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A Cord of Three Strands Is Not Quickly Broken: Strengths of a Team

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Abstract

The idea of “strengths” is a shift for the western world in how it looks at talents, skills, and weaknesses. The strengths paradigm is an assessment that universities are using to assist students in identifying their talents and strengths. Many have written about strengths and the individual; few have written about or researched the impact of the paradigm on team development. Discussing how disparate strengths can work in relationship to one another is important. Moreover, understanding that improper use of strengths can lead to the “shadow” side of strengths creating dissonance and conflict in a team is also important. This article reflects on what is necessary for a team to provide space for a beneficial exploration and facilitation of strengths. Using literature, student interviews, and personal observations, this article intends to prompt further discussion and the production of literature as it pertains to how strengths work with college teams.

Introduction

The StrengthsFinder assessment, as a lens through which talents, aptitudes, and skills are viewed, is a powerful corrective in a culture that tends to focus on strengthening weaknesses, rather than on identifying strengths and making them effective. The assessment tool is a powerful means of increasing an individual's self-awareness. It can inform current situations and future dreams. It helps to identify the things that a person loves and will most likely do well.

Our university has been using the StrengthsFinder with student-leaders for more than a decade. In the past six years, we have become increasingly aware of the implications of this tool for how we craft and supervise them into their distinctive teams. Many researchers have reflected and studied how strengths work with individuals. Less available is material that expands our understanding of how strengths inform the development of teams, specifically teams of college students. Questions arise, such as, how do strengths evolve in relationship to other team members? What role do strengths play within team conflict? As we have wrestled with these and similar questions, we have discovered details that need to be considered as teams are formed. The following is a compilation of those observations, interviews, and literature that informs how strengths as a tool interact and affect teams.

I will examine why a strengths paradigm has value for the individual in discerning his or her strengths. Then I will explore why the notion of strengths has the potential of shaping a team's effectiveness. My contention is that the StrengthsFinder paradigm is immensely valuable for team development and effectiveness, but that this development must parallel a growing understanding of how strengths function in each person.

Benefits of Strengths

The StrengthsFinder as an assessment tool measures "talent, not strength" (Rath, 2007, p. 17). This talent "represents a capacity to *do* something" (Clifton & Anderson, 2002, p. 6). The assessment helps identify the things that an individual does well. Unfortunately, many "are either unaware of, or unable to describe, their own strengths" (Rath, 2007, p. 13). It has become increasingly important for an individual to identify and develop his or her strengths in order to understand how he or she "fit[s] in" (Rath, 2007, p. 11) to any organization. One's talents are not static:

Each of us begins with a talent (something we are predisposed to be good at) and multiply it by the effort we put toward that talent. As we exert effort to gain knowledge and skills, our talent is transformed into strengths. (Hulme & Oliver, 2008, p. 23)

While transformation of strengths is possible, "scientists have discovered that core personality traits are relatively stable throughout adulthood" (Rath, 2007, p. 18).

The strengths paradigm provides individuals with insight into how they understand their journey through life. In an ideal situation, awareness of strengths would allow the individual to focus on the best and most helpful manner by which they process information and interact with the world around them.

How do Strengths Function for Individuals?

The strengths approach works under the assumption that individuals have in their personal genetic code the essential talents to be successful. Further, when dealing with teams, leaders have the responsibility “to recognize, nurture, and build on those internal strengths” of their team members (Hulme & Oliver, 2008, p. 23). The functional side to the StrengthsFinder is that it provides an individual with their top five identified talents. However, it is important to remember that these talents “do not become strengths until one has added knowledge and skill to the equation” (Henck & Hulme, 2008, p. 8). Identifying and developing one’s strengths, in conjunction with being in an environment that permits their use, increases the individual’s engagement with his or her vocational role and contentment with life. My observation, also noted in the literature, is that when students function within their strengths, not only are they more successful, but they often attribute a greater sense of significance to their task or responsibility (Shushok & Hulme, 2006).

Scholars and practitioners who write and teach on leadership affirm that “we know that believing what you do is important, and doing work that is congruent with your value system leads to engagement at work” (Hulme & Oliver, 2008, p. 22). Engagement or motivation is tied to the freedom to use one’s strengths. Some of the constant variables of our lives are our talents and strengths; often our success is tied to whether we are permitted to use and develop them. For a team leader, one of his or her roles is to “create... an environment where we could do what we do best” (Hulme & Oliver, 2008, p. 22). This environment permits team members to build their strengths, and as a result, become increasingly engaged in their tasks and goals.

