



Cultivating Client Strengths
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Introduction

“I’m not good at anything.” How many times have you heard a client say that? The truth is, every individual has strengths that have been present since childhood. Personal strengths are natural talents that have been cultivated and refined so that they can be applied consistently. Some people are aware of their strengths, but many are not. Since strengths are based on talents that come easily, people often don’t appreciate the fact that their talents are unique. They assume everybody else can do it too. Sometimes, a person is a late bloomer, having never been exposed to his/her areas of potential interest, or having never received the feedback or training necessary to perfect skills.

Increasing client awareness of personal strengths increases self-confidence and improves decision-making, job satisfaction, problem solving and resiliency. This course will provide an overview of talents and strengths and specific tips on helping clients discover and apply their unique strengths.

Educational Objectives

After taking this course, participants will learn how to:

1. Define difference between talents and strengths.
2. Apply personal strengths to problem solving and adversity.
3. Improve life satisfaction by incorporating strengths.

Let’s Get Started!

Defining Strengths

According to Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton, authors of “Now, Discover Your Strengths,” a strength is the ability to consistently provide near-perfect performance in a specific activity. Strengths are built on talents, which the authors describe as, “naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied.” Talents are innate and must be refined with knowledge, skill acquisition, and practice. Together, all of these combine to create strengths.

For example, a budding comedian may be naturally funny, but would need hours of practice and skill development to learn how to construct and time a joke so that it’s funny nearly every time. A client may find it easy to start a conversation, but would need to gain product knowledge and the skills of negotiation to become a master sales person. You get the idea. Take a baseline interest in anything and add knowledge, skills, and plenty of practice and it will result in strengths.

Ultimately, helping clients discover and use their strengths allows them to experience the highest self-confidence, satisfaction, and resiliency. They’re aware of what they’re designed to do well and can consistently apply their strengths to grow and address adversity. Setting and achieving goals is desirable because they have a clear vision of what they’re pursuing and why.

People unaware of their strengths tend to have a haphazard approach to personal growth, career choices, and solving problems. When they're successful, they're not sure why or how to repeat it. Life satisfaction is reported as neutral or low only because these clients aren't investing enough energy into activities or pursuits that would grow their strengths.

Stalled Development

Strength awareness and development can get stalled for many reasons. While every person has talents, many don't recognize them. Remember, talents are innate and come easily, so it's easy to take them for granted. It's common to minimize talents, assuming everyone can do what you do.

Also, cultural expectations suggest that we should work hardest at our "weaknesses" or skills that are *not* our natural talents, rather than indulge what we do best. School and work performance evaluations emphasize "areas of growth," meaning the most opportunity for growth is in an area of weakness. The opposite is true. The biggest opportunity of growth is for an individual to focus on a talent and develop it into a strength, versus becoming mediocre at a weakness. That doesn't mean weaknesses are to be ignored, especially if they interfere with your strengths, but growth will be limited.

A person may be aware of his or her talents, but not know how to develop them. There may not be time, money, opportunity, or the right people in place to go further. Others may not have the insight, or received feedback, to become aware of talents. Since our talents make us different, some clients have learned to feel ashamed versus celebrate what makes them unique.

Finally, it can be scary for some people to develop their talents into strengths because they fear discovering that they're actually not that special. So, they withhold seeking knowledge or practice because it's safer to keep the talent as something they're "pretty good" at, but not "great." Sometimes these clients appear disinterested or lazy, unwilling to put effort into developing their talent. But really, they're protecting their fear of failure. Therefore, clinicians may encounter clients in any one of these stages:

- Unaware of talents
- Perceives talents as bad, the reason they don't fit in
- Aware of talents, but needs more knowledge, skills, and practice
- Aware of talents but fearful to develop them

Talent Quest

The first step in helping clients build strengths is discovering their talents. Once again, talents can be described as naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behaviors that have been present since childhood. Signs that point to your talents include areas of rapid learning and natural reactions. Below are questions to ask clients to highlight their talents.

It's the clinician's job to dig for details, ask follow up questions and identify themes. Pay attention to repeated words, frustrations, and the ways a client currently solves problems. Be prepared for clients to minimize the importance of their answers, or even be unable to answer at first. Gently encourage them to answer anyway.

- What activities can you pick up quickly after being shown just a few times?
- What activities have you taught yourself how to do out of curiosity?
- What activities are easy for you to skip steps or improvise because you can “see” or understand where it's going?
- What activities absorb your attention to the point of losing track of time?
- What activities do you find energizing?
- What seems to come easily to you, but not always to others?
- What have others consistently told you that you're good at doing?
- Describe a project that you found deeply satisfying.

