New Book Destroys the Myth of the Well-Rounded Leader

A Synopsis of and Interview with the Authors of

Strengths Based Leadership

Nearly a decade ago, Gallup ignited a global conversation on the topic of strengths when it unveiled the results of a landmark 30-year research project. <u>The research concluded that spending time building strengths was far more productive than logging countless hours shoring up weaknesses</u> and it created a virtual revolution in the way people think about their natural talents. Gallup has published two bestselling books on the subject (*Now, Discover Your Strengths* and *StrengthsFinder 2.0)*, and to date, more than 3 million people have taken the company's StrengthsFinder assessment.

Strengths Based Leadership, by #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Tom Rath and renowned leadership consultant Barry Conchie, is the next logical step in the strengths dialogue. The book reveals three key findings about leadership; offers readers access to a leadership version of the StrengthsFinder program to help them lead with their top five strengths; and presents the engaging stories of some truly successful leaders of our time, including Best Buy's Brad Anderson, The Ritz-Carlton's Simon Cooper, Standard Chartered Bank's Mervyn Davies, and Wendy Kopp of the legendary nonprofit Teach For America.

"Chances are," write Rath and Conchie, "you will have many opportunities to lead during your own lifetime. As you will learn, the path to great leadership starts with a deep understanding of the strengths you bring to the table."

The Myth of the Well-Rounded Leader

One of the most startling conclusions of Gallup's research is that there is no one strength that all good leaders possess. What's more, the most effective leaders are not well-rounded at all, but instead are acutely aware of their talents and use them to their best advantage. The late Donald O. Clifton, the Father of Strengths Psychology, was asked a few months before his death in 2003 what he considered to be the greatest discovery in more than 30 years of leadership research.

Clifton responded, "A leader needs to know his strengths as a carpenter knows his tools, or as a physician knows the instruments at her disposal. *What great leaders have in common is that each truly knows his or her strengths -- and can call on the right strength at the right time*. This explains why there is no definitive list of characteristics that describes all leaders." It also explains why the calm and quiet approach of Mahatma Gandhi was equally as effective as the domineering and confrontational style of Winston Churchill.

Note: This article is posted on the GALLUP Management Journal website at the following URL: http://gmj.gallup.com/content/113554/Press-Release-Strengths-Based-Leadership.aspx#1, dated December 23, 2008.

Gallup scientists surveyed more than one million work teams, conducted more than 20,000 in-depth interviews with leaders, and even interviewed more than 10,000 followers around the world to ask exactly *why* they followed the most important leader in their life. Here's what they found:

- **The most effective leaders are always investing in strengths.** In the workplace, when an organization's leadership fails to focus on individuals' strengths, the odds of an employee being engaged are a dismal 1 in 11 (9%). But when an organization's leadership focuses on the strengths of its employees, the odds soar to almost 3 in 4 (73%). When leaders focus on and invest in their employees' strengths, the odds of each person being engaged goes up *eightfold*.

- **The most effective leaders surround themselves with the right people and then maximize their team.** While the best leaders are not well-rounded, the best teams are. Gallup's research found that top-performing teams have strengths in four specific domains. (See below.)

- **The most effective leaders understand their followers' needs.** People follow leaders for very specific reasons. When asked, followers were able to describe exactly what they need from a leader with remarkable clarity: trust, compassion, stability, and hope.

The Findings

In researching the book *Strengths Based Leadership*, Gallup researchers studied more than one million work teams, conducted more than 20,000 in-depth interviews with leaders, and even interviewed more than 10,000 followers. Here are some of their findings:

- Of all the leaders surveyed, Gallup has yet to discover even one who has world-class strength in all of the four domains of leadership strength -- executing, influencing, relationship building, and strategic thinking.

- Paradoxically, those who strive to be competent in all areas become the least effective leaders overall.

- Out of 1,001 U.S. adults surveyed in a recent Gallup Poll, 97% rated their ability to lead as being at or above average. And more than two-thirds reported that they have led a group or team, whether at work or in an environment such as school, church, or community.

- A preliminary Gallup analysis suggests that people who report having a chance to use their strengths in the workplace are likely to reap the benefit of a "cumulative advantage" of having higher income, higher job satisfaction, and even better health over time.

- An organization with leaders who are able to help employees capitalize on this cumulative advantage will create more rapid individual *and* organizational growth.

- While the findings don't reveal a universal skill set for leaders, they do point to four domains of leadership strength: executing, influencing, relationship building, and strategic thinking. While the leader himself need not exhibit *all* of these skills, he should build his *team* so that all four domains are represented.

