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Developing Strengths-Based Project Teams

Martha Buel
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Martha Buel, MA and Connie Plowman, PMP®



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Abstract

Everyone has talents and strengths. Everyone does projects. *Developing Strengths-Based Project Teams* integrates common project management and strengths-based talent development language to help you and your project team learn about and become a strengths-based project team.

This book is designed for project managers, team members, and stakeholders who have an interest in talent development—not only their own talents and strengths, but also the combined talents and strengths of their project teams. Strengths-based project teams integrate their knowledge, skills, and practice of strengths development with project management tools and techniques, equipping the project team to apply and maximize their collective strengths to successfully complete their project on time, within budget, and according to the project objectives and specifications.

The authors provide a series of building blocks (i.e., discovering, appreciating, and articulating, plus applying talents, knowledge, skills, experience, and strengths) for individual strengths development. This is followed by cultivating the collective strengths of the project team members to become a strengths-based project team.

Throughout the book, there are exercises, templates, and action plans to guide you, along with reflective questions. You will learn the characteristics of a strengths-based project team and explore the various project management roles—including the project sponsor and functional managers—for sustaining a strengths-based project team culture.

A strengths-based project team culture creates an environment in which team members can use their talent development tools long-term to develop and apply what they naturally do best, resulting in higher project team performance.

Keywords

coaching, functional manager, mentoring, project management, project management (PM) tool kit, project manager, project sponsor, project team, stakeholder, strengths-based project team, talent development, team development, team member

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CHAPTER 3

History: An Overview of Strengths Philosophy and Strengths-Based Project Teams

This chapter is an overview of key principles and processes in strengths-based development that we believe are essential tools for developing strengths-based project teams.

The purpose of this chapter is to help you:

1. Begin adding strengths development tools to your project management (PM) tool kit.
2. Understand foundational strengths development building blocks for individual strengths-based development.
3. Understand the characteristics of a strengths-based project team.
4. Have the general framework of this book's strengths-based process for developing a strengths-based project team.

Besides this book, are there more strengths-based talent development resources available to you? Yes! Chapter 3 is simply an overview; therefore, we highly recommend that you read additional strengths-based books and online articles for more extensive explanation, examples, and exercises, which will help you to engage in a deeper understanding of strengths-based development principles and building blocks. (See Appendix A for a list of other resources).

Foundational Individual Strengths Development Building Blocks

The strengths-development building blocks for *individual strengths-based development* summarized in this section will give you a general foundation required to understand and engage in *strengths-based project team* development.

History of Strengths-Based Development

Dr. Donald Clifton was a positive psychologist and is often referred to as the Father of Strengths Psychology. Instead of focusing on what is “wrong” with people, Dr. Clifton was interested in what is “right” with people. In his research, he interviewed many people, asking them questions about what they liked doing, when they are happiest, and when they are most successful. He discovered that people are happiest and most successful when they can use their **strengths** every day. Through his research he learned that the foundation for a person’s strengths are their **talents**—the ways a person naturally thinks, feels, and behaves.¹

After extensive interviewing and reviewing of data, Dr. Clifton and his colleagues named **34 CliftonStrengths® Themes**—*talent themes*, which are groupings or categories of talents. Dr. Clifton and his colleagues then developed the CliftonStrengths (StrengthsFinder®) assessment, the results of which give each person who takes the assessment their **CliftonStrengths Signature Themes**—their *top five dominant talent themes*. Starting in 2001, the CliftonStrengths assessment was made available to the public. As of 2018, over 19 million people around the world have taken the assessment.²

Your CliftonStrengths assessment results are a foundational and essential *tool* for you to add to your PM tool kit. As with any tool, it important to read the instruction manual before using the tool. Therefore, this book is somewhat of an abbreviated instruction manual, helping you to understand the purpose of CliftonStrengths assessment results, what the results do and do not do, and ways you could use the results in project management. Chapter 4 will walk you through the process of how to take the assessment and begin using the assessment results.

The Purpose of the CliftonStrengths (StrengthsFinder) Assessment

The purpose of the CliftonStrengths assessment results is to give people a starting point in which to name their unique and specific dominant talents so that they can be more intentional about describing and articulating their **existing strengths** and developing **new strengths**.

The CliftonStrengths assessment results *are not* designed for putting people in “boxes” or “labeling” people—each person’s specific talents and strengths are unique!

The assessment results *do not* give people their specific and unique strengths—each person is responsible for naming their many strengths.

The CliftonStrengths results *do* give people a **basic language** in which to understand and articulate each of their unique and specific dominant talents, the foundation and key ingredient for each of their many specific strengths.

A general process for articulating your unique and specific dominant talents through the lens of project management will be presented in Chapter 4.

Articulating Talent (Potential)

If talent themes help a person articulate their dominant talents, what exactly is a talent?

Talent is like “potential energy” and is foundational for developing a strength. Strengths-based positive psychology defines dominant talents as “naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that *can* be productively applied.”³ Although talents have the potential to become strengths, each person, team member, or organizational member needs to intentionally name, invest in, and apply their individual and collective talents to maximize their talent potential.

You can’t acquire your talents—you are born with your talents.

“[T]alents naturally exist within you and cannot be acquired. They are your inborn predispositions. They are the things that you do instinctively and that naturally give you satisfaction. Your spontaneous, top-of-mind reactions to the situations you encounter are the best indicators of your talents.”⁴

Your talents are like filters helping you to navigate living in the world. Your talents are the ways that you naturally think, feel, and behave. Since you are born with talents, your talents give you lifelong energy and potential: “Human talent may be one of the most sustainable, renewable forms of natural energy.”⁵

Here are some examples of specific talents:

- Sees the uniqueness of each team member
- Driven to solve problems
- Sees the positive light in situations or challenges
- Takes the complex and makes it simple
- Enjoys meeting new stakeholders
- Knows how each team member feels
- Drawn toward the process of learning
- Driven to get things checked off the list
- Sees the potential in others
- Takes charge
- Gets things moving
- Gathers lots of information

Your talents influence, affect, “enhance, modify, regulate,”⁶ and complement each other. Therefore, when you engage in the process of articulating your specific talents, it is helpful to consider *how* your talents are influencing each other, giving you more insights and ideas about how you can best use and maximize your specific talents’ potential. For example, a team member with a dominant talent of “driven to solve problems” may also have a dominant talent for “knowing how each team member feels.” This person’s talent for “knowing how people feel” may influence her “driven to solve problems” talent, resulting in specific strengths for solving people-related problems.