If these questions don't spark a theme, ask the client to recall his childhood interests. Adulthood can sometimes squash natural childhood instincts that need to be rediscovered. How did he spend free time? What made him different from other kids? How did he decorate his bedroom – with artwork, posters, collections, or trophies? All of these answers will reveal clues of innate interests and talents.

In identifying talents, it is not the activity itself that matters as much as the client's thought pattern, behavior, and motivations of performing the activity. For example, as a child a client may have spent a lot of time playing video games, even though he doesn't as an adult. The talents revealed could be strategizing, competition, utilizing technology, building camaraderie with other gamers, or quickness in decision-making.

Red Light, Green Light

Another way to learn about talents is to pay attention to daily activities and energy levels. Give clients a self-awareness assignment. For one week, at random daily intervals (up to eight times per day) have them write down four things:

1. Task they're doing
2. Level of energy and overall positive feelings on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest
3. Other people present or if it was alone
4. Environment/setting

At the end of the week, spend time helping them uncover patterns and commonalities of the types of activities they ranked highest. (Note: activities take effort and are different from time spent relaxing. So, reading is an activity, but sleeping or watching TV doesn't count.) Create two lists, one titled red and the other green.

Red list activities are the ones ranked low interest or were just “okay.” Most likely, they were associated with dread, avoidance, or procrastination. Green light activities are the ones ranked high and were enjoyable. They produced feelings of inspiration and desire to grow. Clients may need to keep trying different activities or applications in order to discover what really moves them. Sometimes it’s a matter of mixing and matching talents with different day parts, settings and people.

There will always be tasks in life that are unpleasant or boring. Realistically, you can’t eliminate everyone’s red list activities. But, if people can spend at least 80% of the day doing things they enjoy and are good at doing, they’re bound to feel better.

Examples of Talents

Remember, talents are just natural inclinations that show up in recurring patterns of how we think, feel, and behave. They can be used in a number of ways. You will often have to help people make the leap between what they loved doing as a kid and how that can be applied in their current life. Here are some examples of talents:

- ✓ Communicating
- ✓ Organizing
- ✓ Socializing
- ✓ Analyzing
- ✓ Empathy
- ✓ Discipline
- ✓ Creativity
- ✓ Exploring
- ✓ Achievement
- ✓ Learning
- ✓ Ethics
- ✓ Curiosity
- ✓ Adaptability

Entering a State of Flow

As you can see, these attributes have multiple applications. When talents are applied in the right setting, clients have the ability to reach what’s known as a state of “flow.” The term, developed by psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, describes a level of concentration where a person is using his talents to reach a clearly stated goal that’s achievable, but will take effort. If the task is too easy to achieve, you can make it harder, and if it is unattainable, you can increase skill training.

Athletes describe this state as “being in the zone” or the exhilarating “high” after working hard to achieve a goal. Anyone using his talents fully can experience it: a programmer cracking a difficult code, a sales person closing a big deal, a customer service rep resolving a complicated

issue, or a health care provider saving a life. The best part of operating in flow? The person is *self-motivated*. Here are the seven elements of flow that describe what it's like:

7 Elements of Flow

1. Complete absorption in an activity.
2. Mentally energized, even if physically tired.
3. Inner clarity; clear on what needs to be done and doing it.
4. Knowing the task is achievable, even if difficult.
5. Inner calmness, no concerns about self.
6. Timelessness. Hours seem to pass by in minutes.
7. Intrinsic motivation.

Clinicians can begin the discussion about flow by simply asking the client if he or she has ever lost track of time while becoming absorbed in an activity? Most likely they were creating something, solving a problem, or wanting to learn how to do something better. Listen closely to how the client describes the experience, tying together clues from earlier discussions about talents.

Tapping Intrinsic Motivation

Applying strengths, experiencing flow and intrinsic motivation are interdependently woven together. One does not exist without the others. Intrinsic motivation (also called self-motivation) comes from within the individual, based on a deep desire to increase competencies or achieve a goal. The reward is internal: personal satisfaction. When someone is self-motivated, he or she is growing and using personal strengths to the point of experiencing flow.

