ENGAGING STRENGTHS

INTRODUCTION

Think of a time or circumstance when you were performing at the peak of your abilities. Now, step back and try to explain why you were so effective in that situation. What was it about *you* or the *way you presented yourself* that made you feel good? What did you *do* that worked so well? Why did others respond to you the way they did? The answers to each of these questions are related to your strengths—the central theme of this chapter.

Every one of us has identifiable leadership strengths, areas in which we excel or thrive. But we often fail to recognize these strengths. As a result, many times our strengths are used ineffectively or not at all. The same is true for the strengths of our coworkers and followers; sometimes their strengths are known, but often they go untapped. The challenge we face as leaders is to identify our own strengths as well as the strengths of others and then use these to make our organizations and followers more efficient, productive, and satisfied.

Identifying individual strengths is a unique challenge because people often feel hesitant and inhibited about acknowledging positive aspects of themselves. In the American culture, expressing positive self-attributes is often seen as boastful or self-serving. In fact, focusing on self is disdained in many cultures, while showing humility and being self-deprecating is seen as virtuous. In this chapter, you will be asked to set aside your inhibitions about identifying your own strengths in an effort to better understand the inextricable role these strengths play in leading and working with others.

Our goal in this chapter is to explore how understanding strengths can make one a better leader. First, we will explain the concept by defining *strengths* and describing the *historical background* of strengths-based leadership. We will examine *how to identify strengths*, followed by a description of different *measures* that can be used to assess your strengths. The final section of the chapter will look at the concept of strengths-based leadership in *practice*, including specific strategies that leaders can employ to use strengths to become more effective leaders.

STRENGTHS-BASED LEADERSHIP EXPLAINED

Before discussing the development and principles of strengths leadership, we need to clarify what is meant by strengths. A **strength** is *an attribute or quality of an individual*

that accounts for successful performance. It is the characteristic, or series of characteristics, we demonstrate when our performance is at its best.

Strengths researchers (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Rath, 2007) suggest that strengths are the ability to consistently demonstrate exceptional work. Similarly, Linley (2008) defines strength as a preexisting capacity that is authentic and energizing and enables peak performance.

A strength is an *applied* trait. As mentioned in Chapter 2, traits are characteristics of people that are often inherited; in the case of strengths, these traits are being engaged at their highest level. For example, sociability is considered a leadership trait, but for someone who is very good at establishing and maintaining social relationships, someone we might call a "people person," that trait is a strength.

A strength is also different from a skill. As discussed in Chapter 5, skills are learned competencies; everyone can be taught skills. Strengths are expressions of a preexisting capacity and are unique to each person. A skill can become a strength, however. For example, a person can learn time management and organization, and with application and practice that allows him or her to become very good at this skill, it can become a strength.

Simply put, strengths are positive features of ourselves that make us effective and help us flourish. For example, Antonio was born with a talent for drawing and design. He worked as a construction laborer for years while he attended a university to study architecture. As a result, when Antonio became an architect, his experiences in building made his design skills stronger because he more fully understood the concepts of actual construction. His clients often comment that one of his strengths is his "construction-friendly" designs.

Historical Background

Studying leadership from the perspective of strengths is a new area of study, which came to the forefront in the late 1990s as a result of two overlapping research developments. First, researchers at Gallup initiated a massive study that included interviews of over 2 million people to describe what's right with people—that is, their talents and what they are good at—rather than what's with people (Rath, 2007).

Second, academic research scholars began to question the exclusive focus in psychology on the disease model of human problems and started to study mentally and physically healthy people and what accounted for their well-being. From this work, a new field called *positive psychology* emerged (Peterson & Seligman, 2003). Each of these two developments helped to explain the rising popularity of strengths-based leadership.

Gallup

Best known as a public opinion research organization that conducts political polling, **Gallup** also conducts research in other areas of the social sciences. For nearly 40 years, the study of people's strengths has been a major research focus at Gallup. This work was spearheaded by the late Donald O. Clifton, under whose leadership millions of people were interviewed regarding their performance and human strengths. Based on these interview data, Gallup researchers designed and published the StrengthsFinder

profile, an online assessment of people's talents and potential strengths. This profile was subsequently titled the Clifton StrengthsFinder in honor of its chief designer and in 2007 became StrengthsFinder 2.0. As of this writing, the profile is known as CliftonStrengths. Later in the chapter, we will discuss more extensively CliftonStrengths and the specific talent-based strengths it measures.

CliftonStrengths is one of the most widely used self-assessment questionnaires in the world and has been completed by more than 10 million people to date. This assessment has been adopted by many universities and organizations to help individuals identify their strengths, become more engaged, and improve their performance. While Gallup has not published a theory about strengths, the widely accepted use of CliftonStrengths has elevated strengths as a key variable in discussions of factors that account for effective leadership development and performance.

Positive Psychology

At the same time Gallup's CliftonStrengths profile was growing in popularity, a major change was occurring in the discipline of psychology. Researchers were challenging the discipline to expand its focus on not only what is wrong with people and their weaknesses, but also what is right with people and their positive attributes. This expanded focus, which was initiated by Martin Seligman in an address to the American Psychological Association in 1998 (see Fowler, Seligman, & Kocher, 1999), soon became the field of *positive psychology*. Since its inception a decade ago, positive psychology has grown exponentially and developed into a credible and important area of psychological research.

Specifically, **positive psychology** can be defined as "the 'scientific' study of what makes life most worth living" (Peterson, 2009, p. xxiii). Rather than study the frailties and flaws of individuals (the disease model), positive psychology focuses on individuals' strengths and the factors that allow them to thrive (Fredrickson, 2001; Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It addresses people's positive experiences, such as their happiness and joy; people's positive traits, such as their characteristics and talents; and people's positive institutions, such as families, schools, and businesses that influence them (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003).

Most prominently, positive psychology is devoted to the study of people's positive characteristics—their *strengths*. This makes it invaluable for understanding strengths-based leadership. Positive psychology launched the analysis of people's strengths into the mainstream of scientific research (Linley, 2008). Concepts and theories from the field of positive psychology directly relate to learning how strengths-based leadership works.

Identifying and Measuring Strengths

As indicated in the historical background, most of the research on strengths has been done by scholars connected with Gallup and scholars studying positive psychology. This body of research has produced multiple ways of identifying strengths and a wide-ranging list of individual strengths. This section explores the way strengths have been identified by three major groups: (1) Gallup, (2) VIA Institute on Character, and (3) Centre of Applied Positive Psychology in the United Kingdom. Although there is much overlap in their work, each research group provides a unique perspective on identifying and measuring individual

strengths. Collectively, this research provides an extensive list of specific strengths, a clear picture of how strengths can be measured, and an expansive view of how strengths can be used to understand human behavior.

Gallup and the CliftonStrengths Profile

Gallup researchers interviewed an enormous number of executives, salespeople, teachers, doctors, nurses, and other professionals about their strengths and what made them good at what they did. The goal of the interviews was to identify the qualities of high-performing individuals. From interviews, Gallup researchers extracted 34 patterns or themes that they thought did the best job at explaining excellent performance (see Table 6.1). These 34 items are "the most common themes that emerged from the study of human talent" (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001, p. 12). For the last decade, these themes have been the benchmark for discussing strengths in the workplace.