How can you articulate your specific and unique talents? Your top five CliftonStrengths Themes can begin to help you identify your specific and unique dominant talents. Each of the 34 CliftonStrengths Themes has a general summary describing the theme, which can be found in several Gallup resources, such as *StrengthsFinder 2.0* (see Appendix A). Embedded in each respective theme summary are words and phrases that describe specific talents associated with that theme.

Your top five talent theme summaries can also help you to reflect on and discover ways your dominant talents influence each other, equipping you to be even more specific when articulating your specific talents and strengths.

In Chapter 4, you will be given tools to help you in the process of articulating your specific talents.

Connecting Talent Themes and Project Management

Often, we are asked, “It’s great that I know my top five talent themes, but how do I connect them with project management?” In addition, we frequently work with professionals who are in job transition and are seeking ways to connect their talent themes to project management for showcasing their expertise and strengths on their resume.

At first, it can be a bit overwhelming. There are 34 talent themes. Applying each of themes to project management can lead you in so many different directions. To help make the connection between the talent themes and project management, take a look at Chapter 5 where Timothy Kloppenborg, author of *Contemporary Project Management*, has made an alignment for us. It is a great resource to put in your strengths development compartment of your PM tool kit.

Developing Strength (Ability and Performance)

If a talent is the foundation for a strength, what exactly is a strength? Although a talent may give a person a general ability or potential to do something, a *talent that has been invested-in* gives a person a specific *strength*—“the ability to consistently provide near-perfect performance” in a given activity.⁷ Two key words in this formal definition for strength is ability and performance: having the ability to do something really well and do it consistently well.

Consider these differences between a talent and a strength. For example:

Talent—An individual naturally...	Strength—An individual has proficient, consistent ability for...
Looks for solutions	Solving complex problems
Is comfortable with moving parts	Coordinating events
Thinks outside the box	Creating new products
Sees potential in others	Mentoring others
Is objective in approach	Interpreting data for other's understanding

How can you develop your strengths? People are not born with strengths but develop their strengths over their lifetime. Once a person develops a specific strength, they can then use or leverage that strength toward their tasks, challenges, and goals. In Chapter 4, we will suggest ways for you to name your current strengths and engage in the process of developing further strengths. However, for you to fully name and develop your strengths, you need to know some key elements for developing a strength.

Key Elements for Developing a Strength

As shown in Exhibit 3.1, consider this equation: **Talent + Knowledge + Skills = Strength**⁸

In addition to the dominant talents anchored in your top five talent themes, knowledge and skills are key ingredients for developing a strength. Although talent *cannot* be acquired, knowledge and skills *can* be acquired.

Where does strengths building begin? It starts with your dominant talents, followed by acquiring specific knowledge and skills and investing the knowledge and skills into your dominant talents.

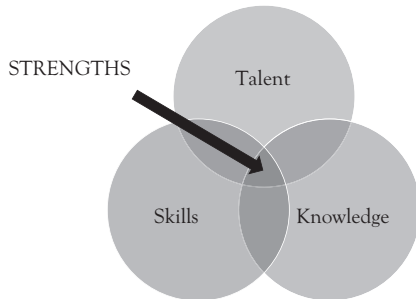


Exhibit 3.1 Strengths equation

For the purpose of building strengths, let us define what skills and knowledge mean.

Skills are the *step-by-step processes* “to do something” that you have acquired or can acquire from a classroom, a teacher/mentor, a book, and/or online. General skills include touch typing or using software program like Microsoft® Word, Excel, or Project.

Knowledge is factual, conceptual, and experiential.

- *Conceptual and factual knowledge*: This is knowledge that you have or can acquire from a classroom setting, a teacher/mentor, a book, and/or online.
- *Experiential knowledge*: This is knowledge you gain from the practice of using what you know. Even your basic day-to-day living gives you experiential knowledge. You acquire experiential knowledge throughout your lifetime as you practice using your talents and acquired knowledge and skills.

As we go forward, we will be using the term “knowledge” to describe conceptual and factual knowledge and the term “experiences” to describe experiential knowledge.

How does this all tie together? Take a look at Exhibit 3.2. You can see how your talents, knowledge, skills, and experiences are all “key elements” in developing your strengths.

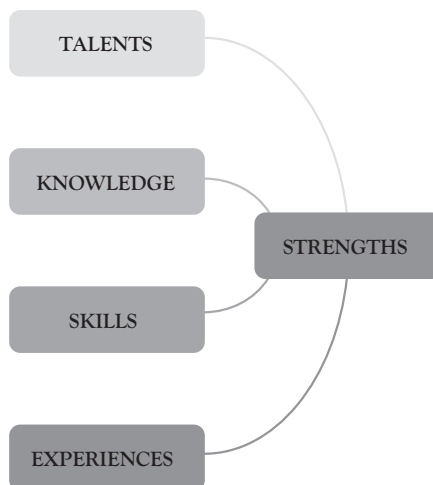


Exhibit 3.2 Key elements for strengths development

Over your lifetime, you have already developed some strengths without even intentionally thinking about strengths development. However, to maximize the potential of all your dominant talents, you need to be intentional about the talent investment process. To illustrate the talent investment process, consider the ***process of making a loaf of bread***:

What is the foundational ingredient for a loaf of bread? *Flour*

What else is required for the bread dough? *Ingredients such as yeast, sugar, and milk*

What needs to happen once the dough mixture is made? *Kneading and baking*

What is the final product? *A loaf of bread*

Now compare making a loaf of bread to **developing a strength**:

What is the foundational ingredient for a strength? *Talent (flour)*

What else is required to develop a strength? *Knowledge and skills (yeast, sugar, and milk)*

What needs to happen once the strength is developed? *More investment and practice (kneading and baking)*

What is the final product? *A strength (bread)*

As you look ahead to Chapter 6, which focuses on project teams, be thinking about other examples that you can use to help your project team gain greater understanding of strengths development building blocks.