Compare this to external motivation where an outside factor (such as money) or person (such as a parent or boss) is the impetus for change. Remove the external factor, and the person most likely will give up. This can make a person appear, "lazy" yet laziness is a myth. Everyone is motivated, but not always to do what others want or require. All behavior is meaningful. Resistance may be frustrating to others but is still revealing underlying motivators. Therefore, when clients appear unmotivated, one area clinicians need to explore is developing strengths.

Developing Strengths: Three Elements

It takes more than raw talent to be successful. If you've helped your clients recognize their talents, that's half the battle. But, here's where your real work begins – developing those talents into strengths that translate into high performance. There are three things you'll need to add to talent to develop it into a reliable strength: knowledge, skills, and managing weakness.

1) Knowledge

There are two types of knowledge to acquire: factual and experiential. Another way of putting it is, you need both book smarts and street smarts to be successful. One type of knowledge without

the other leads to failure. Assess your client's factual knowledge. This could include intimate knowledge of a product, field, industry, correct vocabulary and labels, tools necessary to use the talent, etc. Depending on the talent, factual knowledge may require classes, higher-level learning or trade school. Or, it could be gained through trade school, research or a personal mentor.

With the foundation of factual knowledge in place, clients are ready for the "real world." These are the real life experiences that give people the chance to apply what they've learned and adapt in real time. Help clients brainstorm ways to practice their factual knowledge, test responses, and learn to adapt. This is how a rookie turns into a pro. You may recall definition of a strength is, "near perfect performance in an activity." It takes a lot of practice!

2) Skills

For strengths to be reliable and predictable, they need to be built around a framework of skills. When talents are taken for granted, people don't recognize the specific skills they use to achieve a goal. But, if you break down their process, there's usually a repeated step-by-step plan.

By providing feedback on the process of *how* someone completes a task, you'll highlight the skills necessary. To do this, be prepared for the person to respond with an agitated, "I don't know – I just do it." Don't let this deter you. Provide your observations and encourage them to slow down and think out loud about their internal process. This will expose steps they take, and if any skills are missing that still need to be mastered. By highlighting the process, you give them a success plan to replicate every time.

3) Manage Weaknesses

As mentioned earlier, one of the reasons people get distracted from recognizing their strengths is because they've grown up with the belief that it's best to concentrate on improving "weaknesses." So, if you're excellent in analysis, but not so great at public speaking, it's often suggested that it's better to spend your time improving your presentation skills. But, the reality is, you may never be outstanding at public speaking if it's not your talent, no matter how hard you try. It's realistic to improve on a weakness, but not master it to the level of a talent.

On the other hand, if you love analysis, pick it up quickly, and would be energized by learning more, attending a workshop on improving analytical skills would give you the knowledge to develop your strength.

Weaknesses are not necessarily liabilities. If they're recurring patterns, think of these characteristics as a misplaced talent. The true areas of growth are strengths because they're based on innate talents, where there are endless opportunities (and motivation) to learn. This doesn't mean you should totally ignore weaknesses. If they distract from a client from realizing strengths, weaknesses need to be managed. Here are several approaches:

- Seek coaching to minimize weaknesses just enough so that they don't prevent strengths from shining
- Maximize strengths enough to compensate for weaknesses
- Reframe weaknesses as possibly misplaced talents. For example, what would happen if the client changed environment, people, or tasks? In what arena would these behaviors be considered helpful?
- Delegate tasks in the area of weaknesses to others who claim it as a strength

Keep in mind that your greatest strengths can also be your greatest weakness if misused or abused. For example, someone may have the talent of empathy but use it to take advantage of people, resulting in broken trust. Or, a person may have the gift of communication but use words to hurt versus heal.

Above all, clinicians will need to help clients gain a healthy perspective on how they perceive weaknesses. Many clients focus on all the things they don't do well and unfairly compare those things to others' strengths. This mindset would make anyone feel bad. Rather than compare, help the client appreciate that everyone has strengths that are unique to that person. The more a client can adopt this thinking, the more competitiveness and jealousy is reduced.

Adapting to Change and Adversity

Recognizing and applying strengths increases one's life satisfaction, but knowing one's strengths also is a buffer to change and adversity. Clients may experience any number of challenges such as:

- Career changes
- Moving
- Illness
- Death
- Relationship conflicts
- Financial distress
- Natural disasters

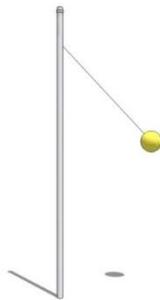
No matter the situation, the constant will be internal strengths. When circumstances, environment or people suddenly change, many people feel upended complaining that, "everything's different." Yet, every change to one's external world still carries something familiar: internal talents and strengths. What a client may be revealing in a time of adversity is that he or she isn't skilled at transferring their strengths to new situations. They lack agility.