It is important to point out that Gallup researchers identified **themes of human talent**, not strengths. Talents are similar to personality traits—they are relatively stable, fixed characteristics that are not easily changed. From talents, strengths emerge. The equation for developing a strength is talent times investment (see Figure 6.1). Strengths are derived from having certain talents and then further developing those talents by gaining additional knowledge, skills, and practice (Rath, 2007). For example, you may have the talent for being able to communicate easily with others. If you were to invest time in learning more about the intricacies of effective communication and practicing it with the help of Toastmasters International, a club that helps individuals develop public speaking skills, you could enhance your communication strength. Similarly, if you were born with

Table 6.1	34 Talent Themes		
Executing	**Influencing**	**Relationship Building**	**Strategic Thinking**
Achiever	Activator	Adaptability	Analytical
Arranger	Command	Developer	Context
Belief	Communication	Connectedness	Futuristic
Consistency	Competition	Empathy	Ideation
Deliberative	Maximizer	Harmony	Input
Discipline	Self-Assurance	Includer	Intellection
Focus	Significance	Individualization	Learner
Responsibility	Woo	Positivity	Strategic
Restorative		Relator	

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talent as an initiator, you could develop it further into one of your strengths by studying how to "think outside of the box" and then practicing this thought process in your organization. To summarize, talents are not strengths, but they provide the basis for developing strengths when they are coupled with knowledge, skills, and practice.

How are strengths measured from the Gallup perspective? Gallup's CliftonStrengths is a 177-item questionnaire that identifies "the areas *where you have the greatest potential to develop strengths*" (Rath, 2007, p. 31). After taking this questionnaire, you receive a list of your five strongest talents. You can build on these talents, furthering your personal growth and development. The questionnaire, which takes about 30 minutes to complete, is available through an access code that appears in the back of strengths books published by Gallup. It is also available on the organization's website at www.gallupstrengthscenter .com. How can leaders use strengths in their leadership? In the book *Strengths Based Leadership*, Rath and Conchie (2008) explain how a leader's scores on the CliftonStrengths profile can be interpreted. To facilitate understanding, they developed a configuration that depicts four domains of leadership strengths (see Table 6.2). The four domains are executing, influencing, relationship building, and strategic thinking. These domains were derived from information obtained during interviews with thousands of executive teams and from a factor analysis of the Gallup talent data set. Taken together, the four domains represent the four kinds of strengths that help create successful teams.

Effective teams possess broad groupings of strengths and work best when all four domains of leadership strengths are represented on their teams (Rath & Conchie, 2008). Effective teams are generally well rounded, and they have different group members who fulfill different needs of the group. Leaders bring unique strengths to teams, but leaders

Figure 6.1   Strength Equation

X **Talent** (a natural way of thinking, feeling, or behaving)

Investment (time spent practicing, developing your skills, and building your knowledge base)

= **Strength** (the ability to consistently provide near-perfect performance)

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Table 6.2   Four Domains of Leadership Strengths

Executing

Influencing

Relationship Building

Strategic Thinking

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do not have to demonstrate strengths in all four domains. Strong and cohesive teams bring into play everyone's strengths to make the team effective.

For example, Maria Lopez, who has owned a successful bridal shop for 10 years, took the CliftonStrengths profile and found her dominant strengths were in the *strategic thinking* domain. Maria is known for her futuristic thinking and deliberate planning. She is outstanding at forecasting trends in bridal wear and helping her team navigate the constantly changing bridal market. Maria hired Claudia, whose dominant strengths are in *relationship building*. Claudia is the most positive person on the staff and connects with everyone. It is Claudia who treats customers in the store like they are part of "the family." To run the store on a day-to-day basis, Maria brought on Kristen, who is a hard worker and uses her strengths in *executing* to get the job done. She is highly disciplined and motivated to make the bridal shop the best in the city. Lastly, Maria hired Brianna because of her strengths in the domain of *influencing*. Brianna is always out in the community promoting the shop. She is seen as a credible professional by other shop owners because she is self-assured and knowledgeable. In the store, people like Brianna because she is not afraid to be in charge and give directions to others. In summary, Maria, the store's owner, is a leader with strengths in one domain, but has the wisdom to hire personnel who have strengths in other domains. Collectively, the combined strengths of Maria and her team allow them to have a very successful bridal shop.

VIA Institute on Character and Inventory of Strengths

At the same time the CliftonStrengths profile was gaining prominence, researchers at the VIA Institute on Character, led by Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson, were engaged in a project to develop a framework for the field of positive psychology that defined and conceptualized character strengths. This classification focused on what is best in people rather than their weaknesses and problems. To develop the classification, they reviewed philosophical and spiritual literature in Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judeo-Christianity, Ancient Greece, and Islam to determine whether there were commonalities that consistently emerged across cultures regarding virtues (Peterson & Park, 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). From the review, they identified six universal core virtues: *wisdom*, *courage*, *humanity*, *justice*, *temperance*, and *transcendence*. These six virtues represent the basic structure around which Seligman and Peterson developed the VIA Classification of Character (see Table 6.3). The VIA Classification includes 24 strengths organized under these six basic virtues.

As illustrated in Table 6.3, the 24 character strengths identified in the VIA Classification are somewhat different from the strengths identified in Gallup's CliftonStrengths profile (see Table 6.1). For example, "forgiveness" and "gratitude," which are strengths in the VIA Classification, seem more encompassing and virtue oriented than "arranger" and "relator," which are strengths identified in the Gallup 34 Talent Themes. Furthermore, the strengths outlined by the CliftonStrengths are more closely tied to the workplace and helping individuals perform better, while VIA strengths are focused more directly on a person's character and how one can become more virtuous.

From the VIA perspective, character strengths are measured with the VIA Character Strengths Survey, a questionnaire designed to create a profile of your character strengths.

Table 6.3　VIA Classification of Character Strengths

Classification	Strengths
WISDOM & KNOWLEDGE *Cognitive Strengths*	1. Creativity 2. Curiosity 3. Open-mindedness 4. Love of learning 5. Perspective
COURAGE *Emotional Strengths*	6. Authenticity 7. Bravery 8. Perseverance 9. Zest
HUMANITY *Interpersonal Strengths*	10. Kindness 11. Love 12. Social intelligence
JUSTICE *Civic Strengths*	13. Fairness 14. Leadership 15. Teamwork
TEMPERANCE *Strengths Over Excess*	16. Forgiveness 17. Modesty 18. Prudence 19. Self-regulation
TRANSCENDENCE *Strengths About Meaning*	20. Appreciation of beauty and excellence 21. Gratitude 22. Hope 23. Humor 24. Religiousness

Source: Adapted from *A Primer in Positive Psychology,* by Christopher Peterson, 2006, pp. 142–146.
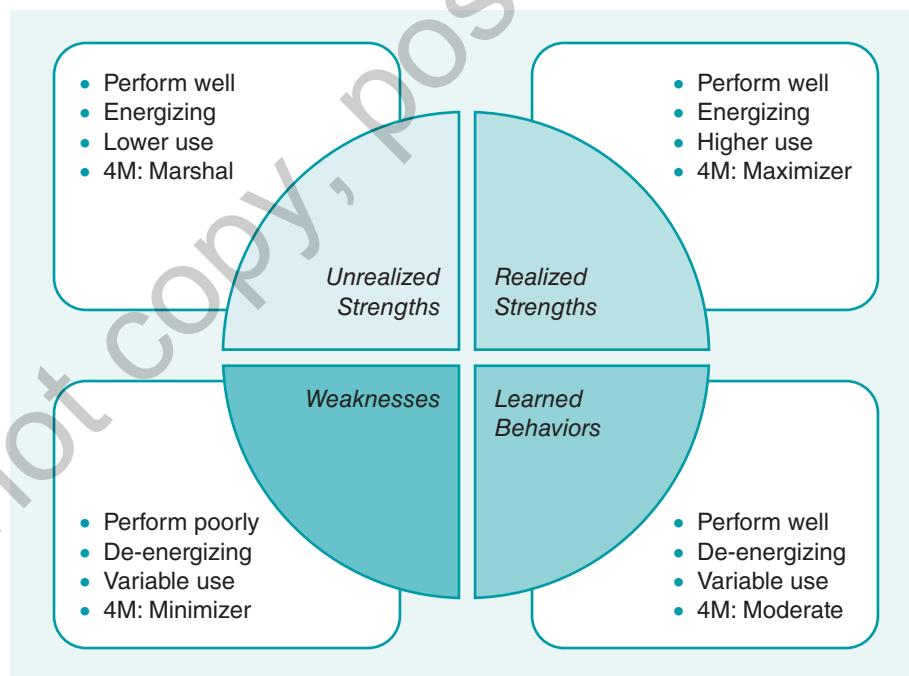
It takes about 30 minutes to complete and is available free at www.viacharacter.org. After completing the questionnaire, you will receive reports and feedback identifying your top five character strengths as well as a rank order of your scores on all 24 character strengths.