Project Management Key Elements for Developing Strengths

As we apply the basic strengths equation (Talent + Knowledge + Skills = Strengths) to strengths-based project teams, we can populate the equation with project management specific knowledge, skills, and experience toward developing ***specific project management strengths***.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, we define the project team to include the project manager and team members. Project team members are continually adding *specific project management knowledge and skills* to their PM tool kits. They then use their acquired tools to gain *specific project management experiences*. The process of acquiring and applying specific

project management tools and techniques are maximized when the project team also intentionally invests their project management knowledge, skills, and experiences into their talents for developing specific project management strengths.

In Exhibit 3.3, we take a closer look at the difference between identifying and applying knowledge and skills—through training versus experience.

Exhibit 3.3 PM conceptual knowledge and skills vs. PM experiential knowledge

	PM conceptual knowledge and skills	PM experiential knowledge
Identify	Already have and/or need to acquire	Already have and/or need to acquire
Apply/Practice	In the classroom	On the job
Example	Attending a PM workshop	Managing a project or participating on a project team

The benefits of strengths-based project teams acquiring project management tools and techniques include equipping the team to better encourage and mentor their colleagues in both project management development and strengths development.

Acquiring project management tools and techniques also give project team members a solid foundation for participating in further project management training and education to continue to grow (acquire) project management specific knowledge and skills—also a benefit for further strengths development.

Like many professions, the project management profession—managing projects and teams—never stands still and is constantly evolving. There is always something new to learn: different project management approaches, new concepts, unique techniques, tools, and skills. Strengths-based project team members continually acquire project management tools and techniques to further develop their strengths for continuous improvement.

Continuous improvement can come in baby steps—it does not have to happen overnight. As project managers and team members use their

project management tools and techniques in small ways and invest them into their talents, these mini-applications will eventually lead to larger applications. These mini-applications have a snowball effect—meaning the growth and results continue to increase over time.

In Chapter 4, we will give you tools for intentionally articulating your specific talents, knowledge, and skills, which will help you in the process of naming your current strengths and developing further strengths. In addition to adding your specific talents and strengths to your PM tool kit, we also encourage you to add your **specific project management knowledge, skills, and experiences lists** to your tool kit. Your knowledge and skills lists will be elements for you to use in your own strength development process, improving your ability to communicate with your project team about the specific knowledge and skills that you bring to your team. (Check out the template for your lists in Chapter 4 and Appendix B.)

Return on Investment

$$\text{Talent} \times \text{Investment} = \text{Strength}^9$$

Strengths development focuses on investing in **dominant talents** rather than lesser talents, because there is a **high return on investment** for developing a strength from a dominant talent.

What exactly is an investment? Investment in strengths development is the time and resources that you dedicate (invest) to continuously build upon your dominant talents, resulting in developing a greater strength.

Let's think more about the strengths development's return on investment through metaphorical examples using picture images and mathematical equations. For mathematically illustrating return on investment in talent (see Exhibit 3.4), we will give talent a numeric range of 1 to 10:1 for lesser talent and 10 for dominant talent. For the following series of

Exhibit 3.4 Talent return on investment

	Talent	X (times)	Investment	=	Return (score)
Example 1	1	X	10	=	10
Example 2	1	X	5	=	5
Example 3	10	X	1	=	10
Example 4	10	X	5	=	50

examples, we will give investment a value of 1 for no investment and 10 for heavy investment.

Example 1: $1 \times 10 = 10$ → Gives us a **Low Return on High Investment.**

In this first example, we are investing in a *lesser talent* (1) large amounts of time and resources—a *high investment* (10), which gives us a low return (a score of 10).

It is like building a road through a rocky mountain. The road builders invest a lot of dynamite, heavy machinery and time to make the road flat. The result is a road that some vehicles could use; however, the completed road is unstable and narrow. The resulting road is a low return on the high investment.



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Example 1: Before



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Example 1: After

Example 2: $1 \times 5 = 5$ → Gives us a **Low Return on Investment**.

Now let's change the equation so that we are using a moderate amount of investment (5). We are investing in a *lesser talent* (1) with *moderate investment* (5), which gives us an even lower rate on return (a score of 5).

Let's think about our road building project again. Instead of going *through* the mountain (as in Example 1), we are building a road *over* the rocky mountain. The road builders may not have dynamite but still use heavy machinery to try to make the rock flatter. The moderate investment in building the road does not deliver much of a road. Only a few types of vehicles could handle driving over this road; therefore, the road is not consistently useable.



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Example 2: Before



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Example 2: After

Example 3: $10 \times 1 = 10 \rightarrow$ No Investment

In this example, we are investing in a *dominant talent* (10) with *low investment* (1), which gives us no return (a score of 10)—the result is unchanged.

Not investing in a *dominant talent* is like not investing into the untapped potential of the path: the path remains the path. However, the path is still there and so its potential remains. The path could become a road with moderate investment.



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Example 3: Before



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Example 3: After

Example 4: $10 \times 5 = 50 \rightarrow$ High Return on Investment.

This is the ideal example. We want to be achieving the highest rate of return on our investment. How do we do this? We invest in a *dominant talent* (10) with *moderate investment* (5) to give us a high return (a score of 50).

Consider our road project: it is like building a road from a path on flat, solid ground—a strong potential for a road. The road builders do not have to dynamite the path. Their use of heavy machinery to smooth out the path has more of an effect to prepare the land for the road. The builders moderately invest by clearing the trees, laying the asphalt, and providing lights. This road is safe and sustainable and can be used by all vehicles.



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Example 4: Before



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Example 4: After

Key Learning: When you develop your strengths, hone in on and invest in your dominant talents for maximized return on investment!

Intentionally Applying Strengths

Understanding strengths development and having an awareness and appreciation of your own and others' talents and strengths are essential components of strengths development; however, strengths development does not stop there. Ultimately, strengths development is about equipping you to intentionally *use* your articulated and developed strengths toward your personal, team, and organizational goals, challenges, and tasks. Subsequent chapters will expand on “how” to apply strengths as a project manager, as a project team member, and collectively as a project team.

