The Big Idea

Have you ever wondered why today’s organizations concentrate on rectifying your weaknesses? What makes weaknesses so interesting? Have you ever wondered what would happen if, instead of correcting your weaknesses, you capitalized on your strengths? Organizations spend millions of dollars every year trying to unlock weaknesses, calling them “areas of opportunity,” trying to minimize them. Can you imagine what would happen if today’s organizations focused on building each of their employees’ strengths? Have you ever wondered how much value can be created in an organization where each employee did what he does best?

Strengths and talents are the primary concerns in this book. Join authors Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton, Ph.D. as they guide you through identifying your strengths and showing you how best to work with them and others.

Chapter 1 - Strong Lives

Many ordinary and extraordinary people are seemingly gifted with strong lives. They are active and passionate about their work. They are successful in their chosen fields and roles, without seeming to try too hard. How do they do it? The answer may lie in the fact that these people have, to quote the authors, “identified in themselves some recurring patterns of behavior and then figured out a way to develop these patterns into genuine and productive strengths.” By “strength,” we mean an activity that one executes consistently, near perfectly.

Three revolutionary tools have been found to help in building a strong life:

1. **Understanding how to distinguish natural talent from things you can learn.** Talents are your naturally occurring patterns of thought, feeling and behavior. Knowledge consists of facts and lessons learned. Skills are the steps of an activity. These three combine to create your strengths but none of them can substitute for the other. Of these, talent is the most important. Without a natural talent for an activity, you might enjoy some level of success but you are probably not going to excel. In the same vein, knowing your talents but not polishing them via learning more (knowledge) or practice (skills) isn’t likely to lead you to excellence, either. It would be good advice for you to discover your dominant talents and then find a way to acquire the knowledge and skills you would need to refine them.

2. **Creating a system to identify your dominant talents.** The search for your talents must be one that is focused and persistent. You will need to step back and watch yourself, finding out more about how you react naturally to situations or circumstances. Take up a new sport and see how you like it. Engage in new activities and determine if you are inspired by them. It is possible that you’ll find some activities boring or unimportant. This is normal and you must continue trying others until you discover your dominant talents. The Strengths Finder profile in Chapter 4 will assist you in this search but it will not define you completely. You must lead the search for your own talents.
3. Having a common language to describe your talents. What need, you might ask, would you have for a language that will describe your talents? We need one because the language for strengths is limited. Because of our interest in weaknesses and frailties, we have come up with a varied language that will describe weaknesses, its stems, its solutions, et cetera but we have failed to create one for strengths. What exactly do you mean when you say that a person is self-motivated? What do you mean by people-skills? Why do we use negative connotations for talents? We call people inclined to action impulsive. We call people who claim excellence egotists. People who anticipate problems are called worriers. For these examples and many more, we obviously don’t have a language that can describe talents and strengths well enough.

Chapter Two - Strength Building

Knowledge. To build your strengths, you will need two kinds of knowledge: factual and experiential.

Factual knowledge includes content, the facts of any activity or learning. For example, factual knowledge when learning a new language is learning the vocabulary. To learn how to fly, you must have the factual knowledge of learning call sign protocols. To learn to sell, you must know your product’s features. Excellence is impossible without factual knowledge.

Experiential knowledge cannot be taught in classrooms or found in manuals. Some of it is practical but it can take on a multitude of forms. This kind of knowledge is added to every time you engage in an activity with different people. For example, you learn that the most important sale is not with the prospect himself but with the prospect’s assistant. Perhaps you learn that the best way to sell to mothers is through radio ads, not television ads. Experiential knowledge can also be conceptual. It can mean shifting your values and becoming more aware of yourself and of the people and situations around you.

Skills. Skills give structure to the knowledge you’ve acquired. It is a sequence of steps that will lead to performance. They may be identified from other experts in your field and then tailored to suit your talents. It must be noted, however that: 1) while skills help you perform, they will not solely lead you to excel and 2) some activities cannot simply be broken down into steps. Learning how to feel another’s feelings, for example, (also called empathy) cannot be dissected to fit a plan.