- Findings also revealed that *followers* have four basic needs: trust, compassion, stability, and hope.

- The chances of employees being engaged at work when they don't trust the company's leaders are just 1 in 12. On the other hand, the chances of employees being engaged at work are better than 1 in 2 if they do trust the organization's leadership.

- The most effective leaders remain true to who they are, are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and surround themselves with the right people to maximize their teams. Interestingly, when choosing their successors, the most effective leaders tend to replace themselves with someone who has a different set of strengths than their own -- a trait that makes the impact of great leadership last beyond the leaders' tenure at an organization.

The Four Domains of Leadership Strength

Over the years, Gallup has studied thousands of executive teams, in most cases interviewing a team's formal leaders *and* each member. This enabled Gallup to compare the strengths of each person on the team and to start thinking about how the organization looks as a whole. What emerged from these data are four distinct domains of leadership strength that are necessary components of all great teams. It serves a team well to have representation from each of these domains -- whether in the leader or in the team members. The four domains of leadership strength are:

Executing

Team members who have dominant strength in the Executing domain are those whom you turn to time and again to implement a solution. These are the people who will work tirelessly to get something done. People who are strong in the Executing domain have an ability to take an idea and transform it into reality within the organization they lead.

Influencing

People who are innately good at influencing are always selling the team's ideas inside and outside the organization. When you need someone to take charge, speak up, and make sure your group is heard, look to someone with the strength to influence.

Relationship Building

Relationship builders are the glue that holds a team together. Strengths associated with bringing people together -- whether it is by keeping distractions at bay or keeping the collective energy high -- transform a group of individuals into a team capable of carrying out complex projects and goals.

Strategic Thinking

Those who are able to keep people focused on what they *could be* are constantly pulling a team and its members into the future. They continually absorb and analyze information and help the team make better decisions.

Leaders who are strongly self-aware and realistic about their own talents and strengths are the most likely to pick a team that helps shore up their weaknesses. A strong strategist, for example, will recognize the importance of having a relationship builder on board. This ability to build a well-rounded team is the mark of a successful leader, no matter which particular talents or strengths he or she possesses.

An Interview with Tom Rath and Barry Conchie

Authors of *Strengths Based Leadership*

Q: This book challenges conventional business wisdom, suggesting that leaders are not, in fact, well-rounded. Did the research surprise you? What exactly does it mean?

A: The concept of the "well-rounded leader" is prevalent in many organizations. You can see this in how organizations select leaders and in the emphasis they place on the kinds of development programs they offer. Typically, selection attempts to find leaders who are almost superhuman -- who exhibit such a wide range of characteristics that those claiming to possess them are barely credible.

The whole idea of the "competent leader" who is well-rounded just doesn't stand up to examination against the evidence. The research shows that the best leaders excel at a limited number of things, and they are smart enough to know it. Thus, they surround themselves with people who provide a balance of talents and attributes. Those claiming to be good at everything tend to be masters of none, and the most successful organizations are not led by average leaders.

Organizations also tend to promote a sense of well-roundedness in their development programs. It's simply ingrained. Many of these programs are remedial; they attempt to correct deficiencies. However, some of this development activity fails to consider whether the desired outcomes are actually achievable. There is little evidence, for example, that you can teach someone to come up with big ideas or to be a creative, out-of-the-box thinker. The return on investment for such development would be very low for an individual without the basic talent set. Rather than try to develop well-rounded leaders, organizations should help leaders define their key strengths and figure out how to use them to the fullest extent and build teams with complementary strengths.

Q: Is leadership an acquired skill or an innate talent?

A: Clearly, there are essential talents that leaders possess to succeed at different organizational levels. Some of these talents would seem to be enduring, and they are difficult to develop in people who don't already have them. Whether these talents existed at birth or were socialized is not a focus of our research, but having individuals more clearly understand their strengths gives them a greater chance of being a successful leader.

Now, if we consider leadership as an attitude and behavior -- as the capacity to influence people and create followership -- then many more individuals have the capacity to lead than probably know it. People can be taught how to identify their strengths and how those strengths can be used to develop their leadership potential. This is true whether someone is a cashier at a supermarket or a junior lawyer working in a law firm. The right leadership development might not lead certain people to become CEOs,

but it will help them build influence and followership and create a positive effect on the lives of those they encounter.

Q: Although the studies did not point to a single skill set that all leaders possess, they did identify four key features of all successful TEAMS -- skills that are shared between the leader and the followers. Can you tell us about these?