Managing Lesser Talents

Sometimes you might be given tasks that seem to require talents that may not be dominant for you. What is the solution? You can *manage* your lesser talents by:

1. Creatively leveraging your strengths
2. Using support systems
3. Forming complementary partnerships¹⁰

Creatively **leveraging strengths** in situations where it appears that lesser talents are needed takes practice and reflection. For example, let us consider a project team member who needs to “influence” her team to get things done on time, but she doesn’t seem to have any dominant influencing talents to help her to influence others. However, one of her dominant, specific **talents** is her “*drive to get things done efficiently.*” Rooted in her talent (“drive to get things done efficiently”), she has developed a **strength**—consistently proficient in “*systematically keeping track of what needs to get done and checking it off her list.*” She could leverage her strength (“*systematically keeping track of what needs to get done and checking it off her list*”) to create action items assigned in project team meetings, post the action items in a place that is accessible to all project team members, communicate where the action items are posted, and then create a system for marking each action item complete. Therefore, her strength founded on her “drive to get things done efficiently” talent can also be leveraged to *influence* her team members to get things done on time.

Using **support systems** can also help you in situations where you lack specific talents and strengths. Examples of support systems include using a microphone when you need a booming voice to talk to a large group of people, learning a software program to help you keep track of assignments if you lack talents for retaining details in your head, or keeping a word bank if it is challenging for you to think of the right words when writing a status report or important message to a key stakeholder.

Finally, forming **complementary partnerships** relieves the pressure of having to be good at everything. People are not well-rounded in everything. We have gaps. No project team member has all the talents; therefore, by working with multiple complementary strengths partners, you are better equipped to be successful as you work on a project team. We will expand upon complementary partnerships in the next section, “Key Elements for Strengths-Based Project Teams.”

Key Elements for Strengths-Based Project Teams

Once project team members have a solid knowledge of and engagement in individual strengths-based development, they are equipped to engage with their team in *strengths-based project team development*. Let’s look

at some key foundational strengths-based team development concepts, which are instrumental for understanding and engaging in the process of creating and sustaining strengths-based project teams (Chapters 6 and 7).

Themes and Domains: Tools for Strengths-Based Project Teams

Earlier, we explained that the purpose of the CliftonStrengths assessment is to give individuals their dominant talent themes, which gives them a starting point and a basic language in which to articulate and understand their dominant talents. CliftonStrengths Themes are also helpful for teams, because the themes give teams a *common talent language* to use, equipping project team members to develop an awareness and appreciation of each other. The common talent language also enables team members to communicate their strengths and ways they can best contribute to their project team.

For example, short-term project teams and/or project teams with members moving on-and-off the team can use the common talent language tool as they onboard new team members, helping the project team quickly develop an appreciation of each other toward better collaboration. Even project teams that stay together for a long period of time also benefit, because the tool gives the team a common language to explore the collective talents and strengths of the team so that they can best leverage the team's collective strengths as they engage in the process of successfully completing their project.

The benefit of the common talent theme language is helpful for project teams of all sizes. And the larger the team, the more talent themes are represented on the team and can be applied toward the project. However, the benefit of more themes on a team also comes with the challenge of managing more talent themes. Think about the project management formula of communication channels, where N is the number of people on the team.

$$N \times (N - 1) / 2^{11}$$

For example, let's say you have a project team of 8 people. $N=8$. Calculating the previous formula, it would be $8 \times (8 - 1) / 2$ which calculates into 28 communication channels in working with just 8 people!

The same is true when working with our talent themes on a team. The size of the project team affects the potential number of possible talent themes which could be represented by the collective project team members.

Let's take a closer look at this concept. Understanding that each member of the team knows their top 5 dominant talent themes:

- If you are working in a partnership with a team of 2 people, you could be working with up to 10 talent themes, which is not too complicated.
- If you are working on a team of 3 people, you could be working with up to 15 themes, which can be somewhat complicated.
- However, think about a project team of 12 people. You could have all of the 34 themes represented on that team. When a large project team enters into applying the collective strengths of their team, the process could be overwhelming.

What do we do when there are so many talent themes to keep track of on a project team? There is even a simpler language for understanding talent: four CliftonStrengths Domains.¹² Each of the 34 CliftonStrengths Themes belong to one of the four domains: executing, influencing, relationship building, and strategic thinking.

Those with talents in the:

“Executing domain know how to make things happen ... [and] work tirelessly to get it done. ...

Influencing [domain] help their team reach a much broader audience ... [and] are always selling the team's ideas inside and outside the organization. ...

Relationship Building [domain] are the essential glue that holds a team together ... [and] have the unique ability to create groups and organizations that are much greater than the sum of their parts. ...

Strategic Thinking [domain] are the ones who keep us all focused on what *could be*. They are constantly absorbing and analyzing information and helping the team make better decisions.”¹³

Look in Appendix A for resources about learning how to use the CliftonStrengths Domains with your team.

The four CliftonStrengths Domains can help you to simplify your strengths-based project team conversations for applying the collective strengths of your project team. However, consider these words of caution:

1. **Sometimes teams dive too quickly into talking about the four domains.** Before your project team applies the four-domain template to your team, give your team time for understanding, appreciating, and articulating the talents and strengths of the individual team members. Once each team member has an understanding of their own and their project team members' CliftonStrengths Themes, talents, and strengths, then consider the domains for *applying the collective strengths* of the team.
2. **Just as talent themes are not meant to put people in boxes, the four domains are not meant to put people's dominant talent themes in boxes.** Do you remember the example we used about the project team member who used her strengths anchored in her dominant "driven to get things done" talents to influence her colleagues? Understanding that her dominant talents fall into the executing domain instead of the influencing domain can help the team understand the primary power of her dominant talents; however, her "driven to get things done" talents can still be used to influence others. Therefore, the domains give us a general understanding of the primary power of their respective talent themes, but the domains are also somewhat "permeable" so that their respective themes can be applied in ways that are reflective of the other domains.

Building Blocks for Developing Strengths-Based Project Teams

Strengths-based project team development builds upon individual strengths development building blocks (i.e., discovering, appreciating, and articulating, plus applying talents, knowledge, skills, experience, and strengths). Once engaged in individual strengths development, project team members have the foundation in which to then understand,

appreciate, articulate, and apply their *collective strengths* as a project team and become a *strengths-based project team*.

A strengths-based project team integrates their knowledge, skills, and practice of strengths development with project management tools and techniques, equipping the project team to apply and maximize their collective strengths to successfully complete their project on time, within budget, and according to the project objectives and specifications.

