their attention and energy into their weaknesses and take their strengths for granted.

A focus on weakness is ingrained in our culture. As Tom Rath points out in *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, “The aim of almost any learning program is to help us become who we are not” (Rath, 2007, p. 3). But our growth in areas of weakness is destined to be little more than marginal.

Unless you have the necessary talent, your improvements will be modest. You will be diverting most of your energy toward damage control and very little toward real development (Clifton & Buckingham, 2007, p.31).

There’s nothing wrong with wanting to improve; it’s the obsession with weaknesses as the place to improve that’s counterproductive. It’s much more powerful to build on our strengths.

Importantly, the message should not be that we ignore our shortcomings. In many instances, we must attend to them. We manage our weaknesses so we can build on our strengths.

In *Go Put Your Strengths to Work*, Buckingham comes at these key concepts another way, by pointing out the myths many people hold and replacing them with new, strengths-based ideas.

Myth: As you grow, your personality changes.

Truth: as you grow, you become more of who you already are.

Myth: You will grow the most in your areas of greatest weakness.

Truth: You will grow the most in your areas of greatest strength.

Myth: A good team member does whatever it takes to help the team.

Truth: A good team member deliberately volunteers his strengths to the team most of the time.

Overall, SBL asserts that the emphasis for growth and excellence should center on strengths, with weaknesses being managed to prevent any negative influence on performance.

Why is SBL Important?

The question is, does SBL actually make a difference in performance? In other words, does it work? In a word, yes.

In its research, the Gallup Organization has surveyed over 10 million people on the question, “At work, do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every single day?”

When the answer was “yes,” people were “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” (Rath, 2007, p. iii). Gallup’s research has shown how a strengths approach improves a person’s confidence, direction, hope, and kindness toward others (Rath, 2007). In short, “you would be at your most productive, most effective, most creative, and most resilient if you could play to your strengths most of the time” (Buckingham, www.SimplyStrengths.com, 10/16/07).

It’s not just individual improvement that results from SBL. Organizations profit, as well.

Where employees believed they had the opportunity to do what they do best, businesses were

1. 50% more likely to have lower turnover,
2. 38% more likely to have productive business units, and
3. 44% more likely to have higher customer satisfaction (Clifton & Buckingham, 2007, *Discover*, p.5).

Unfortunately, only 1/3 of the 10 million employees surveyed say they actually have the opportunity to do what they do best everyday. Of those that have the opportunity to do what they do best, only 17% of people polled say that on a typical day, they spend most of their time playing to their strengths (Buckingham, 2007, p.10) – a figure Marcus Buckingham calls “wastefully low.”

The research shows that those who do not believe they have the opportunity to be their best are emotionally disengaged from their jobs (Rath, 2007, p.iii) – a condition that can lead to attrition, stress, burnout and low productivity. When people are not able to use their strengths at work, chances are that they:

- dread going to work
- have more negative than positive interactions with their colleagues
- treat their customers poorly
- tell their friends what a miserable company they work for
- achieve less on a daily basis
- have fewer positive and creative moments (Rath, 2007, p.12)

By contrast, “on high-performance teams, people say they call upon their strengths more than 75% of the time.” (Buckingham, 2007, p.16). According to these statistics, at any given time businesses are operating at less than 30% of their capacity (Clifton & Buckingham, 2007, p. 5).

Evidently, businesses and their people have a long way to go toward improving employee engagement. SBL is designed to improve the degree to which people are positive and productive at work.

Definition of Terms

The language of SBL is simple, as its originators designed it to be. It revolves around three key terms:

1. Themes
2. Strengths
3. Weaknesses

These terms are defined below as they apply to SBL.

Themes

Themes are descriptors of talent that emerged from Clifton and Buckingham’s “systematic study of excellence” of Gallup data. At the time, that research included over two million interviews over thirty years. Since then, the research has grown to forty years and over ten million interviews. Patterns in the research revealed 34 themes of “raw talent.” These 34 themes are summarized in the box entitled “34 Themes of Human Talent.”

