

THE STRENGTHS PARADOX

THE POWER AND PITFALLS OF
STRENGTHS-BASED LEADERSHIP



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I'm grateful to each of the entrepreneurs, business owners, and executives who trusted me with their fears, frustrations, and aspirations and took the risk of doing something different to achieve something greater, for themselves, their teams, and their companies. -Julie

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“The task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths so strong that it makes the system's weaknesses irrelevant.”

-Peter Drucker

Prologue

“That’ll never work!”

That was our Chief Technology Officer (CTO) repeating his favorite phrase in our recurring Monday meeting. We were a seven-member software startup, and the Monday meeting had become a painfully predictable ritual.

The Chief Marketing Officer (CMO), the newest team member, was helping us package and create a compelling narrative for our SaaS product. The CTO, the product creator, spent the large part of most team meetings staring into his computer, seemingly oblivious to the conversation around him – *until* the CMO proposed a new idea. Then he would lift his head to say, “That’ll never work.”

Seeing that his comment had taken the wind out of the CMO's sails, he would then add, "I see where you're coming from and all, but..." The litany of explanations following the "but" included things that hadn't worked at another company, things this team had tried that hadn't worked, certainty that our customers lacked the technical sophistication to take advantage of her idea, and, occasionally, some actual customer engagement data.

The CMO, an endless font of ideas who had an impressive resume of her own, usually recovered quickly and proposed another idea. The CTO repeated some version of "that'll never work," and the whole process would repeat, over and over and over again. This verbal whack-a-mole could last for an hour or more – often more.

Meanwhile, the COO, the only team member with actual project management credentials, would ask the CMO about time and cost requirements for each of her ideas. For the most part, those were details she "hadn't yet worked out."

My role in this predictable play was to bridge the gap between the CMO and the CTO. Leaping to the whiteboard with a marker, I would attempt to refocus us on our goal

and diagram their respective points of view, highlighting the overlaps we could build on to smooth over the conflict.

The CEO, excited by the discussion of ideas and possibilities, would take over the whiteboard, diagramming additional markets we could pursue and performing calculations to arrive at grandiose financial projections. A couple of hours later, we'd have two or three wall-length whiteboards covered with diagrams, charts, and calculations of what we *could* do, what *could* happen, and what we *could* try.

Then...nothing would happen.

In the status meeting the following week, team members reported not realizing a task had been their responsibility. *Or* that they had done some cursory internet research on their assigned topic but hadn't found anything promising. *Or* their plate was full with whatever they were already working on, so they "just hadn't had time." The CTO would disappear into his computer, presumably working on the product. The COO would disappear into his computer, working on deliverables for existing customers, our only source of revenue. The CEO would try

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to keep the tone light by regaling us with stories from his glory days of leading multinational software projects. The CMO would share her new ideas, and the process would begin all over again.

About 18 months into this endeavor, I completed a Strengthscope® certification course, and the team agreed to be my practice client. When I opened the results of our StrengthscopeTeam™ report, I laughed out loud when I saw the graphic summarizing our team members' aggregated strengths (see below). Suddenly, everything was clear.



StrengthscopeTeam™ Report results graphic. Used with permission.

There's a lot of information in this diagram, so I'll highlight the key elements:

- The large words in the outermost circle – Emotional, Relational, Execution, and Thinking – represent categories of strengths.
- The Emotional and Thinking strengths on the left side of the diagram are more internally focused.
- The Relational and Execution strengths on the right side of the diagram are more externally focused.
- The longest purple bars indicate the strengths possessed by 40% or more of the team's members.
- The numbers next to the concentric circles indicate the number of team members possessing a particular strength.

Even if you are unfamiliar with the Strengthscope® instrument, it is easy to see the density of purple bars in the Emotional and Thinking quadrants on the left, as well as the absence of purple bars in the Relational and Execution quadrants on the right.

The lack of sales activity that had prompted the long, painful discussions was no longer a mystery!

The weeks of energetic ideating, debating, and conceptualizing that never translated into action suddenly made sense.

Our team was energized by thinking, conceptualizing, strategizing, and planning – *not* by doing, and certainly *not* by building customer relationships. We had a vast, collective strengths gap in the Relational and Execution areas, the very capabilities needed to operationalize our grand plans and sell the product.

The team members who possessed some of the needed strengths (the short, pale gray bars in the Relational and Execution quadrants) included the most junior member of the team, who was also new to startups, and the two least technical members of the executive team (myself included). When any of us tried to speak up, the CEO or CTO dismissed our ideas, with condescending comments – “That may work in corporate, but that’s not how startups work”; “You don’t understand technology sales”; “That’s not how SaaS sales work,” which I now understand to be their Self-confidence and Critical Thinking strengths going into overdrive, a phenomenon I’ll explain more in Chapter 6.