Project team members' strengths include vast, specific, and collective talent, knowledge, and skills ***that can be productively applied toward the project team's goals***. In addition to having an awareness of the collective strengths of the team, the team will also gain from having a deeper understanding of each project team member's specific knowledge, skills, and experience to further maximize and leverage the team's collective strengths.

When project team members engage in project team strengths-based building blocks, the project team develops characteristics of a strengths-based project team, which include:

- Share a common mission of moving toward the end goal of completing their project
- Know their own unique and specific talents and strengths
- Invest project management concepts and techniques into their talents for developing project management strengths
- Understand that, as an individual, they each bring something to the team—they are great at some things and not very good at other things
- Use their strengths in their role as an individual contributor and as a member of the project team
- Value and encourage other team members
- Have an awareness and an appreciation of their team member's top five talent themes, dominant talent "filters," and specific strengths

- Believe that they need each other to get the project done
- Work effectively together to apply the collective strengths of their team
- Form strengths-based complementary partnerships
- Know how to and intentionally maximize the team's strengths by orchestrating and leveraging the collective strengths of the team toward the team's project goals

Complementary Strengths-Based Project Team Partnerships

Complementary strengths-based partnerships are the most fundamental relationships of a strengths-based team, causing team members to have thriving, interdependent relationships for maximizing the collective strengths of the team. Since the “key to strengths-based teams [is] forming complementary partnerships,”¹⁴ project managers and project team members need to understand the principles and elements of strengths-based complementary partnerships.

“Strengths-based partnerships create a magical outcome—a unique capability that could not be achieved by either person alone. It is the ultimate description of one plus one equals three. It is the teaming of strengths.”¹⁵

Strengths-based complementary partners understand that

“[t]he key to achieving success is not trying to be someone else or striving to be as good as your collaborator at whatever he does best or seeking to be universally proficient. It's in discovering your own exceptional abilities, recognizing your weaknesses, and understanding how someone else's abilities complement your own.”¹⁶

Therefore, strengths-based complementary partners mutually recognize that they have an interdependent relationship with each other and believe that:

- We complement one another's strengths.
- We need each other to get the job done.
- My partner does some things much better than I do, and I do some things much better than my partner does.¹⁷

Give this real-world example some thought: Partner A is a Gallup-Certified Strengths Coach, who has experience coaching teams. Partner B is a certified Project Management Professional, who has worked on many project teams and teaches project management courses. When Partner A and B work together, they leverage their combined talents, expertise, knowledge, skills, experiences, and strengths toward their project. They believe they need each other to get the job done and know that each partner does some things better than the other. Who are Partners A and B? They are the authors of this book!

Partners A and B work so well together because they enhance the talents and strengths of each other, fill-in the talents and strengths gaps of each other, and collaborate in step-by-step project processes (one person does the first step and another person picks up after the first step is finished).

Based on the various team environments that you have participated in during your career, can you think of an example where you experienced a “complementary partnership?”

Let us now take a closer look at complementary partnerships within project teams through the following examples.

Example 1

A team member is assigned to deliver on a task. He may have the strengths to complete the task. However, by partnering with another team member, the partners may add their combined strengths to the task and speed up its completion with greater quality.

Example 2

In the project schedule, there is a dependency where a task cannot start before another task is completed. Team member A is assigned to task 1. Team member B is assigned to task 2. Task 2 is dependent on task 1 being

completed. Each of the two team members could be considered complementary partners in that they work together to “hand off” the tasks, to ensure that everything is complete—rather than “throwing it over the wall” for team member B to catch!

Example 3

In a RACI chart (responsible, accountable, consulted, and informed), each task has one person “accountable” for the tasks, and other team members who are “responsible” for doing the work. Those who are “responsible” may bring a strength to the task that the “accountable” person does not have. In this example, the complementary partner brings a missing talent/strength to the task.

A word of caution: don’t confuse talent/strengths with expertise. Remember that our strengths are our “invested-in talents”—those abilities that we have developed from our dominant talents to do things really well. On the other hand, expertise is specific knowledge or skills that we have studied and/or gained in a particular area or field—such as technical expertise. Although expertise and strengths are not the same, we *can* invest our expertise into our talents to develop our strengths.

Directing the Project Team’s Collective Strengths Toward the Project

The ultimate goal of a strengths-based project team is to direct their collective strengths toward completing their project on time, within budget, and according to the project objectives and specifications. Understanding and using the individual strengths-based building blocks and strengths-based team concepts (Chapters 3 and 4) gives a project team the foundation they need for this next step of applying their collective strengths. Chapter 6 offers strengths development and application processes for equipping your project team to intentionally apply their collective strengths.

Strengths Development Process Overview for Strengths-Based Project Teams

Developing and becoming a strengths-based project team is a process. In order for project teams to become strengths-based project teams,

project team members first need a foundation of and an engagement in *individual* strengths-based development. Individual strengths development equips each team member to discover, appreciate, and articulate their talents and strengths, discover their talents and current strengths in motion, and be intentional about personally developing and applying their talents and strengths.

Second, once each strengths-based team member can articulate and share their talent themes, dominant talents, and developed strengths with their project team, the team members can then develop an understanding and an appreciation of each of their project team members' talent themes, dominant talents, and developed strengths. In addition, each team member can communicate to their project team how they can best contribute to the team's project. The project team as a whole is then better equipped to use and leverage their collective strengths toward their project.

Exhibit 3.5 presents the process of project team strengths development. The foundation blocks will be further explored in Chapters 4 and 6.

Note: it is important to have a solid strengths development foundation. Without a strong foundation, your strengths-based talent development process will crumble and not be sustainable. Invest time to acquire a solid strengths development foundation before adding more strengths development building blocks to your PM tool kit.

