



# Go Put Your Strengths to Work: 6 Powerful Steps to Achieve Outstanding Performance

By Marcus Buckingham

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## Go Put Your Strengths to Work: 6 Powerful Steps to Achieve Outstanding Performance By Marcus Buckingham

Marcus Buckingham's books have guided millions to become top performers in everything they do by focusing on their strengths. In *Go Put Your Strengths to Work*, a *Wall Street Journal* bestseller in hardcover, Buckingham will show you how to hone and apply your strengths for maximum success in your career.

Research data show that most people do not come close to making full use of their assets at work—in fact, only seventeen percent of the workforce believe they use all of their strengths on the job. *Go Put Your Strengths to Work* aims to change that through a six-step, six-week experience that will reveal the hidden dimensions of your strengths. Buckingham shows you how to seize control of your assets and rewrite your job description under the nose of your boss. You will learn:

- Why your strengths aren't "what you are good at" and your weaknesses aren't "what you are bad at."
- How to use the four telltale signs to identify your strengths.
- The simple steps you can take each week to push your time at work toward those activities that strengthen you and away from those that don't.
- How to talk to your boss and your colleagues about your strengths without sounding like you're bragging and about your weaknesses without sounding like you're whining.
- The fifteen-minute weekly ritual that will keep you on your strengths path your entire career.

With structured exercises that will become part of your regular workweek and proven tactics from people who have successfully applied the book's lessons, *Go Put Your Strengths to Work* will arm you with a radically different approach to your work life. As part of the book's program you'll take an online Strengths Engagement Track, a focused and powerful gauge that has proven to be the best way to measure the level of engagement of your strengths or your team's strengths. You can also download the first two segments of the renowned companion film series *Trombone Player Wanted*.

*Go Put Your Strengths to Work* will open up exciting uncharted territory for you and your organization. Join the strengths movement and thrive.

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### Editorial Review

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Buckingham, an authority on workplace issues, provides a road map for managers to learn for themselves and then teach their employees how to approach their work by emphasizing their strengths rather than weaknesses. He offers a six-step plan for six weeks of reading and habit-forming action for discerning strengths, along with optional tools to enhance the process such as online questions for measuring strengths and downloaded films (two of which are free). The steps of his plan are belief that the best way to compete is capitalizing on your strengths, identifying your strengths and weaknesses, volunteering your strengths at work, lessening the impact of your weaknesses on your team, effectively communicating the value of your strengths while limiting work utilizing weaknesses, and building habits and pushing activities that play to strength. Although everyone will not agree with all the elements of Buckingham's approach, he offers valuable insight into maximizing employees' strengths rather than the more common focus on weaknesses and failure. *Mary Whaley*

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### About the Author

Marcus Buckingham spent seventeen years at the Gallup Organization, where he conducted research into the world's best leaders, managers, and workplaces. The Gallup research later became the basis for the bestselling books *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Best Managers Do Differently* (Simon & Schuster) and *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (Free Press), both coauthored by Buckingham. Buckingham has been the subject of in-depth profiles in *The New York Times*, *Fortune*, *BusinessWeek* and *Fast Company*. He now has his own company, providing strengths-based consulting, training, and e-learning. In 2007 Buckingham founded TMBC to create strengths-based management training solutions for organizations worldwide, and he spreads the strengths message in keynote addresses to over 250,000 people around the globe each year. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife Jane and children Jackson and Lilia. For more information visit: [marcusbuckingham.com](http://marcusbuckingham.com)

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### From Introduction

## Lead This Movement

### THE FIRST STAGE: HOW TO LABEL

It's hard to trace the source of the strengths movement.

Some will identify Peter Drucker, citing his seminal 1966 book, *The Effective Executive*, in which he wrote: "The effective executive builds on strengths -- their own strengths, the strengths of superiors, colleagues, subordinates; and on the strengths of the situation."

Some will cite a 1987 article that launched a new discipline called Appreciative Inquiry, whose basic premise, according to its founder, David Cooperrider, was "to build organizations around what works rather than fix what doesn't."

Some will make reference to Dr. Martin Seligman's 1999 speech after becoming president of the American Psychological Association. "The most important thing we learned was that psychology was half-baked, literally half-baked," he said. "We've baked the part about mental illness, about repair of damage. The other side's unbaked, the side of strength, the side of what we're good at."

More recently, some might even point to the book I wrote with Donald Clifton for the Gallup organization, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, which began with this optimistic statement of intent: "We wrote this book to start a revolution, the strengths revolution."

Whatever its true source, the strengths movement is now in full flood. It is a wave of change that, over the last several years, has swept us all forward. No discipline has been left behind. Whether we work in business, government, education, or health care, this wave has lifted us up, spun us around, and revealed to us all a new world. You may not yet recognize the change -- some of us were bowled over by the wave, while others barely noticed it carrying them along. But, with or without our knowledge, it has picked us up and deposited us far from where we were a decade ago. And there's no going back. This wave has forever changed the way we perceive ourselves, our employees, our students, and our children.

Look around you, and you'll see clearly the signs of change.

Many of the world's most successful organizations such as Wells Fargo, Intel, Best Buy, and Accenture have declared their commitment to becoming an explicitly strengths-based organization. All new managers at Toyota must now attend a three-day Great Manager training program that shows them how to spot the strengths of their subordinates. All new managers at Yahoo are required to take an online survey that measures their talents and pinpoints their strongest.

Look beyond business, and you'll see nonprofit organizations such as the U.S. Coast Guard, the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma, the American Society on Aging, and the New Zealand Ministry of Youth Development all installing similar strengths-based programs and initiatives.