Centre of Applied Positive
Psychology and the Strengths Profile Assessment

Based on the principles of positive psychology, researchers at the Centre of Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP) in the United Kingdom developed an approach to strengths that differs from the approaches used in Gallup's CliftonStrengths and the VIA Character Strengths Survey. Rather than focusing exclusively on the identification of a specific number of strengths, CAPP researchers created a more dynamic model of strengths that emphasizes the changing nature of strengths (see Figure 6.2). They also examined different kinds of strengths and weaknesses. CAPP argued that strengths are more fluid than personality traits and can emerge over a lifetime through the different situations we experience.

From CAPP's perspective, strengths were conceptualized as "the things that we are good at and that give us energy when we are using them" (Linley & Dovey, 2012, p. 4). The three

Figure 6.2 Strengths Profile 4M Model

Unrealized Strengths
- Perform well
- Energizing
- Lower use
- 4M: Marshal

Realized Strengths
- Perform well
- Energizing
- Higher use
- 4M: Maximizer

Weaknesses
- Perform poorly
- De-energizing
- Variable use
- 4M: Minimizer

Learned Behaviors
- Perform well
- De-energizing
- Variable use
- 4M: Moderate

Source: Centre of Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP), Coventry, UK: CAPP Press.

central elements of this definition became the criteria in CAPP's questionnaire (Strengths Profile) for assessing strengths: (1) performance—how good we are at doing something; (2) energy—how much vitality we get out of it; and (3) use—how often we are able to do it. Therefore, the Strengths Profile assesses 60 strengths in relation to three dimensions of energy, performance, and use. Based on an individual's combined scores across these dimensions, CAPP provides feedback that specifies the individual's realized strengths, unrealized strengths, learned behaviors, and weaknesses. It takes about 20 minutes to complete the Strengths Profile, which is available for a fee at www.strengthsprofile.com.

The CAPP strengths perspective is represented in the Strengths Profile 4M Model (see Figure 6.2). It is divided into quadrants labeled *realized strengths*, *unrealized strengths*, *learned behaviors*, and *weaknesses*. As you can see in Figure 6.2, each quadrant lists attributes based on the dimensions of performance, energy generation, and use. Each quadrant characterizes different individual attributes and how they can be put into use.

Realized Strengths. **Realized strengths** are personal attributes that represent our strongest assets. We are energized when we use them because they help us perform well. For example, one of Rachel's strengths is *narrator*. She is a wonderful storyteller and uses these stories to convey her message and express her values. The model suggests that people should make every effort to *maximize* the use of these realized strengths, when it is appropriate to do so.

Unrealized Strengths. **Unrealized strengths** are personal attributes that are less visible. We feel good when we tap into unrealized strengths because they support our efforts and help us achieve our goals. One of Javier's unrealized strengths is *creativity*. He is good at coming up with new ideas and concepts, but more often than not he just goes with the flow and does not express his creativity. The model challenges individuals to become more aware of these strengths and to use them more frequently—thus to *marshal* them as a resource.

Learned Behaviors. **Learned behaviors** represent those ingrained things we have learned throughout our life experience. Although valuable, they do not excite or inspire us. For example, one of Sunil's learned behaviors is *driver*. As the eldest of five, he was driven to graduate from college. Highly self-motivated, Sunil constantly pushes himself to succeed in everything he does, often to the detriment of his own health. Many times Sunil doesn't recognize when his goals are unrealistic, and not succeeding in these leads to feelings of self-doubt and worthlessness. The model suggests limiting, or *moderating*, the use of these behaviors because they are draining and do not energize us.

Weaknesses. **Weaknesses** are our limiting attributes. They often drain our energy and result in poor performance. One of Kaylee's weaknesses is *unconditionality*. She finds it hard to genuinely accept people for who they are, without being judgmental about them and expecting them to change to meet her ideals. As a leader, she is constantly frustrated by others because they don't meet her standards in a number of areas. The model suggests that effective people try to *minimize* their weaknesses so as to make them irrelevant or of less concern.

Unlike the previous approaches to strengths, the CAPP model is prescriptive and pragmatic. The Strengths Profile suggests ways people can be more effective by increasing

their strengths and minimizing their weaknesses. The model recommends that individuals use their realized strengths when possible, but also intentionally look for ways to increase use of their unrealized strengths. Stated another way, we should capitalize on our strengths but also seek out ways to express our unrealized strengths. In addition, the model recommends that we try to moderate our use of learned behaviors and minimize our use of our weaknesses. We are energized by our strengths (the top two quadrants), and we lose energy when we express our weaknesses and learned behavior (the bottom two quadrants).

A good example of using the CAPP model is Tamaria, who has recently taken on the role of project manager for a team that is developing a new website for her company. Tamaria's *realized strength* is her focus on details and organization; her *weakness* is that she isn't as technically skilled as some of the members of her team. As a child, Tamaria struggled in school, and one of her coping mechanisms was to ask a lot of questions so that she thoroughly understood assignments. That has become a *learned behavior* she still employs. Finally, one of Tamaria's *unrealized strengths* is her ability to problem-solve and mediate in conflict.

In order for her team to succeed, Tamaria will need to *maximize* the use of her realized strengths of organization and attention to detail in outlining the tasks and deadlines for the project. To deal with her weakness in technical skills, she will need to *minimize* her involvement in the technical development of the website, relying on other team members' technical skills. By employing her learned behavior of asking her team members a lot of questions about what they are doing and why, Tamaria will slow down the team's progress and frustrate team members who may feel she's micromanaging them. In this case, she will need to *moderate* her inquisitiveness, identifying the questions that she really needs answered or finding a way to research the posts on her own. Finally, working within a team can result in disparate opinions and ideas, and Tamaria will need to *marshal* her unrealized strength in the mediation and problem solving so the team works smoothly together and meets deadlines while creating a dynamic website.

To summarize, researchers have developed three unique assessment tools to identify strengths: (1) CliftonStrengths, (2) VIA Character Strengths Survey, and

Table 6.4	Approaches to Identifying Strengths	
Approach	**Purpose**	**Number of Strengths**
Strengths of Competence **Gallup CliftonStrengths**	To identify traits/strengths of peak performers	24
Strengths of Character **VIA Character Strengths Survey**	To identify virtuous/moral character strengths	36
Strengths Fully Realized **CAPP Strengths Profile**	To identify strengths and weaknesses to improve performance	60+

(3) Strengths Profile (see Table 6.4). Each of these assessments provides a unique approach to strengths, and together they help to define and clarify the meaning of strengths. All of the questionnaires are accessible online, and they are worthwhile self-assessment tools for identifying and exploring your personal strengths.

STRENGTHS-BASED LEADERSHIP IN PRACTICE

How are strengths used in leadership? Although there are no established leadership theories on how to practice leadership from a strengths perspective, many useful applications can be made from strengths research in everyday leadership situations. In this section, we discuss several specific ways to incorporate strengths in your personal and work settings. The steps include (1) discovering your strengths, (2) developing your strengths, (3) addressing your weaknesses, (4) recognizing and engaging the strengths of others, and (5) fostering a positive strengths-based environment around you. Following these steps will not be a panacea for becoming a perfect strengths-based leader, but it will most certainly help you, as a leader, to maximize the use of your strengths as well as those of others.