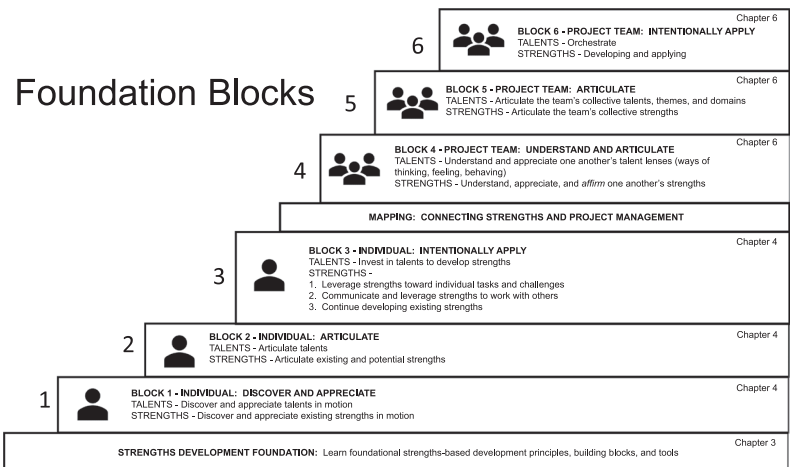


Exhibit 3.5 *Foundation blocks for strengths-based development for project teams*

Summary

For project team members to begin the process of becoming a *strengths-based* project team, they need to have a solid foundation in individual strengths development and understand the characteristics of a strengths-based project team. Strengths begin with dominant talents. The general and specific project management knowledge, skills, and practice that you invest in your dominant talents will yield a high return on investment and help you to better contribute to your project team. Strengths-based project teams are a collection of complementary partners who maximize their collective strengths toward their project. The strengths development knowledge and skills you collect are tools that you can add to a strengths development compartment in your PM tool kit. The knowledge and tools you have collected so far will equip you to begin to engage in the process of individual strengths development (Chapter 4).

Key Questions

1. Strengths development philosophy is founded on positive psychology—what is “right” with people rather than what is “wrong” with people. In what situations do you experience positive psychology in your workplace or on project teams?
2. What are some key strengths development take-aways for you?
3. Think of an example of one of your complementary partnerships. In what ways have you contributed your talents and strengths to this partnership? How has your complementary partner contributed their talents and strengths to your partnership?

Notes

1. Winseman, Clifton, and Liesveld (2008, p. 7).
2. Gallup Strengths Center. 2018. <https://gallupstrengthscenter.com> (accessed March 24, 2018).
3. Winseman, Clifton, and Liesveld (2008, p. 7).
4. Winseman, Clifton, and Liesveld (2008, p. 8).
5. Quote from Curt Liesveld.
6. Liesveld (2014, Location 104).

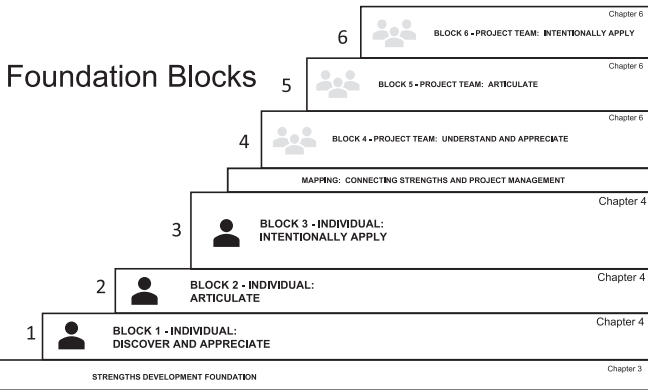
7. Rath (2007, p. 20).
8. Rath (2007, p. 18).
9. Rath (2007, p. 20).
10. Clifton and Buckingham (2001, pp. 151–56).
11. PMBOK® Guide. (2013, p. 292).
12. Rath (2008).
13. Rath and Conchie (2009).
14. Darby (2012).
15. Clifton and Nelson (2010, p. 94).
16. Wagner and Muller (2009, p. 12).
17. Wagner and Muller (2009, pp. 13–14).

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CHAPTER 4

Starting Point: Developing Your Strengths as a Project Manager



Strengths-based project teams start with the strengths of the project manager; therefore, to lead and manage a strengths-based project team, project managers need to first engage in their own individual strengths-based development. This chapter will guide you in the process of individual strengths-based development, much of which can also be applied to help project team members begin their individual strengths-based development.

Since this book is only the “tip of the iceberg” about strengths-based talent development and strengths-based project teams, we encourage you to explore the many resources available to you for more extensive and deeper individual strengths-based development information and processes. Check out the additional resources listed in Appendix A.

The purpose of this chapter is to help you:

1. Continue adding strengths development tools to your PM tool kit
2. Take the CliftonStrengths assessment

3. Use strengths development building blocks (presented in Chapter 3)
4. Discover, appreciate, and articulate your talents and strengths
5. Intentionally apply your talents and strengths
6. Use your strengths for leading and managing the project team

In Chapter 3, we presented the foundation blocks (Exhibit 3.5) for strengths development. Having started with foundational strengths-based development principles and tools (in Chapter 3), you are now ready to explore blocks 1, 2, and 3 in this chapter (Exhibit 4.1)—individual talent and strengths development.

Throughout this chapter, you will be learning about and using more strengths development tools. To fully engage in this chapter and future chapters’ objectives, you will need to create a “compartment” in your PM tool kit to keep and maintain your strengths development tools. In Chapter 2, we briefly defined a PM tool kit as “a unique combination of specific project management knowledge, experiences, skills, concepts, approaches, techniques, tools, and resources that the team member has acquired, has learned to use, and continues to add to over time.” Your *strengths development tools compartment* in your PM tool kit can be a physical or electronic system of keeping track of strengths development exercises and processes that you are learning to use. Your strengths development tools compartment is also a place for you to retain your responses and reflections that you write and compile as you engage in strengths development exercises and processes. Appendix B has sample templates from exercises used in the book that will also be good tools to add to your strengths development tools compartment.

We encourage you to move through each of the following strengths-based development sections before moving on to the next section. Take

Foundation Blocks

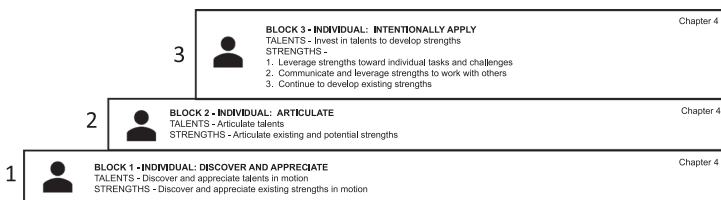


Exhibit 4.1 Individual talent and strengths development

time to absorb and assimilate this information for your project environment and learning style. Most of the tools will resonate with you, even though some may be somewhat challenging. If there is an exercise or process that is very frustrating for you, it is best to put the specific exercise/process aside and come back to it at another time.