34 Themes of Human Talent

1. Achiever	Drive; a constant need for achievement
2. Activator	Emphasis on action; getting things done
3. Adaptability	Living in the moment; flexible productivity
4. Analytical	“Prove it;” “show me;” logical; rigorous; a refining mind
5. Arranger	Arranging productive configurations; effective flexibility
6. Belief	Enduring core values; family focus, altruistic, spiritual, ethical
7. Command	Taking charge; presence
8. Communication	Bringing ideas to life; words that inspire people to act
9. Competition	Comparing; outperforming; contests; the inside track
10. Connectedness	Strong faith; considerate, caring, accepting; a bridge builder
11. Consistency / Fairness	Balance; clear rules applied equally; predictable; even-handed
12. Context	Looking back to understand the present
13. Deliberative	Careful; vigilant; private; planning ahead for risks
14. Developer	Seeing potential; helping others experience success
15. Discipline	Predictability; order, structure; routines; feeling in control
16. Empathy	Sensing the emotions of others; giving voice to emotional life
17. Focus	“Where am I headed?”; goal-oriented; efficient
18. Futuristic	“Wouldn’t it be great if...?”; dreamer; visionary

19. Harmony	Finding common ground; consensus and support;
20. Ideation	Fascination by ideas; creative; original; conceptual; smart
21. Includer	Everyone is equally important; accepting; including people
22. Individualization	Intrigued by people's unique qualities; focus on differences
23. Input	Inquisitive; collecting things/ideas; acquiring, compiling, filing
24. Intellection	Thinking; reflection; mental activity
25. Learner	Learning; from ignorance to competence; mastering skills
26. Maximizer	An emphasis on excellence; capitalizing on gifts; strong to superb
27. Positivity	Contagious enthusiasm; celebration; excitement; vitality
28. Relator	Deep relationships; intimacy; genuine friendship
29. Responsibility	Conscientious; utterly dependable; willingness to volunteer
30. Restorative	Problem-solving; analyzing symptoms, identifying what's wrong, finding the solution
31. Self-Assurance	Self-confidence in abilities and judgment; aura of certainty
32. Significance	From mediocre to exceptional; credible, professional, successful
33. Strategic	Seeing patterns; making selections; "What if?," select, strike
34. Woo	Winning Others Over; meeting new people and getting them to like you

(Clifton and Buckingham, 2001; Rath, 2007)

The themes do not capture every type of talent, but rather provide “a common language;” a “classification;” a way of talking about talent that make it ‘easy to use with work teams, families and friends” (Rath, 2007, p.16).

Think of these 34 themes as akin to the 88 keys on a piano. The 88 keys cannot play every single note that can possibly be played, but in their many combinations they can capture everything from classic Mozart to classic Madonna. The same applies to these 34 themes. Used with insight and understanding they can help capture the unique themes playing in each person’s life (Clifton & Buckingham, 2007, p.12).

Clifton and Buckingham (2001) and Rath (2007) assert that the themes provide a foundation for SBL. Their assessment, the StrengthsFinder profile, (www.strengthsfinder.com), provides an easy way for people to discover their five “signature themes.” Once individuals identify their signature themes, they can build on them with additional knowledge, skills, and practice.

“Every signature theme contains the promise of a strength” (Clifton & Buckingham, 2007, p.80), say the authors of *Now, Discover Your Strengths*. “However,” they continue, “- and it’s a big however – these labels are not your strengths” (Buckingham, 2007, p.74). Talents are only one aspect of a person’s strengths – the other two being knowledge and skills. In SBL, talents warrant the most attention, because they are the only one of the three of these aspects that are innate.