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There is no shortage of leadership lessons in this team's experience. As you read, you probably saw red flags everywhere – glaring errors in meeting management, accountability, customer awareness, and a host of other obvious dropped balls. It was our seeing the results of our Strengthscope® assessment, however, that allowed us to identify our gaps and determine next steps.

We were a collection of superstars. Every team member had a rich resume of successes, and each one was trying in good faith to do the right thing, giving it their all. Unfortunately, the result was like an orchestra with no sheet music. Each musician played their “instrument” – their respective configuration of strengths – at full volume and at their own pace. The result? A lot of noise and not much “music.”

Our strengths had become our liabilities, both individually and collectively.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Courage, creativity, decisiveness, initiative, optimism, results focus, empathy – all these qualities (and more) are ones we find desirable in our leaders. At the same time, taken too far or applied in the wrong context, these same strengths can sabotage a leader’s effectiveness. If you’re an entrepreneur, business owner, or senior leader, your strengths, applied at the wrong times or in the wrong proportion, can even sabotage *the entire company*.

In fact, one of the most common “open secrets” in many startups is that their biggest liability is their founder. The founder is typically one of the most intelligent and motivated individuals on the team. Their vision, creativity, and energy created the product or service that

is the basis for the company. Yet, those same strengths can later stifle the company's growth and agility.

I first became aware of strengths-as-liability when I began my organizational development career at a Texas regional medical center. I don't remember where I first heard or read it. Still, within my team, we took for granted that executives' strengths were also potential liabilities, creating pain and suffering for their teams, destroying deals, or even their careers. We often referred to a person's main strength as a "double-edged sword" or their "Achilles heel" – a source of both strength and vulnerability.

Since those early days, I've been excited to see the growing awareness of and attention to strengths in education, career selection, parenting, and leadership development. Overall, this increased appreciation for the power of strengths-based approaches in individual, team, and company development has been beneficial.

At the same time, however, I think there's been insufficient attention given to the performance risks related to overusing and misapplying one's strengths, to the double-edged sword nature of strengths. Based on

several currently available books, it would be easy to conclude that the primary goal of strengths-based leadership and career management is to amplify one's strengths as much and as often as possible.

When I was first trained in strengths-based approaches, I, too, focused only on the benefits of leveraging my own and others' strengths. Then, in working with teams and seeing the negative consequences of unrestrained strengths, I was reminded of the double-edged sword. Being able to rein in one's strengths is at least as important as being able to apply them.

Imagine an orchestra – or your favorite jazz, rock, or hip-hop group. Now imagine all the members of that group singing or playing their instrument as loudly as they can – *all at the same time, all the time*. You don't have to be a musician or orchestra conductor to know the result would be noise, not music. Music requires that each member of the group sing or play their part at the right time, pace, and volume relative to the other members.

By the time you reach a leadership position in your career or decide to go the entrepreneurial route, you generally know what you *don't* enjoy and are *not* good at doing.

You've made career choices that minimize demand for these things and that take advantage of the strengths you have in abundance. What you may not have learned along the way, however, is how to best apply and moderate your strengths in an ever-changing mix of team members, projects, and organizational conditions. Just like a tuba blasting during a violin solo, a strength played at the wrong time or with the wrong intensity disrupts the whole team's performance.

I now coach startup founders, small business owners, and corporate executives in strengths-based leadership with the goal of improving both organizational effectiveness and team member well-being. I teach leaders to both recognize and amplify their own and their team members' strengths *and* to recognize and rein in their strengths in situations where those strengths become performance liabilities.

This is the book I wished I'd had 20 years ago when moving from an individual contributor role into a position with more authority and responsibility, and again when contemplating my first run at being a solopreneur. It's also a book I hope will become required reading for anyone moving into their first people-leader role or

starting a company. Too many teams and companies derail simply because the leader doesn't know how to get out of their own way and make the most of their team's considerable talents.

I intend this book to be a practical guide for high achievers (and wannabe high achievers) seeking tools and methods to maximize both your own and your team's performance without burning everyone out. It includes tools and recommendations for both amplifying your own and your team members' strengths, and for recognizing and managing the performance risks associated with those strengths. With this knowledge, you will be able to achieve next-level excellence with greater ease and less collateral damage.

In the next chapter, I define *strengths* as I will be using the term throughout the book, give examples of the power of strengths-based leadership, and explain why focusing on strengths, rather than weaknesses or deficits, is so powerful. In Chapter Three, I delve into more detail about *how* to apply strengths-based leadership in your team or company. In Chapter Four, the focus shifts from the power of strengths-based leadership to the potential pitfalls. Chapters five, six, and seven dig into three specific

potential pitfalls in more detail. To make the exercises in the book rapidly actionable, I've also provided links to downloadable toolkits containing full-sized copies of the tools with all the instructions.