Teams as a Valuable Approach

American culture tends to affirm the value of individual action and achievement. However, many areas (athletics, business, ministry, and education) do affirm the value of a team (Michaelson, Knight, & Fink, 2004; Pellerin, 2009; Samuels & Hoxsey, 2010). As a strategy for efficiently accomplishing tasks and projects, a team approach is recognized as beneficial. “Although individuals can complete some tasks effectively, groups have been found to accomplish tasks, especially complex ones, more effectively than individuals working alone under a wide range of conditions” (Tjosvold & Wong, 2004, p. 293). A team helps move a group of individuals into a collaborative and complementary venture (Linley, Woolston, & Biswas-Diener, 2009).

A team is more than just a grouping of individuals tasked with a certain objective: “If handled appropriately, [it] is an important vehicle through which the work of organizations gets accomplished” (Nicotera, 1995, p. 4). This is particularly true when a team is diverse in experience, heritage, and culture: “Culturally diverse team members can strengthen their capacity for innovation by developing a common understanding and methods for how they are to negotiate their differences” (Tjosvold & Wong, 2004, p. 292). In order for teams to flourish, they must recognize and be committed to the idea “that the success of one promotes the success of the other” (Tjosvold & Wong, 2004, p. 298).

For their mutual success, it is helpful for team members to focus on cooperation rather than on competition. Tjosvold and Wong (2004) noted:

Cooperators want each other to perform well so that they can both achieve their goals. Competitive goals produce a desire to obstruct the others’ effective action so that one achieves one’s goal while the opponent does not. Competitors want to win, see the other lose, and engage in oppositional interaction. (p. 297)

The success of a team is tied to the collaboration of two or more individuals pursuing a goal. Many schools, businesses, and organizations are committing resources to the development of teams because they understand that “the *purpose* of a team is to accomplish one or more necessary tasks or responsibilities that cannot be accomplished by individuals working alone” (Rees, 2001, p. 18).

In discussing work teams, Rees (2001) observed, “The *focus* of a team is to get work done that supports the goals of the organization” (p. 18). Beyond that, there is an understanding that “*teams are the structure; teamwork is the process*. Teams are the ways to organize. Teamwork is the way a person thinks and works. Teamwork is more than skills. It is more than structure. It is more than forced group cooperation” (Rees, 2001, p. 21). Teams are recognized as significant strategies for effectively accomplishing their goals, objectives, and mission. Within the context of teams, personal awareness of strengths allows the individual to discern his or her ability to tackle challenges and to be aware of when he or she needs assistance or the skills of others. A supervisor or team leader assists in the shaping of a team culture where this discernment is understood and valued.

Strengths as a Paradigm for a Team

Using myself as an example, I can illustrate the ways strengths interact harmoniously within an individual and with others. Using the assessment terminology, my top five strengths area identified as *context*, *intellection*, *input*, *belief*, and *connectedness*. While Gallup provides descriptions for each strength (www.gallupstrengthscenter.com), they are defined in my life in the following manner: *Context* clarifies that to fully understand the world and the events around me, I need to understand as many of the details and

nuances which might be relevant to situations revolving around me. *Intellection* indicates that I love to muse, reflect, and study the things in my life. I function easily in the life of the mind. *Input* reflects the importance I place on gathering the reflections, thoughts, and opinions of others before I act or speak. *Belief* explains that standards such as integrity, justice, and congruity are important to me; these standards work out in my actions being consistent with my convictions. *Connectedness* affirms I believe that little in this world is random. I believe there is a reason for most things existing or acting. There is significance in the world reflected in how things are connected. It is not difficult to see how these strengths interact in my own life. Context, input, and connectedness dovetail and reinforce one another, bringing details, ideas, and observations into a holistic picture. Belief and connectedness reflect my worldview which affirms that God is active in his creation.

As individuals begin to discern and understand their own strengths, they become attuned to how these strengths interact and reinforce each other. It is also possible to see how these strengths can potentially interact with the strengths of others. My team members who have the strength of *activator* are men and women who want to start implementing tasks or challenges. They function well in tandem with my input, which wants to gather data before action. We function as strong counterbalances to one another. My colleagues with the strength of *empathy* provide relational mercy and grace to those who do not meet the standards expected by my strength of belief. My co-workers who have the strength of *relater* round out my *intellection*; when I focus too much on the mind, they are able to draw in and strengthen the relationship. Even from these few examples, it is possible to see how strengths can function in tandem with one another. They can become counterbalances to one another augmenting each other's abilities and aptitudes.