Strengths

A strength is defined as an activity in which a person exhibits “consistent, near-perfect performance” (Clifton and Buckingham, 2001). Compared to themes, which are naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior, strengths are defined by actual activities. “These are things you do, and more specifically, things you do consistently and near perfectly” (Buckingham, 2007, p. 74-75).

Strengths are entirely specific to the way a person spends his or her days. Below follows a sampling of strengths:

“I sell. I can sell anything, especially tangible, concrete products. I get a thrill out of closing a sale and moving on to the next customer.”

“I’m very good at meeting clients’ needs. I can put myself in their shoes and anticipate what they need.”

“I create high functioning teams. I can spot where a person will succeed and put them in the positions that allow the whole team to operate like a smooth-running machine.”

“I take control of chaotic situations.”

“I’m a problem solver. I figure out what’s wrong and fix it. If I can’t fix it right away, I’ll try every solution until I finally do. It’s an obsession!”

“I have an uncanny ability to see patterns in numbers. I can look at a data set and see a dozen different ways of cutting it up to find out what it’s saying.

In *Go Put Your Strengths to Work*, Buckingham defines strengths simply as the “activities that make you feel strong” (Buckingham, 2007, p. 89). He uses a variety of descriptors:

- Powerful
- Confident
- Natural
- Smooth
- On fire
- High
- “I’ve got this wired”
- Great
- Authentic
- “That was easy.”
- Awesome
- “When can I do this again?”

(Buckingham, 2007, p. 97).

Our strengths are the activities we do well. They come so naturally that we can hardly help doing them. We are drawn to these activities. We volunteer for them. We might even do them late into the night. Talents not only have an “I can’t help it” quality to them but also an ‘it feels good’ quality. In many ways, we are happiest when we are working in our strengths.

Weaknesses

Weaknesses are defined as “anything that gets in the way of excellent performance” (Clifton and Buckingham, 2001, p. 148). This definition is purposefully narrow.

Most of would probably side with Webster’s the Oxford English Dictionary and define a weakness as “an area where we lack proficiency.” As you strive to build your life around your strengths, we advise you to steer clear of this definition for one very practical reason: Like all of us, you have countless areas where you lack proficiency, but most of them are simply not worth bothering about. Why? Because they don’t get in the way of excellent performance. They are irrelevant. They don’t need to be managed at all, just ignored (Clifton & Buckingham, 2007, p. 148).

Just as a strength can be defined as “an activity that strengthens you,” a weakness can be defined as “an activity that weakens you.” Buckingham uses the following descriptors:

- Drained
- “Time’s going by so slowly”

- “I can’t concentrate”
- Frustrated
- Wiped Out
- Forced
- “I’m getting a migraine”
- “How much longer?!”
- Irritated
- Bored
- “Why can’t the new guy do this?”

(Buckingham, 2007, p.97).

Weaknesses take more of an effort. They’re harder for us, and we may even hate doing them. Whether we do them well or not is irrelevant; we’ve all learned to do things well that we don’t enjoy doing. What matters is that we wouldn’t choose to do them because they drain us and slow us down.

We may have an almost visceral aversion to our weaknesses. They can make us feel physically ill or even desperate. Some examples:

“I hate talking on the phone to clients. I can never think of anything to say, and I end up giving away the store. I’d rather do anything but phone work.”

“Public speaking gives me hives. Literally. I can do it, and I have done it, and I’ve even done it pretty well. But if I never had to give another presentation it would be too soon.”

“I just don’t have a mind for creativity. I can carry out any plan you give me. I can even create the plan. What I can’t seem to do is come up with the ideas in the first place.”

On one’s pursuit of excellence, weaknesses get in the way.

The Process: Putting SBL to Work

The process for engaging one’s strengths involves three basic steps:

1. Identify your strengths
2. Do more of the activities that strengthen you
3. Do less of the activities that weaken you.

Although the steps are simply stated, the process itself can be quite challenging. It involves plenty of exploration, introspection, and analysis. On one hand, it’s a practice in which one can readily engage; on the other, it’s a journey that can take a lifetime.