Discovering Your Strengths

As discussed earlier in this chapter, strengths emerge from our basic personality traits. We all have unique personality traits, and therefore we all have unique strengths. No one is without strengths. As suggested by psychologist Howard Gardner (1997), extraordinary individuals are "distinguished less by their impressive 'raw power' than by their ability to identify their strengths and then exploit them" (p. 15). MacKie (2016) suggests that our leadership capability is enhanced when we are able to discover our fully utilized strengths, underutilized strengths, and weaknesses. The challenge we face is identifying our strengths and then employing them effectively in our leadership and personal lives.

Discovering your strengths requires you to concentrate on your positive attributes and those times when you feel inspired. To do so, you need to pay attention to your successes rather than focusing on your weaknesses or failures. For example, when are you at the top of your game? What is it about you or your interactions with others that contributes to that feeling? What accounts for your best performance? When things are going really well for you, what attributes are behind this success? Answering these questions will help you discover your strengths. They are the first and most important step in practicing strengths-based leadership.

There are several ways you can discover your strengths. First, you can complete one or more of the strengths questionnaires (e.g., CliftonStrengths, VIA Character Strengths Survey, and Strengths Profile) that are available online. Each questionnaire gives a unique snapshot of your greatest strengths. Second, you can fill out the Leadership Strengths Questionnaire that appears in this chapter. This questionnaire will provide you with specific feedback regarding your relative strengths in the areas of implementation, innovation, encouragement, analysis, and mediation. Third, you can complete the Reflected Best Self Exercise (RBSE) (Quinn, Dutton, & Spreitzer, 2003), which can be found at https://positiveorgs.bus.umich.edu/cpo-tools/rbse/. The RBSE can assist you in identifying

unrecognized and unexplored areas of strengths (Roberts et al., 2005). Fourth, you can complete the Reflection and Action Worksheet on page 157 to discover your strengths. This exercise allows people you know to tell you what they see as your strengths when you are performing at your best. It is a powerful exercise you can use to become more aware of your strengths, and it may help you learn about some you have not recognized. Fifth, you can engage in a self-assessment of what you believe to be your strongest attributes. Intuitively, we all have a sense of what we do well, but taking the time to intentionally contemplate and consider our own strengths leads us to become more fully aware of our strengths.

This myriad of methods for discovering strengths will allow you to painlessly develop a definitive list of your major strengths. This process is not only enlightening but also a vital first step in developing strengths-based leadership.

Developing Your Strengths

Once you have discovered your strengths, what do you do with that knowledge? How do you make use of this information to be a stronger leader? Developing one's strengths is a multifaceted process that involves several steps. First, you must acknowledge your strengths and be prepared to reveal them to others. As we discussed at the beginning of this chapter, it is often difficult to share our strengths with others because we may feel inhibited about openly and verbally acknowledging positive aspects of ourselves. But expressing our strengths is essential to making others aware of our leadership.
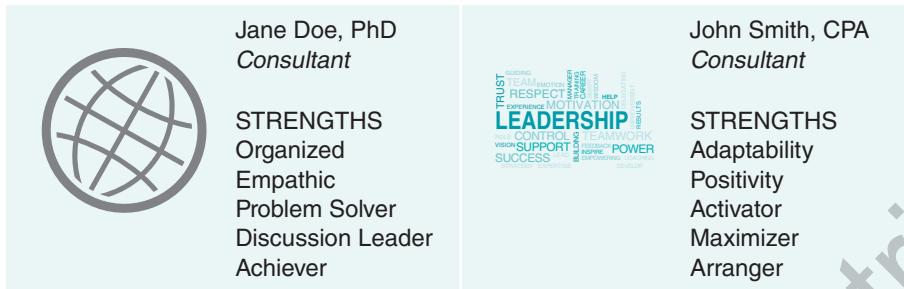
Telling others about our strengths is important because it lets them know how we can be most useful when working or collaborating together, clarifying the unique contributions we can make to others and their work. In essence, disclosing strengths declares "this is what I bring to the table, this is what I am best at, this is what I can do for you," and that allows others to know what they can expect from us. For example, when Tanya lets others know that her strongest quality is that she is an *achiever*, others learn that Tanya is not likely to allow mediocrity in their work. She is going to be demanding and push others toward excellence. Similarly, when Damian tells his staff that his strength is *listening*, his staff learns that Damian will have an open door and be willing to hear their problems or concerns. Putting our strengths out in the open makes us more transparent to others, and this helps others predict how we are going to act and how they might want to act toward us.

People use a variety of ways to reveal their strengths. Some people post their top five strengths on Facebook or LinkedIn, add them to their email signature, or list them on their résumé as a way of making their strengths more visible to others. Several unique examples of how some people share their strengths are illustrated in Figure 6.3. Disclosing our strengths to others does not need to be a daunting or embarrassing task, but can be done in a fairly simple, straightforward manner.

Expressing strengths has a cultural element to it as well. What one culture may see as a strength that should be revealed, another may see as something to be kept hidden. For example, many Western cultures encourage women to recognize and celebrate their intelligence. In some cultures, such as those in religiously conservative, patriarchal societies of the Middle East, women expressing intelligence is not seen as a strength. Many girls are prohibited from attending school.

In addition to revealing your strengths, practice working consistently with others based on your strengths. For example, if your strength is being an *innovator*, find ways to be

Figure 6.3 Examples of Ways to Express Strengths

Jane Doe, PhD
Consultant

STRENGTHS
Organized
Empathic
Problem Solver
Discussion Leader
Achiever

John Smith, CPA
Consultant

STRENGTHS
Adaptability
Positivity
Activator
Maximizer
Arranger

creative in your leadership. For example, do not hesitate to engage in activities like brainstorming or creating a vision for your group or organization. Similarly, if your strength is that you are *deliberative*, place yourself in a position where your strength in providing structure and order to a project can be put to use. Add your well-thought-out perspective by being vigilant and practical when people around you are coming up with ideas that have never been tested. The point is that you should lead from your strengths; your strengths represent the best you have to offer in influencing others. As Anderson (2004) from Gallup has suggested, "The best of the best invent ways of developing and applying strengths in areas where they want to improve, achieve, and become more effective" (p. 7).

A good example of practicing strengths is Warren Buffett, one of the wealthiest people in the world. Buffett is known for his *patience*, *practicality*, and *trustfulness*, and he used these strengths to make Berkshire Hathaway, a multinational conglomerate, successful (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). His patience led him to adopt the now famous "20-year perspective" on investing only in companies that he believed would be successful for the long term. His practicality explains how he selected specific companies whose services and products he understood (e.g., American Express). Finally, Buffett's trustfulness allowed him to select senior managers who were reputable and dependable to run his company. Clearly, Buffett recognized his strengths and carved out a role for himself that allowed him to practice these strengths every day (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001).

Addressing Your Weaknesses

Leaders must not only recognize and capitalize on their strengths, but also be able to identify their weaknesses and address them (MacKie, 2016). Harvard leadership professor John P. Kotter states, "Great leadership doesn't mean running away from reality . . . sharing difficulties can inspire people to take action that will make the situation better" (Blagg & Young, 2001).

While some of the models discussed here advocate minimizing your weaknesses, understanding them can allow you to work to improve them and to recognize situations where your weaknesses can be a liability to your leadership. For example, Lisa owns a small business developing e-commerce websites for companies that sell products online. Her strengths are her structural and process-oriented thinking and technical expertise. She is adept at anticipating and managing the many small details for creating a website that is

LEADERSHIP SNAPSHOT

Steve Jobs, Founder, Apple Inc.