A: The four domains of leadership strength provide an effective framework for identifying balance in a team. Each of these domains is broad in nature, but taken together, they represent key aspects of effective leadership. We don't tend to find individual leaders who excel in each of the domains; in fact, we often find leaders who are more accomplished in maybe one or two of them. This is why it's important that, overall, a leadership team shows evidence of each of these leadership domains. If a leadership team is comprised of individuals who are all weak in Relationship Building, for example, that would seriously limit the effectiveness of the team and potentially cause some limitations in terms of their performance.

Q: Gallup made a point of studying not only leaders, but followers as well. Can you tell us why you think that's important?

A: So much has been written either by or about specific leaders or leadership generally. But very little research had been published on how *followers* view effective leaders -- leaders they look up to. We thought this was a major gap in knowledge, and we wanted to close it -- and in the process see what we could learn about how followers looked at leaders and the particular qualities they needed from those leaders.

This is an important area to study because it provides leaders with a different lens through which to consider their behavior, focus, and impact. The results of our research provide leaders with a powerful framework for thinking about their leadership. And in the book, we give specific advice about how to meet these follower expectations through a focus on strengths.

Q: You also discuss in the book how effective teams are also teams made up of engaged workers. Can you tell us why there is a connection between the two?

A: High and improving levels of employee engagement correlate positively to a variety of business outcomes such as productivity, profitability, and turnover. This correlation exists at the organizational, division, team, and individual levels. One engaged employee on a team of actively disengaged employees is going to have a hard time making the kind of positive impact that a whole team of engaged employees could make. As the most effective teams deliver the best results and outcomes, we find that these teams are also the most engaged.

Managers and leaders in organizations create the conditions for teams to be highly engaged. One key factor in raising levels of engagement is managers and leaders focusing on the strengths of individual

employees. If managers can help employees understand and leverage their strengths -- help them do what they do best every day -- that will have a positive impact on engagement. While it is possible to have a productive team that is not engaged, our research tells us that this situation is not sustainable for the long term. Unless the level of engagement increases, performance could deteriorate.

Q: The book's research found that successful leaders are more likely to pick successors who do not possess the same skills as they do. Can you tell us why that is?

A: The most successful leaders tend to know their leadership strengths and how to leverage them. They also know their leadership weaknesses and recognize that unless they get help and support in these areas, they will not be as effective. Consequently, they tend to surround themselves with other leaders who compensate for their shortcomings. This focus on leadership talent sometimes supersedes a focus on technical proficiency and knowledge, and great leaders are often extremely patient in their search for the specific blend of talents that fit best.

Less effective leaders tend to see balance in teams as a result of combining people with specific technical expertise and specialized knowledge -- but their teams lack an essential diversity in *talent*. This is a very important distinction, and one too few leaders make. Our research shows that many leadership teams with average and below-average performance "self-replicate" this lack of talent diversity on the teams that report to them. Without a diversity of talent -- and the range of perspectives that goes with it -- teams can miss growth opportunities altogether.

Q: What do you believe is the hallmark of effective leadership?

A: The most effective leaders are those who are aware of their strengths and who have fully optimized them. They are clear about their weaknesses and have found strategies, support mechanisms, and partners to successfully compensate for them.

Effective leaders assemble technically proficient and knowledgeable teams using these same principles, and they establish high and improving levels of engagement across the organization. They ensure that their leadership teams have abundant talent to strategically think, build relationships, influence, and execute.

Their leadership is stable and predictable. They show that they care about people. They operate with high levels of trust, and they inspire hope and optimism among their followers. They harness all of these elements to deliver world-class performance.

The Authors

Gallup Global Practice Leader **Tom Rath** is the author of the bestselling titles *How Full Is Your Bucket?* and *StrengthsFinder 2.0*. In total, Rath's books have sold more than one million copies and have made more than 100 appearances on the *Wall Street Journal* bestseller list. Rath has been with Gallup for 14 years and currently leads the company's workplace research and leadership consulting worldwide. He and his wife, Ashley, live in Washington, D.C.

A renowned Leadership Consultant, Gallup's **Barry Conchie** is sought out by CEOs around the world to assist in aligning business and talent strategies that drive performance. Conchie was a public sector leader in the UK before joining Gallup in London. In 2002, he brought his extensive global experience to Gallup's Washington, D.C. headquarters, where he now leads Gallup's executive leadership consulting. Conchie lives in Maryland with his wife and two children.

Strengths Based Leadership offers a new roadmap for great leadership and building more effective organizations and workgroups.