1. Identify Your Strengths

Before discussing the specifics of identifying strengths, it’s important to remember that the word “strengths” is often used interchangeably with “themes” or “talents.” But again, the two are not the same. Below, we discuss how to find your themes first – those “raw talents” you were born with. Then we will discuss how to find your strengths – the particular activities in which you leverage your talents.

Finding Your Themes

One logical place to get started with your strengths is by taking the Clifton StrengthsFinder Profile. Directions and a personalized access code for taking the profile are included in every copy of *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (2007) and its more recent version, *StrengthsFinder 2.0* (2007). Once you have taken a short (twenty-minute) online assessment, you will receive a set of five “signature themes.” The report includes descriptions and quotations from people who exemplify the theme to illustrate the concept.

This step of finding one’s signature themes is a powerful one, for it immediately cuts through the guesswork to clarify a person’s strongest ways of being. But as Tom Rath, the author of *StrengthsFinder 2.0* (2007) reiterates, themes are not strengths. To find one’s own strengths, one must continue the process of discovery and introspection.

Finding Your Strengths

If finding one’s signature themes is about identifying innate talent, finding one’s strengths is about learning how our talents show up in our day-to-day activities.

Marcus Buckingham describes this process in detail in *Go Put Your Strengths to Work*. He walks readers through the steps to more clearly identify their strengths. His process can be seen as either an extension of the signature themes or an alternative to them. We don’t need to know our signature themes to find our strengths, but knowing those themes can help us narrow the possibilities. Either way, says Buckingham, “You must learn how to go beyond the labels of any personality test that you may have taken and identify the specific, real-world activities that constitute your strengths” (Buckingham, 2007, p.21).

Buckingham argues, “The most direct way to identify your strengths is always to pay attention to how specific activities make you feel. No one can do this better than you” (Buckingham, 2007, p.111). And if that’s true,

...then the person best qualified to identify them – indeed, the only person qualified to identify them – is you. ...You know which activities draw you back to them time and again. You know which activities you can’t help volunteering for. You know which activities keep your interest and your concentration with almost no effort. You know which activities leave you feeling strong, fulfilled, powerful” (Buckingham, 2007, p.89).

The process of finding your strengths depends on you.

But that’s a lot harder than it sounds. “Most people think they know what they are good at,” stated business guru Peter Drucker. “They are usually wrong” (cited in Rath, 2007, p.15). And even if our instincts aren’t wrong, it can still be difficult to access those instincts. “Most of us struggle when asked to describe our natural talents” (Rath, 2007, p. 21). We know ourselves so well, and our strengths are so much a part of who we are that we take them for granted. Often we’ve believed until now that our strengths are not just “who we are” but also “just the way the world is.” We can use other strategies besides self-assessment and analysis to sharpen our perspective and break outside our paradigms. A number of options are listed in the box called “Finding Your Strengths and Weaknesses.”

Finding Your Strengths and Weaknesses

To be able to distinguish your strengths and weaknesses, you can draw on a number of resources. Not all of these resources are specifically designed to help you find your strengths, rather they are places where your strengths may be hiding. You can mine them for information about what you do and don't do well.

1. Intuition.

Because your strengths are based on the emotional reaction you have to different activities, you are most qualified to say whether an activity is a strength or a weakness. Use your intuition to guess at your strengths simply by asking yourself, "What are my strengths?" Continue that process by paying attention to your reaction to different activities and experiences each and every day.

2. People Who Know You Well.

Sometimes what we do well is so much a part of who we are that it's difficult to recognize our strengths. The people who know us best can take one look at us and hand us our strengths. They see us for who we are, even better than we can see ourselves. All you have to do is ask. Over the course of about a week, talk to people. Ask your friends, family and coworkers what they notice about you. What do they see as your strengths?