By Matthew Yohe, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia. org/w/index.php?curid=10584359

While Steve Jobs was undoubtedly brilliant, he didn't possess the technical abilities to be a computer genius. In fact, Jobs didn't know how to write computer code or program a computer. But he succeeded—twice—in building one of the most successful and profitable computer companies in the world.

Jobs had many notable strengths, including his creativity, team building, strategic vision, and influencing. He had intuitive vision, imagining products and applications of which no one else dared to dream. When he created Apple in 1976 with partner Steve Wozniak, he sought to create an attractive, simple, inexpensive computer marketed as the first home computer. Jobs micromanaged every detail of the computer's creation from its unique operating software to the color of its casing.

Jobs was an influencer, using his indomitable will and charisma to convince himself and others of almost anything. He believed rules were meant to be broken, and in 1984, Apple did just that, introducing a truly revolutionary product, the Macintosh. It used graphics, icons, a mouse, and the point-and-click technology that is still standard. It was innovative and influential.

But Jobs wasn't perfect. He could be confrontational, and this quality eventually resulted in him being booted out of his own company by Apple's board of directors.

Jobs moved on, using his visionary skills and passion for perfection to create NeXT Computer, recognized as a great product that never caught on with consumers.

Undaunted, Jobs branched out into movie animation by acquiring Pixar Animation Studios, bringing his vision, passion, and influencing skills to a new industry. Under his leadership, Pixar revolutionized movie animation and made Jobs a multibillionaire.

His old company, Apple, hadn't done so well. A decade after Jobs exited, Apple was nearly bankrupt. It decided to buy NeXT Computer and the services of Jobs as a consultant. But he would soon take over as CEO. His first move was to employ another of his strengths—focus. He took the two-dozen products Apple was producing—printers, computers, and software—and winnowed them down to only laptop and desktop computers for the professional and home consumer.

Jobs didn't stop there. Over the next 14 years, he dreamt up the iPod, the iPad, and the iPhone. By combining creativity, technology, and feats of engineering, Apple produced new devices that consumers hadn't even thought of or knew they needed. Jobs insisted these devices be intuitive and simple to use and oversaw every detail of design from creating specialized glass for the screens to the width of their metal casings.

In the end, Jobs's vision revolutionized seven industries: personal computers, animated movies, music, telephones, tablet computing, digital publishing, and retail stores. When he returned to Apple in 1997, he personally created the company's new ad campaign—"Think Different"—which was as much a statement of his own strengths as a leader as it was a mission statement for Apple.

secure and provides a good user experience. However, Lisa can't describe what she does in normal "layperson" terms for clients. In her proposals and presentations, she tends to lose clients with her use of technical language and minutiae of detail. In Lisa's case, it isn't enough that she minimize her weakness—she can't *not* talk to clients because that's how she generates new business. She must find a way to communicate better with her clients.

After losing out on several possible projects, Lisa listened to the feedback of the clients when they said that what she was proposing was "too complicated." Lisa brought in a marketing professional, Julie, to help her develop and pitch proposals to clients. Julie understands enough of the technical parts of Lisa's work to be able to put it in easier-to-understand terms for potential clients. Julie is very strong in communication and social interactions, and Lisa is finding that by observing and working with Julie, she is learning to communicate more effectively with clients.

While making the most of our strengths is important for leaders, recognizing our weaknesses is also important in effective leadership. In the case of Lisa, she had to address her communication problems; there was no way around it. Working to improve on your weaknesses or using them as opportunities for others to contribute their strengths will improve your leadership.

Recognizing and Engaging the Strengths of Others

In addition to employing their own strengths, leaders need to recognize and engage the strengths of their followers. They need to determine what followers are good at doing and help them to do it. Educators who study group dynamics and the roles individuals play in effective groups often say "people do what they do best." What they mean by this is that individuals often become engaged and contribute positively to groups when they are allowed to do what they are good at and feel comfortable doing. People feel comfortable in groups when they can contribute to the group from their strengths.

A good example of this is the Mary Kay cosmetic company. Mary Kay Ash was a skilled motivator and trainer, who founded her business with five products and a dream to inspire women to transform their lives by empowering women and putting them in control of their own futures (Mary Kay, n.d.). She established the company as a multilevel marketing enterprise specializing in direct sales, where each saleswoman could determine her own sales goals and commitment level. Saleswomen recruited and trained other saleswomen and supported one another in their work. Ash imparted to her salespeople that she imagined everyone wearing a sign that said, "Make me feel important," and made it part of everything she did. Ash connected a community of women who found confidence through encouragement; as a result, Mary Kay is now the sixth-largest network marketing company in the world, with more than $3.25 billion in wholesale volume in 2018 (DSN Staff, 2018).

How do leaders know what people are good at? Sometimes people are very up front and freely express their strengths. Mia, for example, often says when she joins a new work project, "I'm a good note taker, so you can plan on me to be the record keeper for our meetings." Similarly, Josh often says on the first day of a roofing project, "I am pretty fast with the nail gun, so you might want me on the roof nailing shingles." Clearly, sometimes followers openly inform leaders of their strengths. When this occurs, it is important for leaders to acknowledge the strengths of these individuals if possible and assign them to roles in the work setting that capitalize on these strengths.

While recognizing strengths sounds simple, it is not uncommon for leaders to overlook followers' strengths. Oftentimes, the strengths of followers are not evident to leaders

or even to the followers themselves. This becomes a challenging situation, because leaders need to ascertain followers' strengths from what they observe rather than what followers explicitly express to them. Cordelia was a struggling graduate student who was just plodding along, uncertain about her direction and goals. When she received an A++ on a challenging reaction paper, she became excited and was surprised to learn that her strength was *creativity*, particularly in writing. Cordelia and her instructor both became aware of her strengths in writing by the work she did on her assignment. Juan is good with solving computer glitches in the office, suggesting his strengths lie in the area of *technology*. When he was assisting a staff member who was having a problem downloading a file from the web, he found that he liked the challenge of solving these problems. Or consider Ashley, who is a good worker, always present, and never oppositional. She is a wonderful team member whose strengths are *consistency*, *kindness*, and being *fun-loving*. She fosters the *esprit de corps* in the athletic center where she works. In each of these examples, an effective leader tries to identify the followers' strengths and then incorporate them into building a more productive team.

However, it is important to note that others' strengths may not always be directly recognizable. Followers may have strengths that are not observable because their situations don't allow for many facets of their overall abilities to emerge. Therefore, it is important to find opportunities outside followers' normal realm of duties or activities that will allow their strengths to emerge. For example, Jeff works on an assembly line at a golf cart manufacturer attaching seats to the chassis of golf carts. The position is very repetitive and structured, and Jeff, like the other assembly line employees, spends most of his workday at his station with limited interaction with other workers. However, with the blessing of his supervisor, Jeff recently organized a softball team made up of other plant workers to play in a local league. Jeff has recruited team members, arranged all the practices, communicated practice and game schedules to the team, organized the purchase of team uniforms, and promoted the team's games in the plant through flyers and the company newsletter. As a result, many individuals who work with Jeff have observed his strengths in *organization*, *inclusion*, and *communication*, which would not be observable through his day-to-day work on the assembly line.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, high-performing teams and work groups possess strengths in four domains: executing, influencing, relationship building, and strategic thinking (see Table 6.2). When leaders become aware of their followers' strengths as well as their own, they can use this information to design work groups that have individuals with strengths representing each of the domains. Knowing followers' unique strengths allows leaders to make work assignments that maximize each individual's contribution to the collective goals of the group (Rath & Conchie, 2008). If a leader is strong on executing and knows how to make new ideas come to fruition, but is not as strong in building relationships, the leader should identify followers with strengths in that area. Or if a leader has strengths in connecting with people and taking command, the leader can identify others who are strong in executing and strategic thinking. Knowledge of followers' strengths is a valuable tool to help leaders to build effective groups.

