



Uncovering Strengths

I wrote the essay below during Collaborative Leadership with Leslie DeChurch, Ph.D. This essay follows up on a Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment I completed to uncover the “intensity” of my talents and learn what I do best. The prompt for this essay was to reflect on any ways in which my personalized report surprised me, provide examples of times I have leveraged my strengths (or could in the future), and investigate the “dark side” of my strengths – i.e., situations that challenge me. This essay provided me with an opportunity to examine how I show up as part of a team, lead collaboratively in complex organizations, and support teams in making choices, negotiating conflict, generating creative ideas, and executing on goals.

My signature themes are Responsibility, Empathy, Intellection, Relator, and Discipline. I was not particularly surprised by this report, and after digging into the theme and insight reports, I have to say the StrengthsFinder hit the nail on the head. As a matter of fact, I am currently in the process of looking for a new job, and whenever I am asked what my strengths are, I answer by saying that I am incredibly conscientious/perfectionistic (Responsibility), I like to organize and plan (Discipline), and I try to care well for the people around me at work (Empathy and Relator). And while I do not always reference it as a strength during job interviews, I am quite introverted and there is quite a lot of thinking, learning, and understanding that goes on inside my head (Intellection). Thus, knowing what I now do about these themes, I would certainly agree that they describe me well.

I plan to purchase my full profile at some point because there are a number of strengths that did not end up being among my signature themes but that I would guess were still quite high. For example, I was quite shocked that Belief did not rank in my top five themes. I have deliberately built my career in the nonprofit sector – mostly health and human services – not just because I hold firm beliefs around the importance of doing good in the world, but because I need my work to be guided by that. I was also surprised that Deliberative did not rank in my top five themes. Having read the description of that theme, it sounds exactly like the description of a Type Six on the Enneagram, and I identify as a Type Six through and through. Lastly, while I was not surprised to see them excluded from my top five themes, I would guess that Includer and Positivity will be included in my top 10. Alison from our cohort told me that she wrote my name down as she read about the Positivity theme, so I am wondering if perhaps there is some crossover with Empathy and Relator – two of my signature themes.

One aspect of the report that was clarifying (though not particularly surprising) is the fact that none of my signature themes fall into the domain of Influencing. I am very aware that this is a weakness of mine, and this weakness has become problematic and hurt me on more than one occasion. Even Communication, which I would consider to be a strength insofar as written communication is concerned, did not appear among my top five themes. I take to heart the message in Strengths Based Leadership that leaders should not “strive to be competent in all areas” (Gallup, 2008, p. 7), however I do think it would benefit me to: 1) cultivate some strength in this particular domain, or 2) investigate how I can use existing strengths to exercise influence when needed.

As I think more carefully about my top strength of Responsibility, what immediately comes to mind is something I wrote in my statement of purpose when applying to Northwestern:

For most of my professional life – since starting my first job at 13 years old – I have managed myself. Whether my boss worked a different schedule, in a different state, or virtually from another location in the same city, my career has been shaped in environments that granted me significant independence but required of me just as much curiosity, initiative, discipline, and maturity. I find great joy working in these sorts of environments because they feed my hunger for constant learning and growth.

I think this theme of Responsibility – taking psychological ownership of my work, being conscientious and dependable, possessing impeccable ethics, etc. – has been plainly visible to my managers and coworkers. (If I did not know my own personality so well, I might even wonder if my career unintentionally established that strength.) Nonetheless, this strength was recognized, appreciated, and nurtured by one of my recent managers. They were very vocal about their desire to know enough about my job in order to do their own job, but they were otherwise very hands-off. I think they saw in me a drive for and commitment to excellence at work, and their evaluations of my performance never questioned me on that front. I think if a manager ever did question my dedication to my work or my dependability, it would be incredibly hurtful and even offensive. This is useful self-knowledge as I choose my next position.

The next team that I choose to join should be one that is, on the whole, positive and optimistic. I will function best as part of a team of people who care deeply about their work and who want to build genuine relationships with their coworkers. My role on such a team will likely include growing social bonds and cohesion, bringing structure and organization to chaos, establishing priorities and schedules to keep the team on track, and even serving as a moral or ethical compass. I need to be allowed to take ownership of my work and not be micro-managed into misery. Perhaps most importantly, I will be a natural leader in an environment wherein I: 1) use my Empathy and Relator themes to help people feel part of the team, 2) use my Intellection and Discipline themes to help the team go about its work, and 3) use my Responsibility theme to help the team determine the role(s) each of us will play. Let's hope I find such a team!