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Building a Career on Your Strengths **Smart and proven strategies for finding the right fit**

by Kathie Sorensen and Steve Crabtree

Almost every person who takes the Gallup StrengthsFinder profile asks the same questions: What's the right career for me? What should I consider doing now? What is my best fit?

These are complex questions that involve more than just strengths. Goals, interests and education also play key roles in career development. But strengths must be an important part of your career considerations, and the Gallup development basics are a great starting point.

Those basics are a set of strengths-driven guidelines that help define the ground rules for personal development. They offer insights that help us identify our most satisfying career goals and map our progress toward them.

This column describes how these guidelines relate to career development, one of the topics most frequently requested of our presenters, facilitators and consultants. What principles should guide career planning, and how can we develop an effective strengths-based career plan?

First, let's review the Gallup development basics.

1) Own your own development. Nothing is more fruitless than "waiting to be discovered." It's unrealistic to expect others to notice your strengths, consider your interests and your goals and hand you the perfect career.

If you "own your own development," you take charge of your career in the same way you take charge of a project at work, a commitment to your child, or your financial situation. It requires you to act. Ownership -- active decision-making and follow-through -- drives career development. Understanding your strengths boosts your confidence and encourages you to explore career option based on your talents.

2) You are successful because of who you are -- not who you aren't. This principle is familiar to those who have embarked on strengths-based personal development, but you may not intuitively see how it applies to your career development. It's sometimes difficult to know how your talents would "play out" in career opportunities you have not tried or even considered.

It can also be tempting to focus on your limitations. When you are faced with a difficult choice, using a process of elimination may help make it easier. So instead

of beginning with what you do best, you rule out options for which you feel you lack the requisite experience, education, or contacts. This self-defeating process prevents individual growth, because it moves your career growth outside your sphere of influence.

Successful people retain the power to act, rather than surrendering it to forces outside their control. By focusing on your strengths, you can succeed and move ahead professionally in situations others perceive as restrictive or impossible.

3) You cannot be successful alone. Individuals who work alone can be limited by their talents and non-talents, as well as by their unique experiences and knowledge base. Individuals who form partnerships with others are stronger, because they can draw on a "talent pool" -- not just their own resources, but also the talents, knowledge, skills and abilities of their partners.

This principle holds true for career development; other people provide resources essential to the process. These include:

- **Strengths insight.** Mentors, coaches, and friends who know you well can lend you considerable insight about your talents and abilities. Even those who don't know you well may readily perceive your strengths, if they have the necessary talents to do so. These people can serve as a mirror, allowing you to see your own strengths reflected in their view of you.

Sometimes you may need to guide their feedback. Try asking your mentors or coaches for their perception of your strengths: What should you do more of? Less of? What qualities do they most admire in you?

- **Opportunities.** Other people will know of opportunities within their own constituencies and circles of influence, including roles you may not have considered. Asking them about such opportunities is a great way to broaden your thinking about future roles. Explain what you are thinking about and ask for their insight and help.

Often, opportunities come through your extended network of relationships. The "law of threes," as some have referred to it, promises to connect you with anyone within three steps. Let your network know that you are interested in connecting with a certain person or organization and, sooner than you think, someone will be able to provide you with the desired link.

There are innumerable roles that people can and will play in your development process. You are limited only by your reluctance to ask them for assistance.

4) What about your weaknesses? Don't focus on your limitations -- but don't ignore your weaknesses altogether, either. Instead, identify their source. Are they talent-based? Or are they rooted in lack of education, experience or opportunity?

Talent-based weaknesses are situation-specific. For example, your non-talents are irrelevant at work until you take on a role that requires you to use them. So look carefully at your target role. How would your non-talents affect you in that role? How important is that aspect of the work? Who could help you to compensate for those non-talents?

Barriers related to experience and education are easier to overcome, because

those things are attainable, where new talents are not. You want to sell, but you've never held a sales role? Check out volunteer projects that give you the opportunity to learn sales techniques and make a contribution at the same time. Have you ever developed a budget? Volunteer to help your manager with the budget process. Looking for leadership opportunities? Ask your friends, neighbors, church group or HR department. Someone will know of an opportunity that could meet your needs.