Fostering a Positive Strengths-Based Environment

A final way to practice strengths-based leadership is to create and promote a positive work environment in which people's strengths play an integral role. Multiple studies by

researchers in positive organizational scholarship indicate that companies and organizations that create positive work environments have a positive physiological impact on employees and, in turn, this has an advantageous impact on their performance (Cameron, 2012; Dutton & Ragins, 2007). Similarly, research suggests that when employees have the opportunity to engage their strengths, they are more productive and more loyal, and their companies experience less turnover (Clifton & Harter, 2003). In short, people feel better and work better when the climate in which they work is positive.

In his book *Positive Leadership*, Cameron (2012) argues that leaders who want to create a positive work environment should attend to four areas: *climate*, *relationships*, *communication*, and *meaning*. To create a *positive climate*, leaders should foster among their employees virtues such as compassion, forgiveness, and gratitude. When these qualities are present, people feel encouraged and are more productive. Leaders can also promote celebrating people's strengths. Doing so helps people feel valued as individuals and respected for their contribution to the organization. To build *positive relationships*, leaders need to highlight individuals' positive images and strengths rather than their negative images and weaknesses. Acknowledging and building on people's strengths encourages others to do the same, and this results in the development of an environment where positive relationships flourish. To develop *positive communication*, leaders must be supportive, make more positive than negative statements, and be less negatively evaluative of others. Positive communication helps people feel connected and encourages them to capitalize on their strengths. Finally, leaders can foster *positive meaning* in their organizations by emphasizing the connection between employees' values and the long-term impact of their work. Employees who find meaning in their work and see it as valuable are more engaged and productive.

Fostering a positive strengths-based organizational environment is embraced by a multitude of organizations. For example, more than 500 colleges and universities have integrated dimensions of a strengths-based perspective into their student learning, faculty, and culture, including Azusa Pacific University, Baylor University, San Jose State University, Texas A&M University, Texas Tech University, University of Arkansas, and University of Minnesota. Among the many companies that have adopted strengths as a systematic program are Fortune 500 companies Best Buy, Chick-fil-A, Cisco, Coca-Cola, Facebook, Hilton, Microsoft, and Pfizer.

SUMMARY

Strengths-based leadership has been given much attention in recent years because researchers believe it can have a significant impact on the way leaders choose to lead and on the performance of followers. In this chapter, we explored people's strengths and how leaders can make use of these strengths to become more effective leaders. Although we all have strengths, they often go unrecognized and unused. Understanding strengths can make one a better leader.

A strength is defined as an attribute or quality of an individual that accounts for successful performance. In simple terms, a strength is what we do when we are performing at our best. Strengths often begin with our inborn talents and can be further developed through knowledge, skills, and practice. The equation for developing a strength is *talent times investment* (Rath, 2007).

Strengths-based leadership has come to the forefront in recent years as a result of two research

developments. First, spearheaded by Donald O. Clifton, Gallup interviewed millions of people about their strengths and what made them good at what they did. From interviews, Gallup extracted 34 themes that best explained excellent performance. Second, academic scholars created a new field called positive psychology that focused less on the disease model and more on the study of healthy people and what accounted for their well-being. Prominent in this new field is the study of people's positive characteristics—their strengths. Taken together, research at Gallup and in positive psychology explains the rising popularity of strengths-based leadership.

People's strengths have been measured in different ways. The benchmark is Gallup's *CliftonStrengths*, which is a 177-item questionnaire that identifies an individual's five strongest talents across four domains (i.e., executing, influencing, relationship building, and strategic thinking). Strengths can also be measured using the *VIA Character Strengths Survey*, which provides an individual's top five character strengths as well as a rank order of his or her scores on 24 virtue-derived character strengths. A third measure, CAPP's *Strengths Profile*, assesses 60 strengths in relationship to an individual's energy, performance, and use, and provides feedback on an individual's realized strengths, unrealized strengths, learned behaviors, and weaknesses.

Although there are no established theories about the practice of strengths-based leadership, there are several straightforward ways for individuals to incorporate strengths into their leadership. First, leaders need to discover their own strengths. They can do this through completing questionnaires and other self-assessment activities. The goal is to develop a definitive list of one's strengths. Second, leaders need to be prepared to acknowledge their strengths and reveal them to others. Although we may feel inhibited about disclosing our strengths to others, it is essential for making others aware of our capabilities. We need to make ourselves transparent to others and lead from our strengths. Third, leaders must make a concerted effort to recognize and engage the strengths of others. Because "people do what they do best," leaders have an obligation to help uncover others' strengths and then integrate these strengths into building more productive teams. Finally, leaders can practice strengths-based leadership by fostering work environments in which people's strengths play an integral role. Leaders can do this by creating for their followers a positive climate, positive relationships, positive communication, and positive meaning (Cameron, 2012). Research shows that people feel better and work better when the climate in which they work is positive.

To summarize, strengths-based leadership is a new area of research that offers a unique approach to becoming a more effective leader. Not a panacea, strengths concepts provide an innovative and valuable perspective to add to our leadership toolbox.

GLOSSARY TERMS

6.1 Case Study—Ready to Be CEO?

Christine Jorgens was shocked when the board of Begin the Future Foundation, the nonprofit organization she worked for, asked her to apply for the position of CEO of the organization. For 40 years, Begin the Future Foundation had provided programs in a nine-county region to help children living in poverty in urban and rural areas succeed in school and life, and the CEO's job was a big one.

Christine had never aspired to be a CEO. She had grown up on a small farm in a rural area, one of seven children in a family that struggled financially. In high school, she worked at a local restaurant, first as a dishwasher and then as a waitress, continuing to work there while she attended college studying social work.

In her senior year of college, she landed an internship at Begin the Future Foundation overseeing an after-school program for middle school students. Christine ended up working for Begin the Future Foundation for 12 more years, with many of her colleagues joking that she was "the intern who never left." Friendly and approachable, she eagerly took on whatever work the organization had for her to do. She worked as a receptionist, became a grant writer, helped out in public relations and marketing, and then was given a position developing and initiating new programs and working with donors to fund those programs.

She thrived at program development, finding ways to implement community resources that were often overlooked. Her program, Study Buddies, paired up volunteer tutors from a local college with children to meet three times a week for a half-hour of tutoring followed by a half-hour of recreation and games. Christine also initiated Girl Power, a program allowing middle school girls to spend an afternoon each week shadowing a local female professional or businesswoman who worked in a career that they were interested in pursuing.

Christine's enthusiasm was contagious, especially with donors. Her programs were all successfully funded, and potential donors often approached Christine with ideas they had for new initiatives that they were willing to fund.

But despite all her successes, Christine wasn't sure she was CEO material. She saw herself as a local girl who had lucked into some great opportunities. The board had been clear about what credentials a new CEO must have: strategic thinking, experience running a nonprofit organization, ability to work with people on all levels of society from the poorest to the richest, ability to manage people, and a commitment to the organization's mission of helping kids escape poverty. Christine didn't have direct experience overseeing a nonprofit and felt she needed more experience in the day-to-day management of the organization.

At the suggestion of the board members, she took a strengths assessment and learned her strengths were in strategic planning, relationship building, creativity, compassion, and influencing. In addition, the board members pointed out that she had a deep knowledge and commitment to the organization and the children they served. Despite Christine's hesitancy, the board was convinced Christine was the right candidate.

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Questions

1. Strengths are considered inborn traits that can be enhanced with experience. What experiences in Christine's background helped her develop her strengths?