At the same time, it is possible to discern some of the potentially less helpful aspects of strengths in a team. These negative manifestations of the strengths are informally referred to as the *shadows*; I will explain below. However, in order for the influence of shadows to be minimized, certain things must be present within a team's culture.

Conditions for Discussing the Shadows

One of the important elements to consider when discussing strengths is the level of trust that exists among team members. This is particularly important when discussing the shadow or *dark side* of strengths, which are the less positive elements of strengths. Without trust, a team starts to fall apart. A supervisor or team leader must discern if there is any value or safety in identifying shadows when trust is minimal or non-existent.

Therefore, in order for a team to engage itself fully in the conversation about the shadow side of strengths, there must be trust among its members. At the same time, there must also be a sense of hope that permeates the team culture. There must be hope that any discussion about shadows will strengthen the team's functionality and effectiveness. This environment of trust and hope does not happen haphazardly. Team members must understand and acknowledge that "a common mistake in communication is the belief

that one person interprets the spoken words of another exactly as intended by the speaker” (Hulme & Henck, 2008, p. 1). Team leaders must be at the forefront in understanding the need for clear communication: “they must be concerned not only about what is said, but also about what is heard” (Hulme & Henck, 2008, p. 6). As a team grows and strengthens itself, it finds that “trust is built when an individual perceives that another person is attempting to believe the best about the individual” (Hulme & Henck, 2008, p. 6). Trust also compels an individual towards greater effectiveness and excellence: “Trust is one of the most powerful forms of motivation and inspiration. People want to be trusted. They respond to trust” (Covey, 2006, p. 29). Trust is an essential part of what leaders are trying to do in seeking to encourage and build their teams. They realize that for most people, “if we’re going to make it to the summit, we need someone shouting in our ear, ‘Come on, you can do it, I know you can do it’” (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. xiii).

Encouraging and demonstrating care reflect a leader’s role in developing a team’s ethos and culture. Team leaders “keep hope alive when they set high standards and genuinely express optimism about an individual’s capacity to achieve them” (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. xx). When trust permeates optimism, it evolves into hope. The hope those leaders and their teams have for each other is tied to high standards. The hope of these standards is “aspirational and bring[s] out the best in us” (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. 20). Therefore, with hope and trust being present, a team seeks the best for one another and strives to increase its effectiveness. In this environment, acknowledgement, reflection, and hard conversations about shadows are possible.

Understanding Strengths and Shadows as Beneficial for Teams

Shadows are not similar to weaknesses. Shadows “might be considered as the ‘too much of a good thing’ element of strengths” (Hulme & Oliver, 2008, p. 23). In order for the shadow side of strengths to be acknowledged, “we must recognize when strengths are hindering excellence and develop techniques to utilize strengths in positive ways” (Hulme & Oliver, 2008, p. 23). Some writers suggest that the shadow side is fundamentally tied to the overuse of a particular strength (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2009). Some examples of shadows manifesting themselves include: (a) the disdain individuals with the strength of *belief* might have for others who do not share the same values as themselves; (b) the disregard that someone with *activator* might have for someone who needs to process the information they need to gather before acting; and (c) the paralysis someone with the strength of *empathy* might feel when encountering the significant trauma of others. Theorists note, “Once you overplay a strength, you’re at risk of diminished capacity on the opposite pole” (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2009, p. 101).

In relationship to others, shadows can create tension and stress; “conflict with and among staff members is often a result of strengths conflict” (Hulme & Oliver, 2008, p. 24). In light of this, it is very useful for a team to take time to discern the origins of a misunderstanding or conflict. Admittedly, some conflict is connected to malice, ill

will, and evil. However, many misunderstandings are tied to different approaches and emphases rising out of an individual's strengths. The challenge for a team is to maintain patience, trust, and a commitment to resolving these situations:

As human beings, we need teams, relationships, and community. We do not do our best in isolation. We don't get extraordinary things done by working alone with no support, encouragement, expressions of confidence, or help from others. (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. 8)

Teams need leaders who are able to discern the strengths, talents, and aptitudes of their team members. Teams need leaders committed to the team's well-being, who are willing to function in the dual role of advocate and challenger. When a leader encourages his or her team, the team members are often inspired "to become more than they ever thought possible" (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, pp. 11-12). A team has the potential to be more than the sum of its members when a leader identifies their strengths, understands the shadows, and helps develop the strengths in relationship with one another.