By the time you finish, you will know how to assess your strengths, recognize when one or more strengths have become liabilities, and take action to ensure your gifts are contributing, not detracting, from your own and your company's future. Benefits you can expect from being a better manager of your own and your team's collective gifts include increased team effectiveness, cohesion, and engagement, as well as decreased burnout.

Throughout the book, I use case studies, client examples, and stories shared with me during client interviews to illustrate key points. All names and company identifiers have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

In each example and elsewhere in the text, when I capitalize the name of a strength, such as Creative Thinking or Decisiveness, it's because I am using the 24 strengths measured by the Strengthscope® instrument and listed in the table on the following pages. You may

INTRODUCTION

find it helpful to mark those pages and refer to the table as you read.

Let's get started!

24 Strengths as Defined by Strengthscope®

Relational Strengths	Collaboration	You work cooperatively with others to overcome conflict and work toward a common goal.
	Compassion	You demonstrate a deep and genuine concern for the well-being and welfare of others.
	Developing others	You promote other people's learning and development to help them achieve their goals and fulfill their potential.
	Empathy	You readily identify with other people's situations and can see things clearly from their perspective.
	Leading	You take responsibility for influencing and motivating others to contribute to the goals and success of their team and organization.
	Persuasiveness	You can win agreements and support for a position or desired outcome.
	Relationship building	You take steps to build networks of contacts and act as a 'hub' between people that you know.

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Execution Strengths	Decisiveness	You make quick, confident, and clear decisions, even when faced with limited information.
	Efficiency	You take a well-ordered and methodical approach to tasks to achieve planned outcomes.
	Flexibility	You remain adaptable and flexible in the face of unfamiliar or changing situations.
	Initiative	You take independent action to make things happen and achieve goals.
	Results focus	You maintain a strong sense of focus on results, driving tasks and projects to completion.
	Self-improvement	You draw on a wide range of people and resources in the pursuit of self-development and learning.
Thinking Strengths	Common sense	You make pragmatic judgments based on practical thinking and previous experience.
	Creativity	You generate new ideas and original solutions to move things forward.
	Critical thinking	You approach problems and arguments by breaking them down systematically and evaluating them objectively.

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	Detail orientation	You pay attention to detail to produce high-quality output, no matter what the pressures.
	Strategic mindedness	You focus on the future and take a strategic perspective on issues and challenges.
Emotional Strengths	Courage	You take on challenges and face risks by standing up for what you believe.
	Emotional control	You are aware of your emotional 'triggers' and how to control these to ensure you remain calm and productive.
	Enthusiasm	You demonstrate passion and energy when communicating goals, beliefs, interests, or ideas you feel strongly about.
	Optimism	You remain positive and upbeat about the future and your ability to influence it to your advantage.
	Resilience	You deal effectively with setbacks and enjoy overcoming difficult challenges.
	Self-confidence	You have a strong belief in yourself and your ability to accomplish tasks and goals.

Strength names and definitions as per Strengthscope® assessment report. Used with permission. © Stengthscope, Ltd. 2006-2025.

CHAPTER TWO

The Power of Strengths-Based Leadership

In a nutshell, strengths-based leadership is the practice of identifying, cultivating, and amplifying individual and team strengths in the service of company performance *and* employee well-being. I want to emphasize the word *cultivating* because strengths-based leadership is not simply about administering a strengths assessment and sharing employees' results in a report. It requires valuing, investing in, and creating conditions for the use and development of individual and team strengths in all aspects of work.

Don't worry – it's easier than it sounds.

I also want to emphasize the importance of *employee well-being*. If we learned nothing else from the Covid-19

pandemic and its aftermath, we all (hopefully) learned that if employees aren't well, companies aren't well. Companies may succeed for a time by extracting employees' energy and goodwill without replenishing them through appreciation and reasonable accommodations of employees' needs. Over time, however, extraction without replenishment leads to burnout, disengagement, and turnover.

Strengths-based leadership isn't just about talent management and employee well-being, however. True strengths-based leadership approaches every aspect of the business from a strengths-based orientation. The examples in the book focus primarily on talent management and operational considerations, including task assignments, problem solving, and project management, because that's where I have the most experience. For those interested in and ready to apply strengths-based leadership to strategy development and other aspects of their company's operations, I have included a short list of additional resources later in the book.