The insights you gain from these opportunities are just as important as the experience they provide. They could inspire you to take the next step -- or help you question your motives and "fit" for the position to which you aspire. Either outcome is valuable to your career journey.

5) Make sure your plan is one you would CHOOSE to do, not one you feel you SHOULD do Most successful people would agree that developing a career plan is essential. You wouldn't try to launch a new product, or manage an existing one, without a plan. Career development without a plan isn't career development at all -- it's career risk!

Your plan should articulate the steps you will take to move your career development forward. Then it's up to you to make them happen. If you detail the steps without taking them, your plan is worthless.

How can you ensure your plan reflects deeply felt yearnings? Link the action steps with your talents. If there is little "fit," you may have poor results. If you identify areas in which you need support, ask your mentors, coaches and friends for it.

Consider forming a "career board" to help you develop your plan of action. Assemble individuals who know your strengths, believe in you, and are willing to offer their insights, connections and support.

6) The test of development: results! Landing the position you want is only the initial outcome you should expect from your career plan. A role that "fits" who you are -- one in which you thrive -- is satisfying and motivating. The more time you invest in searching out the right role, the more likely you will be to find the rewards that come from doing what you do best, each and every day.

Strengths-Based Career Development: Seven Checkpoints

1. Move from strength.

- A. Assess your talents, knowledge, experience and capabilities. Sort out what you can learn from that which is innate and enduring.
- B. Don't rule out a career possibility because you lack knowledge or experience. Those things can almost always be acquired. Evaluate whether you have the needed strengths or talents instead.
- C. Take a close look at why the role seems attractive to you. Resist being drawn to a role for the wrong reasons (for example, by prestige, glamour, or power). Make sure you love to do what the role requires.

2. Consider the possibilities.

- A. Roles, organizations, and even entire industries are changing rapidly, so building flexibility into your career plan is more important than ever. Spend time considering the choices before you. This exploratory

phase will help you become more aware of possible career options.

- B. Ask for help if you are unsure of opportunities that exist inside your organization or community.
- C. Seek the advice of others whose career progression has been broader than your own or whose work allows them to work with people in many different roles.

3. Define the expectations.

- A. Once you have selected one or two possibilities, define specific expectations for each role.
- B. Consider the talent, knowledge, and experience your target role requires. What tasks would you have to accomplish? What talents and knowledge will it take to be successful? What would you do in that role every day?
- C. Sometimes, getting the role you want requires a different set of strengths than the role itself. Getting elected is one such example -- the talents and skills needed to hold an office may differ from those required to run for office. Managing salespeople may be another: The skills required to succeed at sales are not the skills needed to manage highly successful salespeople. Consider what has to be accomplished to acquire the role. How well can you meet that challenge?

4. Candidly consider your "fit."

- A. Don't gloss over the parts of the role you dislike or wouldn't enjoy. While no role will "fit" you perfectly, the parts that don't "fit" should be kept to a minimum, and they should reflect the more negotiable aspects of the job.
- B. Ask yourself, what tasks would you perform every day? How closely are those aligned with what you do best?
- C. Don't attempt this step alone. Seek input from your Career Board or from individuals who know you well and who are willing to help you with this process.

5. Define an action plan.

- A. Once you've locked onto your goal, it's time to plan. What are the things you must do to prepare for this position? And how can you attain it, once you are ready?

6. Build a constituency.

- A. Think about the people who can help you land your target role. Do you already know those people, or do you need to find ways to connect with them?
- B. Identify the support you will need to be successful. Whose help will you need once you've attained your target role?

7. Measure your performance.

- A. Chart your progress on your action plan. As you check off your current steps, identify the next three.
- B. If your long-term goal requires interim steps, you may need to celebrate smaller successes as you go. These are excellent times to

connect with your Career Board and other supporters.

- C. Finally, continually reassess how your long-term goals relate to your career plan. At each step, consider whether you're still happy with your overall direction, or whether you might have learned some things about the role or about yourself that might cause you to change your course. Failure to self-correct may lead you to token success -- you may achieve your initial goal, but discover your priorities have changed in the interim.

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