Life disruptions often require that you must adapt by doing things you've never done before, making it seem like "everything's different." But, it's the *process* of figuring out how to learn the new thing that strengths show up. In other words, the "what" in life is flexible, but the "how" is stable. So, the same strengths can be manifested in a multitude of ways.

Luckily, talents (foundation of strengths) are permanent and constant. No person or situation can diminish or remove them. But, clients can choose to minimize talents right at the point they need them most. Talents that have not been fully developed into strengths with identifiable habits and processes can also appear unstable during adversity. Here's where a client might mistakenly take a haphazard approach to problem solving rather than start from familiar core strengths.

Remain Tethered

Clients will successfully navigate change by remembering to “stay tethered.” Consider the image below of a tethered ball:



The pole represents a client's core strengths. The deeper the pole goes, the more stable – and there are no bounds! Depth is increased through knowledge and practice. Going deep, not wide, is what provides for layers of interest, new applications, creativity, and constant growth. The client is just like the ball attached to the pole, occasionally getting battered around, but remaining tethered. As long as the client remains in the radius of strengths, he can more confidently respond to change.

Flexing Emotional Muscle

Emotional muscle is gained the same way you build physical muscle. Physically, lifting weights stresses muscles causing microscopic injuries. This triggers satellite cells to rush to the scene of the “trauma” in order to repair our muscles. In recovery, these cells fuse muscle fibers together and create new muscle protein. That's why it's known as “strength training.”

The same system works for building emotional muscle: limited (but consistent) exposure to stress followed by rest and recovery produces emotional strength. Therefore, the more clients are taught to expect and address adversity by using their strengths, the more resilient they become.

Ideally, clients are getting and staying in good emotional shape before adversity strikes. In other words, they are proactive. If not, here are suggestions for exercises clinicians can assign to clients to flex their emotional muscles:

Personal Growth	Professional Growth
Train to achieve a physical goal	Learn a new skill/take a class
Join a new social/activity group	Join a professional networking group
Do something alone you normally do with others	Request new projects or training
Address unresolved conflict	Take a public speaking course
Clean clutter that you've been avoiding	Invite a colleague to coffee or lunch
Spend a day technology-free	Review and update your resume
Go somewhere you've never been	Ask for feedback
Invite a <i>new</i> friend to do something	Offer a new idea in a meeting

Ask clients to choose a scenario that makes them just a little uncomfortable. Then, have them detail what they think would be required to master the situation. When have they done something similar? Perhaps they've been nervous about new situations in the past; how did they cope? By highlighting past application of strengths, clinicians can help clients transfer them to the new assigned situation. With practice, clients will become more agile and manage unexpected adversity far better.

In Conclusion

Everybody has natural talents that can be developed into strengths, but many clients are not aware of them. Talents are recurring thoughts and patterns of behavior present since childhood. They are consistent, innate, natural reactions. Because these reactions come so easily, many people minimize talents, assuming that "everyone can do it."

Talents can be cultivated into strengths with the addition of knowledge, acquisitions of skills and practice. Strengths are defined as near perfect performance of an activity. To reach this level, a client must be able to recognize and recreate the habits of their strengths in various settings. Therefore, more attention must be given to the process versus the outcome.

Cultivating strengths allows clients to experience higher life satisfaction. They are able to appreciate what they do well, increase self-confidence, and are motivated to pursue life-long learning. These endeavors are enjoyable because they're rooted in the client's natural abilities. Clients familiar with their strengths are able to respond better to change and adversity. This is because strengths are stable, reliable and predictable even in the midst of changing circumstances.

TEST

Cultivating Client Strengths

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Name: _____

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Circle the correct answer:

1. Strengths are developed from:
 - a) Motivation
 - b) Talents
 - c) Teachers

2. Being in a state of flow can be described as:
 - a) Taking a shower
 - b) Floating
 - c) Complete absorption in an activity

3. One way to manage weaknesses is:
 - a) Improve just enough so as not to impede strengths
 - b) Focus on mastering them
 - c) Ignore them

4. Knowledge of strengths can help clients adapt to adversity because:
 - a) They will always have something to brag about
 - b) Strengths are consistent and can be applied to problem solving
 - c) Strengths make people physically stronger

5. A person's talents will disappear over time if not used:
 - a) T
 - b) F

I read and completed the test questions for 1 hour of credit.

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