Just as talents and strengths are unique and specific for each person, how each person best engages in strengths development is also somewhat unique. As you engage in the strengths development process, you will be able to determine which strengths development tools work best for you.

CliftonStrengths (StrengthsFinder) Assessment

Where to begin? You start with yourself. To engage in individual strengths development, you will need to take the online CliftonStrengths talent assessment. A CliftonStrengths code can be purchased in two ways:

- Online at the Gallup website (www.gallupstrengthscenter.com)
- Gallup CliftonStrengths books, such as *StrengthsFinder 2.0*.

When you purchase your code online or begin to use a code from a Gallup book, you will also be given an opportunity to set-up your own Gallup Strengths Center account (username and password), which will give you access to resources and tools for your individual strengths development after you take the CliftonStrengths assessment. Once your code is purchased, follow the instructions at the website for taking the CliftonStrengths assessment. The following instructions may also be helpful:

- We know project managers are busy. Try to find at least 45 minutes of uninterrupted time to complete the web-based talent assessment.
- You will be presented with several pairs of potential self-descriptors and will be asked to choose which descriptor best describes you, as well as the extent to which it does or does not describe you. You are allotted 20 seconds for each question before the assessment will move on to the next

question. Try not to think too hard about the questions and *give your first gut response.*

After you complete the assessment, you will be given your CliftonStrengths Signature Themes—your top five dominant talent themes. Your top five themes give you a starting point in which to name your specific, unique talents, which are the foundations for your current and future strengths. Knowing your top five talent themes is a first step in being more intentional about using your talents and strengths when managing project teams and working with stakeholders.

Throughout this book, we will refer to your top five themes. Your top five themes are your top five dominant talent themes; however, you have more than five dominant themes. If you are interested in exploring more of your dominant talent themes, refer to the Gallup website to learn more about acquiring your 34 CliftonStrengths Theme profile.

STOP! At this time, we encourage you to put the book aside and take the CliftonStrengths talent assessment. Having your assessment results will make the following sections and chapters more relevant and informative.

Strengths Development Philosophy and Basic Building Blocks

If you purchase your CliftonStrengths assessment code at the Gallup Strengths Center website, you may have access to an electronic version of the book, *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, when you log in to your account main page. The introductory chapters of *StrengthsFinder 2.0* are a good resource for further understanding strengths development philosophy and building blocks that were presented in Chapter 3. The last part of the *StrengthsFinder 2.0* book summarizes each of the 34 CliftonStrengths Themes; however, initially it is best to focus on your own top five themes. As you engage in strengths conversations and learn about your other project team members' top five themes, you can then look back at *StrengthsFinder 2.0* to learn more about the other themes.

An additional resource for learning about the 34 CliftonStrengths Themes as aligned with project management is presented in Chapter 5 and Appendix C, which will give you another tool to add to your PM tool kit's *strengths development compartment* to further understand and apply the themes to project management.

Discover, Appreciate, and Articulate Talents and Strengths

To fully engage in strengths development, a person first needs to be able to name their talents and strengths and see how their talents and strengths are already working in their everyday life—and on projects—before they move into the next step of intentionally applying their talents and strengths toward their current and future projects, goals, challenges, and tasks. The tools and exercises presented in this section are interrelated, interdependent, and will help you to engage in the processes of discovering, appreciating, and articulating your talents and strengths.

CliftonStrengths Reports

Your CliftonStrengths reports list and summarize your top five talent themes. You can always find your CliftonStrengths reports by signing into the website where you took your CliftonStrengths assessment.

Your ***Signature Themes Report*** lists your top five dominant signature themes—your top five **Talent Themes**—and a *general* summary for each of your top five themes. (These general summaries are the same general summaries found in the *StrengthsFinder 2.0* book.) If you compare your *Signature Themes Report* with another person's *Signature Themes Report* who shares one of your top five talent themes, the two of you will have an identical summary of that shared theme in your reports.

You also may have access to two additional reports: Your ***Strengths Insight Report*** and ***Strengths Insight and Action-Planning Guide***. Because your top five dominant talent themes influence and complement each other, you are also given a *Strengths Insight Report*, which includes your personalized summaries for each of your top five talent themes. Each personalized theme summary considers the intensity of the theme and

of your other top five themes, giving you a customized theme summary for each of your top five talent themes. Therefore, if you compared your *Strengths Insight Report* with another person's *Strengths Insight Report* who shares one of your dominant talent themes, your summaries of the shared theme will be slightly different.

The summaries in the *Strengths Insight Report* and *Strengths Insight and Action-Planning Guide* are identical. The difference between these two reports is that the *Strengths Insight and Action-Planning Guide* also includes action items and questions to help you intentionally apply and develop your talents and strengths.

Using Your Reports:

- Print a copy of your ***Signature Themes Report***.
 - Read over your top five signature theme summaries in your *Signature Themes Report*. As you read through each theme summary, you will notice that some of the words and phrases in the summaries describe you; however, since these are general summaries, not all the words and phrases will describe you.
 - To help you name your talents, you can highlight or underline words and phrases that describe you and use those words to help you articulate your unique and specific talents that stem from each of your top five themes. The words and phrases that you highlight indicate some of your **specific talents**.
 - If you have highlighted your report in the past, consider highlighting your report again. The lifelong process of investing in talents and developing strengths often leads people to notice more of their talents; therefore, as you highlight your report again, you may notice additional talents as compared to the last time you reviewed your report.
 - Add your highlighted *Signature Themes Report* to your PM tool kit. Periodically review your talent theme summaries in your report. As you engage in lifelong strengths development, the report's summaries may help you to notice more of your talents.

- Print a copy of your *Strengths Insight and Action-Planning Guide*, if you have access to this report.
 - Read over your summaries and reflect on the following questions:
 - What do you think about these summaries? How well do the summaries describe you?
 - Are there more words and phrases that resonate with you than in your *Signature Themes Report*? What are those words and phrases?
 - What further insights about your dominant talent themes did the summaries help you to discover?
 - How do these summaries resonate with you as a member of a project team?
 - Add your *Strengths Insight and Action-Planning Guide* to your PM tool kit. You will use this report again when you engage in the application step of strengths development.