3. Reviews and Feedback.

Any kind of performance review can highlight your strengths and your weaknesses, as can other feedback including letters of recommendation (or complaint), evaluation forms, and cards in the suggestion box. Your strengths may be hidden among constructive criticism or other comments about your behavior, but if you specifically look around for information on where you excel, you're going to find some strengths.

4. Assessments.

Assessments are little quizzes you take, like the Myers-Briggs, the DISC Profile, or Emergenetics, that give you a window into your personality, thinking preferences, leadership style, or behaviors. Any assessment you take will show you more about what's true for you; part of that information will include your strengths.

5. A 360-Degree Profiles

The 360-Degree Profile is a survey you deliver to a number of people to get an outside perspective on your effectiveness. A 360, especially a customized, interview-based 360, is one of the best ways to find information on your strengths and weaknesses, because it is both personalized and objective. To learn how to do your own 360, listen to the free audio at www.pillar-consulting.com.

The strategies on this list are not always designed to highlight both your strengths and weaknesses. It's up to you to layer on the lenses of strengths-based thinking, to mine the information for learning about your strength and weaknesses and isolate the activities that have the most to offer you as you move ahead toward your goals. (Jay, 2007)

As you sort through the data you collect – whether from your own ideas or outside sources – it can be helpful to start a simple running list of potential strengths. Then test them. Buckingham (2007) offers the acronym SIGN as the test of a strength. If an activity is truly a strength, you will see these four signs:

Success	You're good at the activity.
Instinct	The activity has an I-can't-help-but quality.
Growth	The activity is easy. You're interested and inquisitive about it. You want to practice it, read up on it, and refine it with new tricks and techniques so you continue to grow.
Needs	The activity satisfies a need in you and leaves you with a feeling that all-is-right-with-the-world.

(Buckingham, 2007, p.77-85)

Notice that being good at an activity is only one sign of a strength. The other signs will help you separate skills from true talents. Also notice that even when you find a strength, it doesn't mean you don't have to practice it. On the contrary:

There's surprisingly little hard evidence that anyone could achieve any kind of exceptional performance without spending a lot of time perfecting it." The *New York Times* summarized it thus: "Michael Jordan, even if he hadn't spent countless hours in the gym, would still have been a better basketball player than most of us. But without those hours in the gym, he wouldn't have become the player he was (Buckingham, 2007, p.86).

2. Identify Your Weaknesses

Although SBL as a philosophy minimizes an emphasis on weakness, it's nevertheless important to identify those weaknesses. The way to do that is similar to the process of finding strengths, except it involves looking for the things we don't do as well. Again, you can do this by simply observing your emotional reaction to different activities. Or, if you prefer, you can also use the same strategies recommended above for finding strengths using other people, strategies and sources.

Once we've found a few strengths, we can test them against the "signs" of a weakness, which are logically the lack of the signs for a strength.

Lack of Success	You've never really been that good at this activity
Lack of Instinct	You instinctively want to avoid this activity.
Lack of Growth	You aren't inquisitive about the activity; you don't want to get better at it; you don't want to read up on it or learn more about it.
Lack of Needs	You never feel compelled to do this activity; overall, it just seems like a "drag."

(Buckingham, 2007, p.157-159)

Throughout the process of finding your strengths, and weaknesses, it's important to create reminders that keep them in mind. A simple chart on a sticky note will do, like this:

Strengths	Weaknesses

After all, finding these activities is only preparation for the real work to come. In order to make SBL work for you, you've got to leverage your strengths and manage your weaknesses.

3. Maximize Your Strengths

In SBL, the message once you've identified activities is to do more of what strengthens you and less of what weakens you – or, as Marcus Buckingham puts it, “to make the best of your job...most of your job” (www.SimplyStrengths.com). He offers some strategies for doing that, such as volunteering for activities in which you can use your strengths and telling others what your strengths are (without bragging or imposing them on others). This step in the process of becoming a strengths-based leader is little more than a choice. As Ben Franklin said, “The real tragedy of life is not that each of us doesn't have enough strengths, it's that we fail to use the ones we have” (Clifton & Buckingham, 2007, p.12). Once you know your strengths, make every effort to do them more.