2. Of the strengths identified by the assessment, which were directly observable in Christine's work? Were there any that were not?

3. Christine admitted having some weaknesses, especially in day-to-day management of the organization. Which of her strengths could she put into use to help her deal with that, and how?

4. What strengths should Christine seek from others that would complement her own and fill some gaps?

6.2 Case Study—The Strength to Stand Out

Sociologist Dr. Brené Brown is a highly recognized thought leader, acclaimed best-selling author, teacher, researcher, and sought-after speaker who has built a small empire and a very large following around the study of such difficult topics as shame, vulnerability, courage, and empathy.

A spunky blonde Texan and *Harry Potter* fan who prefers "shit kickers" (cowboy boots), jeans, and clogs to business attire, Brené is a professor of sociology at the University of Houston. She has authored five number-one *New York Times* best-selling books. Her TED Talk, "The Power of Vulnerability," is one of the top five most-accessed TED Talks ever with more than 39 million views. In 2019, she hosted her first Netflix special, *Brené Brown: The Call to Courage* (Brown, 2019a).

Though Brené is more likely to bill herself as simply a "research professor," she is also an entrepreneur, CEO, mother, and wife. She founded The Daring Way, a training and certification program for helping professionals who want to facilitate her work on vulnerability, courage, shame, and empathy in their practices.

Brené's path to where she is today began when she was a child. Cassandra Brené Brown's family moved several times—from Houston to New Orleans to Houston to Washington, DC, and back to Houston. Fitting in and feeling a sense of belonging was not easy for her. When Brené began kindergarten in 1969, the Brown family had only recently relocated to New Orleans, a city that had become desegregated that same year. Brené was eager to make new friends, but often found herself excluded from White classmates' birthday parties and included in parties for her Black classmates. This apparently was because Brené's first name, Cassandra, was shared by other black girls in her class and party invitations were seemingly sent based solely on a scan of names on the homeroom class roster. Even though she was at the parties to have fun with her friends, she couldn't help feeling like an outsider.

The family's next moves proved no different. When her parents changed neighborhoods in New Orleans, they enrolled the young Brené in a Catholic school despite their own Episcopal faith. Later, when Brené was a teenager, her family returned to Houston, and she was once again the new kid in school. Her efforts to fit in fell short, and that feeling of belonging remained elusive. Deepening Brené's feelings of separateness was the disintegration of her parents' marriage during her high school years, shaking the only real sense of belonging she had.

Despite this, Brené was a plucky, curious young girl who grew to be tenacious and outspoken. Reflecting back, she credits these formative years in helping shape her later success.

"I owed my career to not belonging. First as a child, then as a teenager. I found my primary coping mechanism for not belonging in studying people. I was a seeker of pattern and connection. I knew if I could recognize patterns in people's behaviors and connect those patterns to what people were feeling and doing, I could find my way," she said. "I used my pattern recognition skills to anticipate what people wanted, what they thought, or what they were doing. I learned how to say the right thing or show up the right way. I became an expert fitter-in, a chameleon" (Brown, 2017, p. 16).

The years after high school were unsettled years of rebellion for Brené; she hitchhiked across Europe, bartended, and waitressed—gaining a variety of life experiences and

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admittedly engaging in an array of self-destructive behaviors. After having dropped out of college earlier, she graduated at 29 at the top of her class with a bachelor's degree in social work from the University of Texas at Austin and immediately entered graduate school at the University of Houston where she completed both a master's and doctoral program.

Through her studies, Brené found a passion for social work and discovered the concept of qualitative research. She became interested in and trained in a methodology known as *grounded theory*, which starts with a topic (rather than a theory) from which, through the process of collecting and analyzing data based on discussions with the study participants, patterns and theories emerge. The grounded theory model fit Brené's gift for storytelling and her ability to connect patterns in her subjects through the listening and observation skills she developed as coping mechanisms in her teens. "I fell in love with the richness and depth of qualitative research," she said. "Storytelling is my DNA, and I couldn't resist the idea of research as story-catching. Stories are data with a soul and no methodology honors that more than grounded theory" (Brown, 2019b).

Unfortunately, the grounded theory model is a departure from traditional academic research, which tends to place higher value on the cleaner, more measurable outcomes of quantitative research. Despite being discouraged by other academics and counseled to not use the methodology for her doctoral dissertation, Brené pushed forward. And like the research method she espouses, Brené allowed the stories emerging from the data to shape her explorations, and she began to study the emotion of shame.

"I didn't sign on to study shame—one of the most (if not the most) complex and multifaceted emotions that we experience. A topic that not only took me six years to understand, but an emotion that is so powerful that the mere mention of the word 'shame' triggers discomfort and avoidance in people," she said. "I innocently started with an interest in learning more about the anatomy of connection . . . Because the research participants had the courage to share their stories, experiences, and wisdom, I forged a path that defined my career and my life" (Brown, 2019b).

As with her choice of research methodology, Brené was discouraged from studying shame as a topic. But she prevailed, trusting her instincts and the path the data opened to her. Her research would soon extend to other, equally difficult emotions: vulnerability, courage, and belonging. She was willing to study areas that were often difficult to define, very personal, and sometimes painful, not only for her study subjects, but often for herself.

After getting a PhD, Brené accepted a professorship with the University of Houston, teaching and continuing her research. She was often asked by her shame study participants to share her findings. In academia, research findings are usually released as peer-reviewed articles in academic journals. Brené wanted to make her work more widely available and decided to publish it in a more mainstream format. Knowing it would be difficult to balance this ambition with her academic career, she tendered her resignation to the university. When the dean of her department was unwilling to accept Brené's resignation, she then proposed working part-time—which also was rejected as there was no precedent at the university for that type of arrangement. Brené stood firm, ultimately winning the blessing of the dean, the provost, and the university's president. She borrowed money to self-publish her first book, *Women and Shame: Reaching Out, Speaking Truths and Building Connection*, in 2004. The book sold well enough that it attracted

a well-known publisher who republished it, launching Brené's career as an author.

Brené sums up her journey in her 2017 book *Braving the Wilderness*: "Was living lockstep really how I wanted to spend my life? No. When I was told I couldn't do a qualitative dissertation, I did it anyway. When they tried to convince me not to study shame, I did it anyway. When they told me I couldn't be a professor and write books that people might actually want to read, I did it anyway" (Brown, 2017, p. 18).

Brené's publishing success created speaking opportunities where her engaging, self-reflective personality and willingness to share her own stories in a brutally (yet warmly) honest way make her highly relatable to others. With her Texas-style no-nonsense wit, she weaves humor and lightness with topics most people find uncomfortable. She is a sought-after speaker, trainer, and facilitator to the tune of $100,000 per engagement. Her work translates to many different fields and encompasses a wide swath of clients including C-suite executives, educators, engineers, mental health professionals, and parents. *Time* magazine even called Brené "one of the leading brainiacs on feelings," adding that "what Brown offers that others don't is a nerd's capacity for qualitative data and grounded theory coupled with enough warmth and humor that she moves people rather than merely training them" (Luscombe, 2018).

As her success has grown, Brené has maintained the down-to-earth authenticity of a woman who knows who she is and presents herself exactly as she is—cuss words and all. She believes strongly in her work and has the willingness and courage to practice it in everyday living, even when it is uncomfortable and requires her to look closely at her own behaviors and responses. Brené has also bumped up against many who challenge her and attempt to corral her into "fitting in" with their ideals of who she should be and what she should discuss. She has been asked by event leaders to dress differently or pare back her discussions to suit the perspective of their audience. She's had business groups ask her not to bring up "faith" and religious groups concerned that she might use cuss words and offend the audience. She opts, instead, to remain true to who she is.