Tabletop Name Card

You want to see and have others see your top five themes. You can make a simple tabletop name card using cardstock and a marker. Fold a sheet of cardstock in half *or* in thirds to make your tabletop name card stand upright on a table—it will look like a triangular tent. Your tabletop name card has two sides: a front and a back. Write your **first name** and your **top five talent themes** on each side:

- On the front of the card so that others can see your name and themes.
- On the back of the card so that you can see your own themes which will help you to learn and remember your top five themes.

Place your tabletop name card on your desk, carry it with you to meetings, and use it as you engage in one-to-one strengths conversations.

Strengths Building Blocks Lists (Your specific talents, knowledge, skills, experiences, and strengths lists).

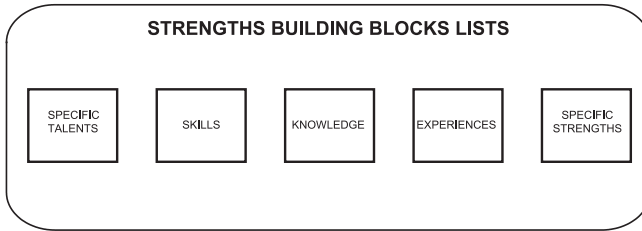


Exhibit 4.2 Strengths building blocks lists

In Chapter 3, we defined talents, knowledge (factual/conceptual), experiences, and skills and explained that these are the major components for building strengths. As you begin being more intentional about building your strengths, create and maintain lists for each of your specific talents, knowledge, experiences, skills, and specific strengths and keep the lists in your PM tool kit (Exhibit 4.2).

Where to begin? Here are some ways to get started on your lists:

- You have just highlighted words and phrases—your specific talents—in your Signature Themes Report. Keep track of those specific talents that you identified on your **Specific Talents List**.
- You have already started your **Specific Strengths List**. Remember in Chapter 1, you wrote down three things that you do consistently well. Use the three things you listed to start your **Specific Strengths List**.
- Take some time to think about and list the general skills, knowledge, and experiences that you have acquired over your lifetime.
- In addition, think about the specific project management conceptual knowledge, skills, and experiences that you have acquired and list those. Also list your areas of expertise.

The **Strengths Building Blocks Lists** (Exhibit 4.3) you are making are brainstorming lists: there is no specific order to the content you are adding, and there may or may not be any connection between the items in each list or between lists. Freely think about the specific knowledge,

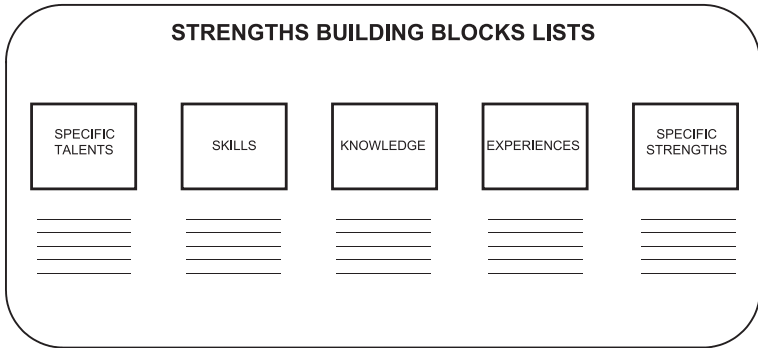


Exhibit 4.3 Working document for your Strengths Building Blocks Lists

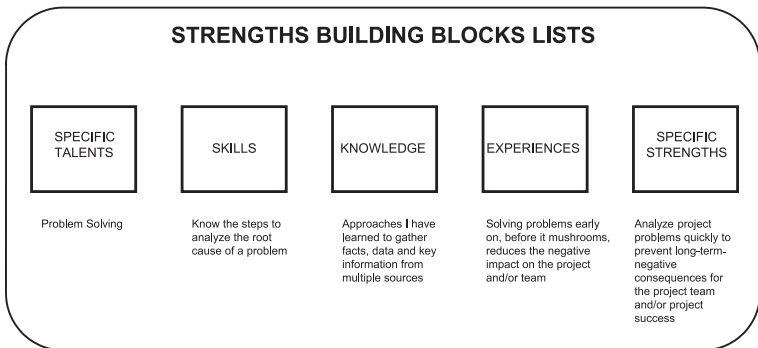


Exhibit 4.4 Strengths building blocks lists (project management example)

skills, and experiences you have acquired over your lifetime, the specific talents you were born with, and the things that you do consistently well right now (your current strengths).

Here is a specific project management example using the working document template (Exhibit 4.4):

As you enter into the next processes and exercises in this section and chapter, you will use and add more to your **Strengths Building Blocks Lists**. Keep your **Strengths Building Blocks Lists** in the strengths development compartment of your PM tool kit. Later, you will intentionally use some of your list’s content to help you articulate how you developed your existing strengths and how you want to intentionally further develop your strengths.

What if you are not a “list” person? Use this list process to get started. Then as you engage in the process, you may develop a better system to keep track of your specific talents, knowledge, skills, experiences, and specific strengths. This is part of the creativity we discussed earlier about tailoring this book’s approaches and information to fit your needs and style.

A Talent Theme a Day

- Choose one of your top five dominant talent themes.
 - *The First Day*: As you go through your day, notice how you naturally use the talents from that theme. At the end of the day, write down the specific talents within this theme that you used during the day.
 - *The Next Couple of Days*: Find two ways to intentionally leverage the specific talents (that you named yesterday) to complete some of your assigned deliverables or tasks today. Continue this process for a few days—strengthening your ability to use talents from the theme you chose on the first day.
 - *Add to your Strengths Building Blocks Lists*: Add the specific talents you named and ways you used these talents to your **Specific Talents List** (one of your **Strengths Building Blocks Lists**) that you keep in the strengths development compartment of your PM tool kit.
- *Repeat the Process*: In a few days, start this step-by-step process with another one of your dominant talent themes.

When you practice using your talents in the “a talent theme a day” process, you are investing in your talents and developing your strengths by gaining experiential knowledge, one of the ingredients for developing a strength.

Keep track of what you learn from the “a talent theme a day” process, because the specific talents you name and the ways in which you use them will also help you to further engage in a subsequent strengths development step of intentionally applying your talents and strengths.