4. Minimize Your Weaknesses

As you work to spend more time with your strengths, you can also learn to manage your weaknesses. You essentially have five options for minimizing a weakness:

1. Get a little better at it
2. Design a support system
3. Use one of your strongest themes to overwhelm your weakness
4. Find a partner whose strengths counterbalance your weakness
5. Just stop doing it – or at least do it less

(Buckingham, 2007; Clifton and Buckingham, 2001; Rath, 2007).

5. Build Lifelong Habits

Learning your strengths and weaknesses and applying them effectively in your life is an ongoing process. Not only will you become more and more accurate in identifying your natural attributes over time, but your activities will constantly change, making it vital that you continue to consider and reconsider how your strengths are at work. Buckingham has built an entire program, called the SimplyStrengths program (www.Simplystrengths.com) to help people continue the process. He summarizes the process in five steps:

1. Everyday, look at your strengths and weaknesses.
2. Every week, make a plan for making this week as close to ideal as possible.
3. Every quarter, look back over your weekly plans to look for tangible signs of success and communicate them in a conversation with your manager.
4. Every six months, capture, clarify and confirm your strengths.
5. Every year, take the SET survey (included with every copy of *Go Put Your Strengths to Work*) to track your progress.

Following this system will ensure that you grow with your strengths.

The Next Level: Using SBL to Be Your Best

The program recommended by Buckingham offers a process for continually refining your strengths and weaknesses and getting them more and more play in your life. But it's not just doing more of your strengths and less of weaknesses that will truly get you to perform at your best. You must also learn to be more sophisticated in your understanding of your strengths and more strategic in your application of them in your life. For this, you need a separate set of skills that allow you to leverage both your strengths and weaknesses for their greatest possible advantage.

Leveraging Your Strengths

The day-to-day process of leveraging your strengths happens primarily in your own mind, where you learn the habits of thinking in line with your strengths.

To leverage a strength, ask yourself three questions to help you get a better sense of what opportunities your strengths present.

1. *How does this strength work for you?*

Once you've identified a strength, give it some thought. What specifically does this strength do for you? What does it look like? When have you seen it? Revisit some of the times you remember being aligned with this strength. How did it feel? What felt "right?" What were the results? Really become familiar with your strengths and personalize them to the way they apply to you.

2. How does this strength work against you?

It may come as a surprise that your strengths can work against you. After all, aren't they supposed to be where you're best? Isn't that a good thing? Well, yes and no. Your strengths can work against you in a few different ways.

- Your strengths can work against you when you "overexpress" them. Every strength can become a weakness if you take it too far. In coaching, we call this "overexpressing your strengths." Going to extremes, the overachiever can become a workaholic; the competitive player can become cutthroat; the commanding leader can become a dictator. Thinking about the limits of your strengths and the point at which they start to work against you ensures you don't overdo it.
- Your strengths can work against you when you abuse them. Remember: your strengths show you the way you do things well. Other people need to be allowed to do things the way they do them well. Announcing, "This is the way I do things best, therefore we are all going to do it this way" is an abuse of your strengths.

Remember, too: your strengths are not excuses. Proclaiming "'I can't do that function, it's just not my strength,'" is another abuse of your strengths.

Your strengths improve your impact. They are not the way the world should work.

- Your strengths can also become weaknesses if you allow them to limit your vision. There are other ways of doing things than the way we do them, and some of them may be better. Getting outside your box once in awhile will allow you to see new perspectives, alternatives and possibilities.

3. How do you use your strength to meet your goals?

Being able to answer this question well helps you tap into the possibilities of your strengths. Without this question, knowing your strengths is wasteful.