Talents. As earlier defined, talent is a naturally occurring pattern of thought, behavior or feeling that can be used to produce performance. As long as this pattern can be applied productively, even seemingly negative traits such as obstinacy or nervousness can be used to perform better. Our talents are unique; no one would have exactly the same talents as we do. Talents are also enduring; you cannot learn new ones even if you acquired all the skills and knowledge necessary to perform an activity well. They are the single, most important part of strength-building, primarily because to perform consistently near perfection, you will have to perform as naturally as you can.

Chapter Three - StrengthsFinder

How do you know if it’s a talent? Traces of talent may be found in your:

- Spontaneous, top-of-mind reactions
- Yearnings
- Rapid learning
- Satisfactions

The StrengthsFinder profile is a profile that identifies your top five talents or themes. It does not identify your strengths. Rather, it pinpoints “where you have the greatest potential for strength.” We have mentioned earlier that strengths are talents, skills and knowledge put together to perform productively and consistently, not just talents. The StrengthsFinder profile is a series of paired statements you can respond to. On the back jacket of this book, you will find a 14-digit code you can use to register onto http://www.strengthsfinder.com. Complete instructions will be found on the website.
As you go through the StrengthsFinder profile and select your responses, remember that there is no right or wrong answer. The statements were crafted to reflect where your talents or themes may lie, not to tell you what you lack or need to improve on. The results you obtain may surprise you but if you examine them closer, you will find that you reacted to them in the very way your profile suggests. After all, talents are recurring patterns of thought, behavior or feeling. Your talents will naturally filter your world and reactions.

The following chapters explain your profile in detail.

Chapter 4 - The Thirty-four Themes of StrengthsFinder

1. Achiever - Your Achiever theme pushes you to drive onwards. To you, each new day is point zero, a new start. In order to feel good about yourself, you must achieve something, no matter how small it may be. As an Achiever, there will always be discontent in your life but you can capitalize on this and use it to achieve more.

2. Activator - You always wonder, “When can we start?” To you, only action can make things happen and you view decisions as green lights to go ahead and make something, do something or start something. Whether or not all the steps have been planned out is irrelevant. After all, you believe that action is the best method for learning. You learn from the reactions generated by past actions and you use these reactions to plot out your next move.

3. Adaptability - You believe that the future is a destination reached by the choices you make in the here and now. Instead of viewing change or instability with fear, you expect them and think of them as facts of life. The theme of Adaptability allows you to be flexible, able to work effectively through various distractions.

4. Analytical - Your Analytical theme pushes people to show you why their view is correct. In the process, some people will find that their views are flawed. This is not something you mean; you just want ideas that are sound and correct. You thrive in data and numbers. You are logical and rigorous. You naturally refine ideas in your mind and expose ill-conceived ones.

5. Arranger - You enjoy making things and people work efficiently and effectively all at the same time. While others cannot fathom how you can manage to juggle different responsibilities, you only think of it as getting the job done in the best way possible. You are flexible and open-minded, able to conceive that rules and procedures notwithstanding, there just might be a better way to complete a project.

6. Belief - You place utmost importance on your core values. People with the Belief theme are often family-oriented, altruistic and value responsibility. Your values guide your life and provide you with a consistent set of priorities. This theme makes you easy to trust and you find work meaningful only when you are able to carry out your values.

7. Command - You take charge and are comfortable with expressing your views. Unlike people who shy away from the truth, you revel in facts. You value honesty and challenge people to take risks. You may intimidate others and while they may call you opinionated, they are most likely willing to let you take control. People are drawn to your presence.

8. Communication - You have the gift of Communication that allows you to reach people through writing, hosting, explanations, descriptions and speech. You take ideas and liven them up by adding stories to them. Your words are able to carry the information you want to impart and leave a lasting impression. You choose words that pique peoples’ interests and cause them to act.
9. **Competition** - Your awareness of other peoples’ performance drives you to push on and better them. A contest isn’t about the game - it is about winning. You have a deep-rooted sense of comparison and you like being in situations where a winner will emerge, preferably if the winner is you. You may be gracious in your defeats but you will push to win even harder in the next round.

10. **Connectedness** - You firmly believe that things happen for a reason. You believe that we are all connected in one way or another and in this belief, you find confidence. Your awareness of this connection forms your values system because you know that if you harm others, you harm yourself. You are a bridge-builder for people across various cultures and can bring calm and faith into others’ lives.

