
NOW, DISCOVER YOUR STRENGTHS
BY: MARCUS BUCKINGHAM AND DONALD O. CLIFTON
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Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton collaborate in this effort to create a book designed not only to impart knowledge, but also to be a practical guide for understanding and making good use of the talents of each person. The authors differentiate between strengths and talents, on the one hand, and skills and knowledge on the other. The main purpose of their book is to illustrate how these assets can work together to form a strong base for professional and personal success. The result is a foundation for understanding how to utilize strengths and how to manage weaknesses. Their work connects with the emphasis in many churches today to help members discern their spiritual gifts and to utilize them to serve God and others.

Buckingham and Clifton stress why it is important to know our strengths and talents and to utilize them to their maximum capacity. Strengths are those things we do consistently well and from which we derive satisfaction. A talent underlies a strength and is "any recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied" (48). According to Buckingham and Clifton, possessing a strength is not merely acquiring knowledge. "The acid test of a strength," they write, "is that you can do it consistently and nearly perfectly."

Readers are encouraged to become clear about personal talents and strengths in order to excel at them and allow them to enhance professional and personal goals. The authors clarify what different "signature themes" might mean for each person. A signature theme represents a "dominant theme of talent" (78). For example, some of their thirty-four signature themes are analytical, communication, developer, empathy, focus, learner, and relater. They add that persons with the same signature themes might actually be quite different. These themes will look different with each person as each person expresses them in the particularities of their lives.

Signature themes are determined by completing their StrengthsFinder Profile. Each book gives the purchaser a code that can be used to complete the online StrengthsFinder Profile, which takes about thirty minutes to complete. A description of the taker's five signature themes results from the profile. Much of the book describes how to understand and utilize information gained about the signature themes for yourself and others with whom you work. We are all part of teams, and it is in the midst of these teams that we are challenged to use our talents to their best capacity as well as bring out the talents of others. Buckingham and Clifton are quick to point out that simply understanding one's profile will not replace the important knowledge gained by spending time with persons with whom we work and gaining their trust. However, it might help in the process of leading a strong team and building strong relationships.

Their book connects with some obvious theological themes. As Christians, we believe that our gifts or talents are given by God and are to be developed and used for the betterment of ourselves and the larger community and world. These gifts are not to be squandered but to be used for the benefit of others. While the authors' discussion focuses quite strongly on the professional success of persons using their talents to the maximum advantage, they also talk about satisfaction in life and deriving greater pleasure from one's work and social life. Church leaders would want to expand the conversation further to talk more about what one will do for the larger world with the gifts one has been given.

What do the authors have to say about weaknesses? Much of the effort towards leadership development is devoted to improving aspects of a person's functioning that are not going well. Buckingham and Clifton do not advise focusing on strengths and ignoring weaknesses. Their advice is "rather, to focus on your strengths and *find ways to manage* your weaknesses" (148). It's like wearing eyeglasses; people choose not to ignore a weakness but rather to develop a method to manage the limitation so that the factor no longer restricts them.

The authors believe that there is a kind of humility demonstrated by confessing a weakness (58). In the end, this wins more trust and respect from colleagues than trying to

appear strong in every area. An important part of the Christian tradition is recognizing where we need help, and acknowledging that we will seek the help of others in order to be our best. It is often through our weaknesses that we realize the kind of help or collaboration we need in order to use our strengths most effectively, and in order to allow another to use her or his strengths to help or collaborate with us. This kind of collaboration is not unusual in scripture where persons are found working together toward a common goal through the use of many gifts. Paul is attributed with the most well known phrases of the "many parts, one body" theme (Romans 12).

This book fits within other leadership writing and research that has focused on strengths. Peter Drucker has made this point in his management writing for years. Clifton came to this subject from an educational psychology background. Formerly faculty members at the University of Nebraska, Clifton and Paula Nelson previously wrote on this theme in *Soar with Your Strengths* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1992). The current work by Clifton, a lay church leader who died in 2003, and Buckingham brings a wealth of new research to the conversation.

All church leaders can find help in this book for their own leadership and for their interactions with others. The authors do not present their work as a method of determining who leaders are or even what kind of leadership or vocation a person should follow based on their signature themes. Their overarching point is that, in whatever we do, we must take seriously those themes that appear embedded in our makeup. Our strengths become a lens through which we look at and shape our leadership rather than a clue to a specific calling or vocation.

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