Students and Strengths

Up to this point, we have reflected on strengths and teams in a general way. However, I am primarily interested in how strengths might be of value within teams of college students. In order to understand the power of strengths, it is beneficial to look at American college student culture.

One of the striking features of the current college generation is its use of technology. Turkle's (2011) research focused on the impact of technology on culture and young adults, in particular. She tried to understand the character of digital natives, a group including emerging adults and traditional-aged college students. She observed that technology tended to have a seductive side that drew people into its sphere, often responding to "our human vulnerabilities" (Turkle, 2011, p. 1). For instance, a young man may be lonely, even while he can state that he has 800 Facebook friends; the Facebook perception suggests that he is not isolated and lonely due to so many friends. Yet many of those electronic relationships are illusory. While some have genuine relationships, many Facebook friends have no lasting presence or resilience that one might expect in friendship. The false sense of community created by social media prompted Turkle to observe that many emerging adults feel isolated but also fear anything but surface-level relationships (Turkle, 2011). As electronically connected as they are with one another, they had a feeling that they lacked intimacy. They desired—but feared—intimacy. Others have noted a growing narcissism, self-focus, and diminishing empathy among the current American college student (Smith, Christofferson, Davidson, & Herzog, 2011; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008). However, student culture is more complex than just simple selfishness. A growing sense of loneliness and fear of intimacy add to the sense that "all is not well among emerging adults..." (Smith et al., 2011, p. 193).

Practitioner and scholar Dalton (2006) spent several decades studying and writing about the importance of values and character in the education of college students. In writing about the role of a campus culture for students, he stated, "The forms of connections they create reveal the substance and meaning of community life on campus" (p. 165). More specifically, he observed that the spiritual life of students provides a way for them to make meaning of their experiences and studies. Their faith establishes a foundation that provides them with the psychological and emotional safety to connect their learning with their lives. Dalton observed that for college students, "the spiritual journey almost always involves traveling companions" (p. 171). One of the significant elements of the journey is that it becomes a "quest for meaning and purpose," which "leads students beyond themselves in ways that help them appreciate and connect with others and experience a greater sense of responsibility for helping and understanding them" (p. 171). This appreciation and connection shapes and encourages their sense of empathy for others (Shore, 1997). At the same time that students are looking for the "transcendent and sacred," they are led "inevitably to the desire to connect with others" (Dalton, 2006, p. 172). The needs that students have for both meaning and relational significance will often come together at the same juncture.

For college students, connection with a community creates a sense of belonging, intimacy, and security (Dalton, 2006; Parks, 2000; Purdy, 1999). Students gain tremendous support from each other during a time of their lives that is full of transitions (Phillips, 2002). Boyer (1990) linked the depth of a student's educational experience with the quality of his or her campus community. Parks (2000) noted the importance of community in the development of college students' maturity and spirituality. She recognized that the process of growth "depends upon the quality of interaction between the person and his or her social world" (Parks, 2000, p. 89). Maturation begins in a solo environment, but the presence of a community around the student enables and facilitates that growth, especially where a community "poses a trustworthy alternative to earlier assumed knowing" (Parks, 2000, p. 93). Parks observed that development and growth of young people are most significant within the context of a community where truth is told and grace is extended.

However, it is not just the value of the community for the individual; sometimes it is the value of the individual for the community. Encouraging new students in the Yale community, the university's dean suggested, "Self-withholding shyness, a relatively sympathetic vice in the world at large, is a disaster here, since when you hold back you deprive the rest of us of what you could have taught us" (Brodhead, 2004, p. 19). He challenged students to view their education as a mutual investment where they give as much as they receive. He particularly encouraged them by saying that they possess the means of providing great value to others regardless of background or aptitude.

Findings: Student Reflections

In seeking an understanding about community, teams, and strengths, we approached 30 current or recent (in the previous 20 months) student leaders (SL), who were easily accessible, for their reflections upon the assessment tool and implications they had personally observed. The reflections below are a sample of them. Their reflections illustrated a growing self-awareness and the value of working in teams, along with the challenges they encountered.