11. **Context** - You look back and study how past events and experiences can be used to deal with the present. When you have understood the blueprints of a particular plan, you gain confidence and can move forward, sure of your next actions. As long as you are aware of the steps that led to a particular present, you are able to forge on and make better decisions. It takes you some time to orient yourself with new people and situations.

12. **Deliberative** - You are careful, vigilant, a private person. You sense the unpredictability of the world and prefer to make decisions carefully, after weighing out all the options. You may seem to be a serious person, careful in sharing praise or recognition. You do not think of life as a popularity contest. You are as careful in your personal life as you are with your profession, choosing friends carefully and keeping your own counsel.

13. **Developer** - It is said that very often, potential is all you see. In your mind, no individual has achieved what he or she is fully capable of. You are therefore drawn to people and your goal is to help others experience success. You think of small behavioral changes, an improvement in skill or any small sign of growth as a signal of potential being realized. You are encouraging and others’ success, especially under your mentorship, brings you satisfaction.

14. **Discipline** - Your world must be orderly, well-planned and predictable. You enjoy routines, deadlines and timelines because they help set structure to your world. You need to be absolutely in control of your life and you rarely enjoy surprises or disruptions.

15. **Empathy** - You have the gift of instinctively being able to sense the emotions of those around you. You can share in the perspective of other people; see the world as they see it. While you do not always agree with the decisions people make, you are able to understand. You anticipate needs and can always find the right words and tone to help people in distress. People are drawn to you for your gift of Empathy.

16. **Fairness** - You regard balance with high importance and believe that no person should be treated with too much favor, regardless of his or her circumstance. Unfair advantage is particularly offensive to you and you work towards equality. You believe that people work best when rules are present and applied to everyone. In this environment, everyone has a chance to prove their worth.

17. **Focus** - To move forward, you need a clear picture of your destination. You often ask, “Where am I heading?” Without Focus, your life and work become meaningless. You set goals as your compass, a means of moving forward while staying at a defined course. You are able to decide with clarity whether or not an action you are about to undertake will take you closer to your goal. Your Focus theme causes you to be efficient and you are an effective team member.

18. **Futuristic** - Your Futuristic theme causes you to move forward to the future. In the future, you know that all possibilities are endless. You have visions of tomorrow and you work towards them, cherishing them, finding inspiration in them. When you share these visions with other people, you energize them as well and raise their sights and spirits. People are drawn to you for the hope you bring.
19. Harmony - Your Harmony theme tells you that there is little or nothing to be gained from conflict. You strive to find agreement and find the common ground between several parties. You believe that productivity is closely linked to how well we work with each other. When others’ views differ from yours, you are willing to adjust to their needs and modify your own views. You prefer to avoid dispute and argument, seeking instead to discuss matters that do not necessitate debate.

20. Ideation - Your fascination with ideas makes others label you creative, conceptual, original and even smart. A new idea brings life and inspiration to you. Your mind is constantly looking for connections that link even seemingly unrelated situations or concepts.

21. Inclusiveness - Your Inclusiveness theme encourages you to draw people in and make them feel part of your group. You are instinctively accepting and like to make other people feel warm and safe within a group. You dislike judgments and advocate respect for differences. You believe that we are all equally important.

22. Individualization - You know that each individual is different and has a different set of needs. You are interested in the unique qualities of other people and you prefer to discover them, instead of generalizations. You are a keen observer of each person’s style, preferences, motivations, thoughts and relationships. You are able to pinpoint strengths and you use this gift to draw out the best in each person.

23. Input - You collect information or things, anything that interests you. Your mind finds interest in so many things and the world is exciting because of its variety and complexity. You have the habit of storing things away for some future use - you may not know what it is just yet but you’re sure it will have some use.

24. Intellection - You like to think and increase your mental activity. This thinking may either be focused or unfocused but this is irrelevant to you, as long as you are thinking. You enjoy time alone and are introspective.

25. Learner - You are drawn to the process of learning. What you learn may depend on your interests and other themes but you enjoy learning because it leads you to experience a process. It isn’t so much about what you learn; it is more about the process you go through to learn. You enjoy dynamic work environments that allow you to learn new concepts given some span of time and then move on to some new learning.