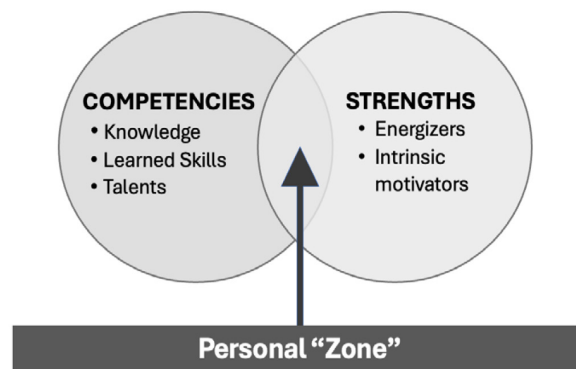
Defining “Strengths”

Before we go further, let’s take a moment to talk about the word *strength*. With respect to work, we often use the word strength to refer to a person’s *competencies*. For instance, we might describe someone as being great at anticipating the market, troubleshooting customer complaints, or analyzing noisy data. These are all valuable competencies that aid the organization, but they may or may not correspond with a person’s *strengths*, as I will be using the term here.

Competencies are the skills we’ve developed and tasks we’ve learned to perform through education and experience. If we do the task well, we get asked to do it again and again – becoming even more proficient through experience. Overall, that’s a good thing.

Here’s the catch – we may or may not be *energized* by the things we’re good at. For example, you may have heard stories about a successful lawyer who chucked it all to write books, an excellent software developer who became a childcare worker, or any number of other examples of people who left careers at which they were *competent* to pursue work they found more *energizing* and fulfilling.

Strengths, on the other hand, are those actions, or those qualities of a task or activity, that a person does find *energizing*. The Venn diagram below illustrates the relationship between strengths and competencies I'll be using throughout the book.



Source: Introduction to Strengthscope® presentation by Josh Dykstra. Used with permission.

As the diagram illustrates, we can be good at things that don't energize us, and we can be energized by things we're not good at. For instance, I love to sing and feel energized when I'm singing, but trustworthy friends have advised me not to sing in public.

For business purposes, we need to add a third dimension to the diagram – business goals. The aim of strengths-based leadership is to maximize both company performance *and* employee well-being by increasing the

amount of time employees spend in their “Zone of Peak Performance,” or what Patrick Lencioni and The Table Group would call the “Zone of Genius.”



1

Source: Adapted from Strengthscope® training materials. Used with permission.

The area where a person’s strengths overlap with their competencies is their Zone of Genius. Where their Zone of Genius intersects with business goals is their Zone of Peak Performance – someone who is “in the right seat.”

When hiring, we typically specify the “must have” and “nice-to-have” competencies, but only rarely mention the energizing strengths that most influence whether a new hire becomes a good fit for the role. What often distinguishes “adequate” team members from “great people we love to work with,” however, is their strength.

We are also generally better at identifying our competencies than our strengths. Educational programs equip students with specific competencies listed in the course description, and we list our competencies on resumes and in bios. We have less practice identifying and articulating our strengths.

To make this definition of strengths real for you, pause for a moment to complete the following exercise:

On a paper, whiteboard, or blank Word or Google doc, draw lines to create three sections as shown in the diagram below.

1. In the left column, list all the work activities you can do well. List as many as you can think of. Don't worry about whether they're measurable or tangible. Many valuable capabilities, such as making new hires feel welcome, quickly evaluating solution options, and getting team members energized to achieve a goal, are both valuable and intangible.
2. Review the list and highlight or circle the activities you find *energizing*. Copy and paste the highlighted activities into the right column.

3. Now review the contents of the right column and highlight or circle the activities that support your company's business goals (or your professional goals if you're not currently working) in a different color. Copy the highlighted activities from this section into the section at the bottom section of the page.
4. Review the contents of the bottom section of the page – this is your Zone of Peak Performance.

<p>1. Things I'm Good At</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•••••••	<p>2. Things I'm Good at <i>that I Find Energizing</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">••••
<p>3. Things I'm Good at, that I Find Energizing, <u>and</u> that Address Company Goals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•••	

If you find it difficult to put anything in the bottom section of the chart, you could be in a role that doesn't fit your strengths.

ABOUT JULIE

Julie Rennecker, PhD, is an author, educator, consultant, and coach who brings an uncommon blend of clinical experience and organization science to the challenge of helping smart people work better together.

As a former ICU and ER nurse, Julie learned early how to lead high-stakes collaboration under pressure. Since earning a PhD in organization behavior from MIT's Sloan School, she has been translating academic insights into practical tools and strategies that help real world leaders.

She has served on the Management School faculty at Case Western Reserve University and at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research on teams spans multiple U.S. healthcare organizations and a range of Fortune 500 and Global 1000 companies, including oil and gas, automotive, semiconductor, and IT firms. Whatever the setting, Julie's mission is always the same, to help mission-driven organizations achieve more AND improve employee experience and stakeholder impact.



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