After taking the on-line assessment and reflecting on it with peers, teams, and supervisors, students developed greater self-awareness about their capabilities and challenges. These students began by acknowledging the value of being able to discern their own strengths: "Knowing our strengths helped us know how to best work together in order to make things amazing" (SL5). Another observed, "One way I have noticed that I gained a deeper understanding of my strengths is by relating, comparing, contrasting, and communing with other people's strengths" (SL1). The student also noted,

I have learned that it is important to risk testing out the limits of my strengths (this has led to more embarrassing moments than I would like to admit), because without understanding a strength's boundaries, it is hard to become completely self-aware. Self-awareness is not only about using my strengths, but also learning how to not use it. (SL1)

Often the understanding of their own strengths tied to their understanding of the strengths and talents of their peers.

Students observed the benefit of understanding their strengths within a team setting:

My strengths sounded like they were really good ones and I was proud of them but it wasn't until working through the year that I realized the importance of all strengths working together...similar to the illustration of the body of the church. I learned to rely on the relational people for encouragement and advice, the influencing people for bringing our team together, and the executing people to get work done and keep everyone on track. (SL4)

Others discerned the ways in which their own strengths were augmented and complemented by others:

[We] were able to see how very different people with very different gifting can learn to appreciate and support one another in ways that are sometimes better than similar people are. I am 'woo' and 'positivity,' and once I found a 'strategic/focus' person on the staff, we were able to take great ideas, and work out the details to make them amazing while getting others excited about them. (SL5)

I think if I took my strengths test again my strengths will have shifted quite a bit since I began my RA journey. The majority of what I know about relationships and community I learned being an RA, not because of my strengths, but because of my teammate's strengths. (SL4)

While they noted the benefits and values of teamwork, they were also candid with the challenges they encountered.

One student acknowledged the dissonance that occurred when different strengths were manifested. Reflecting on how her strengths interacted with others, she wrote:

The personalities or strengths I have experienced the most tension with are the ones who range higher on attributes like 'responsibility' and 'focus.' The reason for the conflict [is] that I see the idea of responsibility as *a means to an end* in the context of a relationship, while some people I know view it as more of an ultimatum. I dislike when relationship becomes secondary to responsibility. (SL6)

Another one of the participants noted the challenges of differing strengths, but acknowledged the value of particular strengths that were not common in a team: "Overall, our staff scored low in the strategic strengths, but the few people that had those ideation or analytical strengths were very influential" (SL3). Another observed, "Four-fifths of [my strengths] are in strategic thinking. This often put me on the opposite side and sometimes at odds with my more relational staff mates" (SL4). Students developed an understanding of the benefits and values of a diversity of strengths.

One student noted our use of strengths as a tool for our training of student leaders: "I appreciated the emphasis on developing and identifying strengths rather than trying to build teams that were mediocre...by developing weaknesses; I saw the complementarity of our teams' strengths when each moving part was working optimally" (SL3). Students developed a growing appreciation for how their strengths worked in relationship to one another.

Further Research

One of the steps we have resisted has been hiring based on student reported strengths. We will consider strengths as part of the placement (teams and locations) of candidates. However, using strengths as the principal or sole reason for hiring new staff leaves us a little unsettled. Exploring the benefits and challenges of this strategy might be beneficial, as this would inform our hiring practices.

Implications and Conclusion

Essentially, this article asks the question whether the notion of strengths has relevance for the development, function, and supervision of student teams. If strengths are relevant,

how do they evolve in the relationship of one team member to another? Furthermore, can strengths cause conflict or will they naturally provide harmony? My observations and practice suggest that they have tremendous relevance to all aspects of development, supervision, and the working of teams. Being aware of the dynamics of individual strengths generally allows each member to work in cooperation and in harmony with one another. However, the strengths paradigm is not a magic pill for team development. The shadow side of strengths has the potential to wreak havoc. The team leader has a protective role in being vigilant, encouraging trust, and facilitating reconciliation. It is important to remember that the strengths assessment is only a tool, yet it is one that can increase self-awareness, enabling a team to fulfill its mandate. Strengths awareness allows team members to discern the role and significance that they might find in what they are doing. The StrengthsFinder helps us give words to our beliefs and discern our fit.

The uniqueness of the strengths approach for traditionally-aged college students is linked to their personal development. Traditional undergraduates are in the midst of significant transition and development. The StrengthsFinder becomes a means to understand their values, heritage, and priorities. Using it in relationship with others will often lead the student to greater collaboration, increased grace, and a greater tolerance for ambiguity.

My personal goal in writing this article is the desire to see more scholars and practitioners engage in this dialogue. Many use this tool in their practice, so I would invite my peers to participate in the conversation. *Soli Deo Gloria*.

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