26. Maximizer - Your Maximizer theme focuses your attention on excellence. Minor achievements are average to you. You do not stop at just good; you strive for the best. You are fascinated by strengths and feel compelled to take a strength and hone it into something excellent. You discriminate what is so-so from what is great and you capitalize on what is great.

27. Positivity - You are an open, positive person. Your enthusiasm is contagious and people are drawn to you for your warmth, generosity with praise and light-heartedness. You celebrate achievements and vitalize dull moments. You find joy in life, work and a sense of humor.

28. Relator - You are comfortable in the company of people you already know. While you do not necessarily shy away from meeting new people, you find pleasure in intimacy. You treat relationships with reverence and have the ability to turn first-time contacts into meaningful relationships. You value genuine friendship and accept the risks that come with building them.

29. Responsibility - Your Responsibility theme encourages you to follow through on your commitments, whether big or small. You do not tolerate excuses or rationalizations when you fail and only upon restitution will you be able to live comfortably again. People assign new responsibilities to you because they know you will get it done. Your reputation and good name are at stake whenever you commit to anything.
30. **Restorative** - You have a gift for solving problems that leave others stumped. You enjoy analyzing all the aspects of a problem and coming up with the solution. You are inspired by bringing processes, systems or things back to life when they could have been left alone until time leaves them bereft of meaning or significance. To you, instead of allowing these to waste away, you “saved” it.

31. **Self-Assurance** - You know what you are capable of doing. You have confidence in your own judgment and are certain that no one else can make them for you because you have a different perspective. Other may guide or inspire you but only you can choose to do what you will. It is natural to you - you instinctively know what the right decision will be. This gift allows you to remain focused and steady.

32. **Significance** - You have a need to be recognized for your achievements. You like to receive praise for the strengths you carry. You associate with others who are successful and will push those surrounding you to excel as well. If they aren’t, you move on. You prefer work that becomes your way of life, with leeway to do the things you really like. Your Significance theme keeps you striving for excellence and achievement.

33. **Strategic** - You are instinctively able to find the best course through confusion. It is a special way of thinking, of seeing things at large. You find patterns where others see chaos. You have a way of evaluating people, things and situations such that all the possibilities are uncovered and you can make the best decision possible. You select the path that works best for you - your strategy.

34. **Woo** - Your Woo theme allows you to make friends with practically anyone you meet and win them over. You enjoy initiating meetings and talking to strangers. Once you make a connection, you are ready to move on and make new ones. The world is full of friends you have yet to meet.

Chapter 5 - The Questions You’re Asking

Are there any obstacles to building my strengths?

Yes. Apart from obstacles, if any, contributed by the current organization you are in, your own reluctance will keep you from building on your strengths. This reluctance usually comes about from fear: fear of one’s weaknesses, fear of failure and fear of one’s true self. You must remember that working to improve your weaknesses only serves to prevent you from failing. It does not allow you to reach out towards excellence. Many people have taken what they thought were their strengths, polished them and find that they still failed. What you must understand is that learning about yourself through performance builds your strengths too. It is irresponsible to resist cultivating your strengths. Other people don’t realize their strengths because they’ve taken these aspects of their lives for granted. There is a constant need to investigate one’s self, lest the true value of one’s strengths be lost.

Why should I focus on my signature themes?

Your signature themes will allow you to perform at your best consistently. A strong life includes moments of success and fulfillment experienced time and again. An understanding of one’s themes and how they worked in winning moments helps in establishing a pattern for future performance. Refinement of these strengths will separate you from average performance and push you closer and closer to near perfect performance.

Is there any significance to the order of my themes?

Technically, yes, but practically, no. Your first theme will be your strongest theme but it is the combination of your themes that helps determine what your strengths are. Your five themes are separate and distinct from your responsive themes. Your responsive themes will become apparent only when you are faced with a situation that allows them to exhibit themselves. Your signature themes are your dominant patterns of feeling, thought and behavior. All your themes are a critical part of strength-building.
Not all the phrases in the theme description apply to me. Why?

Every person’s network is unique. The theme descriptions are approximations, the most prevalent qualities each person with a particular theme possesses.

Why am I different from other people whom I share some of the same themes?