"I can't go on that stage and talk about authenticity and courage when I don't feel authentic or brave. I physically can't do it," she said. "I'm not here so my business-self can talk to their business-selves. I'm here to talk from my heart to their hearts. This is who I am" (Brown, 2017, p. 24).

Exercises/Questions

Brené Brown has achieved considerable success and a loyal following by playing to her own strengths. See Brené in action and acquaint yourself further with her by viewing her two TED Talks:

The Power of Vulnerability (www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability)

Listening to Shame (www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame)

1. Based on the case study narrative and what you learned about Brené and her work from the TED Talk videos:

    a. Based on the strengths listed in Table 6.1, select five strengths that you think are descriptive of Brené Brown. Explain your answer.

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    b. Based on your answer to the previous question, which of the four domains of leadership strengths found in Table 6.2 (executing, influencing, relationship building, or strategic thinking) do you think best apply to Brené? Which domain do you believe is her strongest? Explain.

2. Based on the case study narrative and what you learned about Brené and her work from the TED Talk videos:

    a. Which of the VIA character strengths (Table 6.3) would you attribute to Brené Brown?

    b. On a scale from 1 (*low*) to 5 (*high*), how would you rate Brené in each classification of the VIA (Table 6.3)? Explain your ratings.

3. In applying the CAPP perspective, strengths are defined as "the things that we are good at and that give us energy when we are using them." Based on the definitions for the CAPP categories:

    a. Identify and list Brené Brown's "realized strengths."

    b. What would you consider to be Brené's "unrealized strengths"?

    c. Can you identify any "learned behaviors" as defined by this model?

    d. Can you identify any "weaknesses" as defined by this model?

6.3 Leadership Strengths Questionnaire

Purpose

1. To develop an understanding of your leadership strengths
2. To rank your strengths in selected areas of performance

Directions

1. Please answer the following statements in terms of whether the statement describes *what you are like*.

2. For each of the statements, circle the number that indicates the degree to which *you feel the statement is like you*.

Statements	Very Much Unlike Me	Unlike Me	Neutral	Like Me	Very Much Like Me
1. I am an energetic participant when working with others.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Brainstorming is one of my strengths.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I am good at encouraging coworkers when they feel frustrated about their work.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I want to know "why" we are doing what we are doing.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I look for common ground in opposing opinions of others.	1	2	3	4	5

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Statements	Very Much Unlike Me	Unlike Me	Neutral	Like Me	Very Much Like Me
6. I enjoy implementing the details of projects.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I like to explore creative approaches to problems.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I go out of my way to help others feel good about their accomplishments.	1	2	3	4	5
9. Examining complex problems or issues is one of my strengths.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I am a mediator in conflict situations.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I stick with the task until the work is completed.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I can initiate change, if it is needed, when working with others.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I show concern for the personal well-being of others.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I like to consider various options for doing things.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I am effective communicating with people who are inflexible.	1	2	3	4	5

Statements	Very Much Unlike Me	Unlike Me	Neutral	Like Me	Very Much Like Me
16. I try to follow through with ideas so that the work gets done.	1	2	3	4	5
17. I enjoy creating a vision for a work-related project.	1	2	3	4	5
18. I am the "glue" that helps hold the group together.	1	2	3	4	5
19. I like exploring the details of a problem before trying to solve it.	1	2	3	4	5
20. I can draw the best out of people with diverse opinions.	1	2	3	4	5
21. I like making to-do lists so that the work gets completed.	1	2	3	4	5
22. I can "think outside of the box."	1	2	3	4	5
23. Encouraging others comes easily for me.	1	2	3	4	5
24. I like thinking things through before engaging in work projects.	1	2	3	4	5
25. I am good at finding common ground when a conflict is present.	1	2	3	4	5

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Statements	Very Much Unlike Me	Unlike Me	Neutral	Like Me	Very Much Like Me
26. I enjoy scheduling and coordinating activities so the work is completed.	1	2	3	4	5
27. I am good at developing new ideas for others to consider.	1	2	3	4	5
28. I am good at encouraging others to participate on projects.	1	2	3	4	5
29. I like to explore problems from many different perspectives.	1	2	3	4	5
30. I am effective at helping coworkers reach consensus.	1	2	3	4	5

Scoring

1. Sum the responses on items 1, 6, 11, 16, 21, and 26 (implementer score).
2. Sum the responses on items 2, 7, 12, 17, 22, and 27 (innovator score).
3. Sum the responses on items 3, 8, 13, 18, 23, and 28 (encourager score).
4. Sum the responses on items 4, 9, 14, 19, 24, and 29 (analyzer score).
5. Sum the responses on items 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, and 30 (mediator score).

Total Scores:

_____ _____ _____ _____ _____

Implementer   Innovator   Encourager   Analyzer   Mediator

Scoring Interpretation

The Leadership Strengths Questionnaire is designed to measure your strengths in the areas of implementation, innovation, encouragement, analysis, and mediation. By assessing the rank order of your scores, you can determine the areas in which you have the greatest strengths and the areas in which you are weaker. A high score in a certain area indicates where you are strong; a low score shows where you are weak. As discussed in this chapter, every person has multiple strengths. In addition to the strengths revealed by the Leadership Strengths Questionnaire, you may wish to complete other strengths assessments to obtain a more complete picture of all of your strengths.

If your score is 26–30, you are in the very high range.

If your score is 21–25, you are in the high range.

If your score is 16–20, you are in the moderate range.

If your score is 11–15, you are in the low range.

If your score is 6–10, you are in the very low range.

6.4 Observational Exercise

Strengths

Purpose

1. To learn to recognize people's strengths

2. To gain an understanding of the role of strengths in the leadership process

Directions

1. In this exercise, your task is to observe a leader *in action*. The leader can be a teacher, a supervisor, a coach, a manager, or anyone who has a position that involves leadership.

2. Based on your observations of the leader in action, identify areas in which the leader has strengths and areas in which the followers have strengths.

Questions

1. Based on the virtue-based strengths listed in Table 6.3, identify two strengths you observed the leader exhibit. How did these strengths affect his or her followers?

2. Discuss what strengths group members appeared to exhibit and how these strengths may complement or distract from the leader's leadership.

3. Do you think the followers in this situation would feel comfortable expressing their own strengths to others? Discuss.

4. If you were coaching the leader in this situation, what specific things could she or he do to create a positive environment where the expression of people's strengths was welcomed?

6.5 Reflection and Action Worksheet

Strengths

Reflection

1. For this exercise, you are being asked to interview several people you know about your strengths. Instructions:

   • First, identify three people (e.g., friends, coworkers, colleagues, family members) from whom you feel comfortable asking for feedback about yourself.

   • Second, ask each of these individuals to do the following:

     a. Think of a time or situation when they saw you at your best

     b. Tell a brief story about what you were doing

     c. Describe why they thought you were performing well in this situation

     d. Based on this story, describe what unique benefits you offered others in this situation

   • Third, from the answers the individuals gave, identify two or three recurring themes. These themes represent your strengths.

2. What is your reaction to what others (in Step 1) have identified as your strengths? Are the strengths others identified about you consistent with your own perceptions of your strengths? In what way are they consistent with your scores on the Leadership Strengths Questionnaire?

(Continued)

(Continued)

3. This chapter suggests that it is important for leaders to reveal their strengths to others. As a leader, how do you feel about disclosing your strengths to others? How do you react when others express their strengths to you?

Action

1. Based on the questionnaire in this chapter and your own insights, create a business card for yourself that lists your five signature strengths.

2. Of the four domains of leadership strengths (see Table 6.2), which are your strongest? Describe how you could solicit support from followers to complement these areas of strength.

3. Imagine you are the leader of a classroom group required to do a semester-long service learning project. Identify and discuss specific things you could do to create a positive climate, positive relationships, positive communication, and positive meaning.

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