At first, it can be helpful to write these questions down and consider them every time you identify a strength. Later, it will become a habit, so that every time you take on a new activity, you will start by asking yourself, "How can I do this task in a way that uses my strengths – the way that is going to make it come the most easily and most naturally for me?" That's when SBL truly becomes an advantage.

Leveraging Your Weaknesses

It may seem counterintuitive to think that we can “leverage our weaknesses.” You might wonder, isn’t the whole point to avoid them? Not necessarily. If we are to truly embrace a strengths-based perspective, we also need to value what’s right about what’s wrong. There is strength in your weakness.

Even though common wisdom says that we should avoid our weaknesses, they actually have as much to offer as our strengths, just in a different way. Three questions help you find their hidden potential.

1. How does this weakness work against you?

Considering how much we dislike the activities that use our weaknesses, it should be pretty obvious how they work against us: they make us feel bad. But what else? How does your weakness slow you down, hold you back, or otherwise frustrate you? What is it about your weakness that makes it such a challenge? Considering the specifics of your weakness prevents you from throwing the good out with the bad; try to isolate the specific problem.

And remember, just as your strengths are not excuses, neither are your weaknesses. You don’t get to escape every task you see as outside your areas of strength. Minimize them, move away from, find more powerful ways of doing them, yes. But insisting that you can’t or won’t do something because you perceive it to be a weakness will alienate you from exciting opportunities – not to mention other people.

2. How could this weakness work for you?

It may seem counter intuitive that our weaknesses can work for us, but they can. With practice we can turn almost any weakness around to work for us.

- *Your weaknesses can work for you when you see their benefits.*
If you look, you can find value in your faults.

Maybe you have a weakness in that you lack attention to detail. That might work for you if it means you’re able to overlook the minutiae that so often bogs people down.

Maybe you have a weakness in that you have a hard time selling yourself. That might work for you if it means you’re viewed as humble and unassuming.

Maybe you have a weakness in that you tend to be insensitive. That might work for you in the sense that you’re able to look objectively at a situation and make difficult decisions.

Just because our weaknesses are less pleasant for us than our strengths, they nevertheless have something to offer.

- *Your weaknesses can work for you when they help you see your strengths.*
When you’re in the throes of a weakness, when whatever you’re doing seems

hard and cumbersome, you can use the opportunity to ask yourself, “If this is what I want least to do...what would I rather be doing?” Or, “If doing this activity this way is driving me crazy...how would I rather do it?” Answering that question can help you more sharply refine your strengths, and may even open the door to changing this dreadful activity to better appeal to your strengths.

- *Your weaknesses can work for you when they open up new possibilities.*
When you allow yourself to give up your weaknesses, you can turn them over to other people who will see them differently and show you more possibility. It may be that you always start every meeting with a formal agenda; you might learn something new by allowing the meeting to be spontaneous and freeflowing. In fact, Robert Cooper, author of *Get Out of Your Own Way* (Cooper, 2006) asserts that our brains actually need that kind of variety to stay active and engaged.
- *How can you prevent your weaknesses from getting in the way of your goals?*
Even though you will perform better when you are aligned with your strengths, you cannot ignore your weaknesses. In many cases, you must attend to them, but you do so from a position of strength. Let’s say for instance you believe you have a weakness in “networking,” but you need to network for business reasons. If you have a strength in planning, you can plan your networking activities. Or, if you have a strength in creating deep, meaningful relationships, you can choose to get to know one person at a time instead of trying to work a room.

You can also practice the strategies listed above for minimizing weaknesses, but there are times when you’ll want to face them squarely. Author Claudia Shelton calls these “blind spots.”

Blind spots are things we think and do unconsciously that can negatively influence how other people feel about us. Sometimes they are seen as irritating habits. At worst they can be tragic flaws... For all of us, they diminish the possibilities we see for our success (Shelton, 2006, p.3).

Below follows a list of the kinds of weaknesses that warrant your undivided attention.

Career Derailers.