With over 33 million possible combinations for the 5 signature themes, it is rare for anyone to have exactly the same theme as yours. Your signature themes work together to create your overall pattern of behavior. Changing one theme changes your behavior drastically, whether or not you realize it. For this reason, you may be very different from the people you share one, two, or even three themes with.

Are any of the themes “opposite?”

No. The themes described are not “either-or” themes. They are not mutually exclusive. You can have themes of Ideation and Futuristic, Context and Analytical, or Belief and Competition. These themes work differently but they are not “opposites.”

Can I develop new themes if I don’t like the ones I have?

No. The StrengthsFinder profile measures your spontaneous reactions. These reactions are woven together so that a pattern appears: your signature themes. These themes will be resistant to change. However, you can acquire new skills and knowledge and these may change your life positively. You can’t change your themes but you can develop new strengths.

Will I become too narrow if I focus on my signature themes?

No. By focusing on your themes, you become more aware of who you are and more appreciative of people whose themes differ from yours. You will be more open towards new experiences because you are confident in the successes and achievements your strengths bring about. You will start to be more inquisitive and welcoming and accepting of the world around you.

Can I manage around my weaknesses?

Of course. You can create your own strategy to manage around your weaknesses. This strategy can be a process like the following:

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.
5. Just stop doing it.

Can my themes reveal whether I am in the right career?

Your signature themes have very little say in what field you should be in. And while they may be able to help you choose a role in a field you like, your themes have little say in what role you should be in, too. The StrengthsFinder Profile does not support a linear relationship between themes and fields. In fact, interviews conducted with over two million people have shown that some people who share the same themes excel in very different fields. There are recurring patterns where people with similar themes excel in a particular
role. Developer, Empathy and Individualization are recurring themes for teachers. Command, Activator and Competition are recurring themes for salespeople. Still, no linear relationship exists between roles and themes. The authors suggest: “Whatever you set your mind to, you will be most successful when you craft your role to play to your signature talents most of the time.”

Chapter 6 - Managing Strengths

To excel as a manager, you would preferably possess the theme of Individualization because your employees will all have varying themes and you will need to realize these. Now that you are aware of your own themes and having a greater awareness of others’, how do you manage your employees? Some ideas include:

For Achiever
- Give him extra work
- Recognize that he likes to be busy.
- Give recognition and new goals when he finishes a job.

For Activator
- Ask this person for input regarding goals and improvements to your division.
- Assign her to a team where she can stir up action.
- When she complains, listen and then tell her about initiatives she can take.

For Adaptability
- Position him so that his success depends on his ability to accommodate the unforeseen and run with it.
- Realize that he is a very good team player.
- Task him with short-term assignments.

For Analytical
- Take the time to discuss issues with her, especially those that require decision-making.
- Remember to lay out the logic of each decision clearly.
- Recognize and praise her reasoning ability.
- Show supporting numbers.

For Arranger
- Give him as much responsibility as his skills and knowledge will allow.
- Give him the opportunity to choose and position the members of a project team.
- Provide him with complex assignments.

For Belief
- Discover her passion and relate it to the work she does.
- Figure out how to align her values with those of the organization.
- Realize that she may place more value on opportunities for better service than opportunities to make more money.
For Command

- Give him room to lead and make decisions.
- If he makes a mistake, confront him head on, ask for restitution if necessary and then let him be productive as soon as possible.
- Never threaten him unless you are 100% ready to follow through.

For Communication

- Ask her to come to occasions where you want to entertain prospects or clients.
- Take the time to listen to her.
- Ask her to help with producing presentations.

For Competition

- Measure him against other competitive people.
- Find places where he can win.
- Use competitive language with this person.

For Connectedness

- Listen to and accept her social issues.
- Encourage her to build bridges with other people in your organization.
- Let her be part of developing the mission for your organization.

For Context

- Take the time to explain the thinking that leads to an action.
- Turn to him to review what has been done and what has been learned up to the present time.
- Realize that he can use his talent to help others learn via case studies.

For Deliberative

- Do not position her in a role that requires snap judgments.
- Before you make a decision, consult with her for possible problems.
- In situations regarding legal, safety or accuracy issues, ask her to take the lead.