Universities too have been swept up by the movement. Princeton, with great fanfare, recently set up its own Center for Health and Well-Being, dedicated to the study of all that is right in the world. Over half the faculty are, surprisingly, economists. At Harvard, Professor Tal David Ben-Shahar's class *An Introduction to Positive Psychology* is now the most popular elective class in the entire curriculum. And Azusa Pacific University now has a Center for Strengths-Based Education, set up by the pioneering educator Edward "Chip" Anderson.

Look further still, and you'll see more signs of the movement's reach. If your child happens to break the law in Ingham County, Michigan, before his day in probate court, he'll be asked to fill out a Strengths Assessment for Juvenile Justice, which will pose strengths-based questions such as "Have you made any good changes in the past? How did you make these changes?" and "What is your first step to get out of this trouble? Who will be the first person to notice this step?"

If you are a psychiatry student learning to work with patients suffering persistent mental disorders, you will be asked to read Charles Rapp's 1997 classic, *The Strengths Model*, which shows you, case by case, how to "amplify the well part of the patient."

If you are an aspiring soccer coach, Major League Soccer will be happy to sign you up for its Strengths-Based Coaching course. Here you'll learn, among other things, how to hand out "green cards," which draw a child's attention to a particularly good pass or tackle he made, rather than the traditionally punitive yellow and red cards.

Today the strengths movement is everywhere: the corporate world, the worlds of public service, of economics, of education, of faith, of charity -- it has affected them all. It has its detractors, of course, but an appeal as universal as this begs the question "Why?" Why do so many people from so many different worlds see such power in the strengths-based perspective?

Because it works better than any other perspective. The radical idea at the core of the strengths movement is that excellence is not the opposite of failure, and that, as such, you will learn little about excellence from studying failure. This seems like an obvious idea until you realize that, before the strengths movement began, virtually all business and academic inquiry was built on the opposite idea: namely, that a deep understanding of failure leads to an equally deep understanding of excellence. That's why we studied unhappy customers to learn about the happy ones, employees' weaknesses to learn how to make them excel, sickness to learn about health, divorce to learn about marriage, and sadness to learn about joy.

What has become evident in virtually every field of human endeavor is that failure and success are not opposites, they are merely different, and so they must be studied separately. Thus, for example, if you want to learn what you should *not* do after an environmental disaster, Chernobyl will be instructive. But if you want to learn what you *should* do, Chernobyl is a waste. Only successful cleanups, such as at the Rocky Flats nuclear facility in Colorado, can tell you what excellence looks like.

Study unproductive teams, and you soon discover that the teammates argue a lot. Study successful teams, and you learn that they argue just as much. To find the secrets to a great team, you have to investigate the successful ones and figure out what is going on in the space between the arguments.

Focus your research on people who contract HIV and die, and you gain some useful insights about how the disease wrecks the body's immune system. But focus your research on those few people with HIV who are relatively unaffected by the disease, and you learn something else entirely: namely, how the body fights back.

Conventional wisdom tells us that we learn from our mistakes. The strengths movement says that all we learn from mistakes are the characteristics of mistakes. If we want to learn about our successes, we must study successes.

Fueled by this idea, the first stage of the strengths movement -- the stage we are in right now -- has been dominated by efforts to label what is right with things. Thus, whereas the World Bank used to rank countries according to their negative qualities, such as poverty, violence, and vulnerability, today it has developed a list of positive labels that capture a country's overall level of well-being, labels such as social capability, economic self-determination, and sustainability of local customs.

In the field of psychology, our descriptors all used to be heavily skewed toward the negatives: neurotic, psychotic, schizophrenic, depressed. Today we have redressed the balance and have added equally detailed labels to describe the positives. For example, Martin Seligman and his colleague Chris Peterson have developed their list of "Character Strengths and Virtues," which includes such qualities as Courage, Justice, Transcendence, and Temperance.

Similarly, *Now, Discover Your Strengths* introduced Gallup's online personality profile called StrengthsFinder (since renamed the Clifton StrengthsFinder, in Don's memory), which measures you on thirty-four themes of talent, with names like Ideation, Restorative, Significance, and Connectedness.

Our hunger for these labels can be measured in part by the number of people who have taken the Clifton StrengthsFinder profile since 2001. The total is now over two million. More revealing still, each year this number not only increases, but the *increase* increases. More people took it last year than the year before, and

more the year before than the year before that. Clearly, millions of us feel a deep need to label what's right with us.

## **THE SECOND STAGE: HOW TO TAKE ACTION**

If all this labeling is to not go to waste, however, we must now take the necessary next step. We must progress into the second stage of the strengths movement: the action stage. This is where we learn how to go beyond the affirming power of a label. It's the stage where we engage with the real world, where we figure out how to use our strengths to make a tangible contribution, where we deal with people who don't agree on what our strengths are, or who don't care, or who do care but want us to focus them differently than we do. It's the stage where we step up and put our strengths to work.

This book leads us into the second stage, where the real payoff is to be found.

While the labeling stage was driven by the theoretical idea that you learn little about excellence from studying failure, the action stage is founded on a more pragmatic premise: namely, that a person or an organization will excel only by amplifying strengths, never by simply fixing weaknesses.

At the level of the organization, this premise has been both widely disseminated and well executed. Drawing on the economic theories of the eighteenth-century economist David Ricardo, Peter Drucker wrote that the most competitive companies, just like the most competitive countries, "get their strengths together and make their weaknesses irrelevant." Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great* captured the same idea when he wrote that great companies focus on those few things they can b...

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