Some “weaknesses” are really serious problems. You may not be as good at relating to people as someone else, but if you’re a manager, you’d better learn. You may have a weakness in taking risks, but you’re going to need them if you’re going to succeed in a business environment. Leaders lose credibility, opportunities, and even their jobs when they ignore their weaknesses at the expense of the business.

Relationship Saboteurs.

We all have different strengths. We all have different weaknesses. A major thrust of SBL is to learn how to use our differences in complementary ways. That's what makes relationships work, and it's what allows people to collaborate effectively to get better results.

But when our weaknesses get in the way, they can destroy important relationships no matter what our strengths may be. If you have a weakness in listening and empathizing with people, they won't much care that you are a master at delegation; you'll come across as a bully or a tyrant. Sometimes for the sake of a relationship, we need to put our strengths aside and develop the weaknesses that are important to the people in our lives

Practical Necessities.

Even though SBL encourages us to steer away from our weaknesses, sometimes it's simply not possible. If part of your job is to do something that you believe is your weakness, your long term strategy may be to change jobs, and your short term strategy may be to use the five strategies for minimizing weakness that we described above. But if it's not possible or not practical to use those strategies, or if there are significant benefits to succeeding with them, you may have to do more than just "get a little better at it." You may want to develop the skills to be able to do that activity as well as you possibly can, at least for now.

SBL is inherently a positive perspective, one that celebrates the best in us and helps us bring it out so we get better results. But our weaknesses deserve just as much attention – just in a different way and for different reasons. So even though we call it Strengths-Based Leadership, make sure you use a balanced approach.

Conclusion

In some ways, SBL is so contrary to the way we've learned to think and learn that it truly lives up to the notion of a "Strengths Revolution." That's especially true when you consider "our cultural obsession with being well-rounded" and "the prevailing corporate demand that we capitalize on our so-called areas of opportunity" (Buckingham, p.163). But the research is clear: to truly be our best, we need to engage our strengths. For businesses as well as individuals, "capitalizing on your strengths is the best way to compete" (Buckingham, 2007, p.20).

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Additional Resources

We have developed a number of resources to help you maximize your strengths (and minimize your weaknesses).

The 360 Investment

www.the360investment.com

The 360 Investment is an audio program with a workbook that will show you how to get good quality feedback from the people whose opinions you value most. As a result, you get better results from your leadership, more satisfied customers, a competitive advantage, and more confidence in your own success. The program includes an Audio Program, Workbook, eBook, Refresher Course, 20-minute Consultation, and Free Email Support. Check the website for special pricing.

The Inner Edge

www.amazon.com

www.theinneredge.com

Coming: Fall 2009

Leadership: it's not just for corner offices anymore. In her new book *The Inner Edge*, author Joelle Jay coaches leaders in the strategies of personal leadership - what management expert Peter Drucker once called "the only leadership that's going to matter in the 21st century." *The Inner Edge* shows readers that leadership is not just a label; it is a way of life.

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Pillar Consulting, LLC, is a leadership development practice dedicated to improving the effectiveness of leaders while enhancing the quality of life that keeps them at their best. Visit our website to learn more about our executive coaching, speaking, workshops and services, and to find more articles, materials, and tools to help you maximize your talents.

About the Author



Dr. Joelle Jay is a leadership consultant and coach who specializes in helping business leaders increase their results by investing in themselves. Joelle has worked with hundreds of top leaders in Fortune 500 companies through her coaching, speaking, and research in transforming their business by transforming themselves. She is an associate with the Leadership Research Institute, a regular columnist for CEOIQ magazine, and the author of several books on a variety of leadership topics. Joelle has a Ph.D. in leadership and is an adjunct faculty member for the University of Nevada MBA Program. She is on a number of boards, including the American Heart Association's Go Red for Women campaign and the Nevada Women's Fund. She is a mother of two boys, Jackson (6) and Morgan Adam (3).