For Developer

- Allow him to identify associates growing in their jobs.
- Position him so that he can help others within the organization grow.
- Help him focus his developing instincts on setting up people to achieve success and not on supporting people who are enduring hardship.

For Discipline

- Allow her to produce structure in a chaotic situation.
- Give her advance notice of deadlines.
- Allow her to develop routines to help her work efficiently.
For Empathy

- Ask him to help you relate to the people within your organization.
- Ask him how he feels before securing his commitment to a particular course of action, including those of other people.
- Allow him to work with positive, optimistic people.

For Fairness

- Ask her to pinpoint each person’s contribution after the completion of a project.
- Ask her to lead situations where rules must be applied equally and fairly.
- Ask her to contribute to the development of rules.

For Focus

- Set goals with timelines.
- Check in with him on a regular basis.
- When there are projects with critical deadlines, ask him to get involved.

For Futuristic

- Ask her to share her vision with you.
- Give her time to think, write about and plan for products or services needed in the future.
- Put her on the organization’s planning committee.

For Harmony

- Do not include him in meetings where there will be conflict.
- Keep your discussions focused on practical matters.
- Do not expect him to disagree with you even when you are wrong.

For Ideation

- Position her where her creative ideas will be valued.
- Feed her ideas that lie within the focus of your organization.
- Encourage her to think of ideas to share with your best customers.

For Inclusiveness

- Ask him to work on orientation programs for new employees.
- Allow him to lead task forces to recruit minority persons into your organization.
- Position him to work on products or services designed for a broad market.

For Individualization

- Ask her to serve on your selection committee for any number of positions.
- Ask her to help the organization by selecting the right people for every role.
- Discuss with her what might be done about performance problems.
For Input

- Ask him to research a topic of importance to your organization
- Position him in roles with a heavy research component.
- Keep him posted on the news within your organization.

For Intellection

- Capitalize on the fact that thinking energizes this person
- Challenge her thinking.
- Ask her to evaluate books, articles or proposals and give you a report.

For Learner

- Position him in a role that will require him to stay up-to-date in fast-changing fields.
- Identify milestones or levels that he has reached.
- Have him work beside a master who can push him to learn more.

For Maximizer

- Avoid positioning her in roles that demand continual problem solving.
- Focus on her strengths, instead of her weaknesses.
- Help her develop a career path and compensation plan that will encourage her to strive for excellence.

For Positivity

- Ask him to plan events that include your best customers.
- Don’t expect him to enjoy cheering up negative people.
- Ask him for ideas about how to recognize and celebrate achievement.

For Relator

- Don’t place her in a role that will frequently uproot her from her colleagues and customers.
- Trust her with confidential information.
- Draw attention to her generosity.

For Responsibility

- Avoid putting him in team situations with colleagues who do not value commitments.
- Do not force him to rush work so much that he has to compromise quality.
- Place him in a position with unimpeachable ethics.

For Restorative

- Ask for her observations when you want to identify a problem within your organization.
- Position her to solve problems for your best customers.
- Celebrate the achievement of solving a problem.
For Self-Assurance

- Allow him leeway when making meaningful decisions.
- Position him in a role where persistence is essential to success.
- Support his self-concept that he is an agent of action.

For Significance

- Provide for her need for independence.
- Recognize her achievements and contributions.
- Position her so that she is surrounded by credible, productive and professional people.

For Strategic

- Position him on the leading edge of your organization.
- Involve him in organizational planning.
- Give him ample time to think through a situation before asking for input.

For Woo

- Position her in a role where she can meet new people everyday.
- Help her refine her system for remembering people’s names.
- Allow her to build goodwill for your organization within the community.

Chapter 7 - Building A Strengths-Based Organization

Because each person’s talents are enduring and unique and each person’s greatest room for growth lies in his strengths, you can build a strengths-based organization by:

- Spending time and money selecting people properly in the first place
- Focusing on performance by outcomes
- Focusing training on educating employees about building strengths
- Devising ways to help each employee grow in his career without necessarily promoting him out of his areas of strength

Systems like a Strengths-based Selection System, Strengths-based Performance Management System and Strengths-based Career Development System are other methods you can employ to guarantee that your organization remains focused on identifying and developing strengths rather than wasting its resources patching up weaknesses.