



How to Play to Your Strengths

By Kristi Royse

Play to Your Strengths:

Our strengths are expressed through the activities that we look forward to doing—the activities that leave us feeling fulfilled and empowered. Wouldn't it be great if we got to play to our strengths all of the time? Or even some of the time? If we develop our gifts and learn to leverage our natural skills, we will find ourselves playing to our strengths more often.

Many of my clients come to me in frustration after focusing their work improvement efforts on overcoming weaknesses. This is an ineffective way for driving sustainable personal growth. Gallup Organization researchers, Marcus Buckingham and others, have suggested that in order to foster excellence in a person, one must identify and harness an individual's unique strengths. Our strengths create the platform from which we can excel.

Unfortunately, most of us have never learned to recognize our own strengths. Sometimes we discount them as unimportant because they are second-nature and come easily to us. Other times, our strengths are the sea in which we swim, and we don't even know they are something of great worth. How often do we really stop and assess our strengths? How often do we acknowledge and claim them? How often do we celebrate them?

Following are five steps to help you tap into the unrecognized and unexplored areas of your strength potential. Armed with a systematic process for gathering and analyzing data about your best self, you can improve your performance at work. After you have mastered these steps and are playing to your own strengths, you will be able to engage your team to do the same for themselves.

The purpose of this process is to assist you in developing a plan for more effective action. It requires commitment, diligence, and follow-through. It may be to your benefit to employ the help of a coach to keep you on track while discovering your strengths through these exercises.

Step One: Ask for Feedback

The first step in uncovering your strengths is to collect feedback from a variety of people inside and outside of work. By gathering input from different sources—family members, past and present colleagues, friends, mentors, coaches, and so on—you can develop a much broader and richer understanding of yourself. Email is an effective way of doing this, not only because it is comfortable and fast, but also because you can cut and paste the responses you receive into one document for easy analysis.

Step Two: Identify Your Own Strengths

Your strengths are the things you like to do consistently and do well. Your strengths show up in the activities that make you feel strong, therefore, the person best qualified to identify them is you. You know which activities draw you back to them time and time again. You know which activities you can't help volunteering for. You know which activities keep your interest and your concentration with little effort.

To identify and name your strengths, pay close attention to your work. Include hobbies, volunteer work, and activities you do around the house in your list. As you sort through each activity, note how each one makes you feel. Reflect back to last week and answer the following questions:

- Which specific activities did I find myself looking forward to last week?
- Was there time last week when I was truly in my "zone"? When time flew by.
- What specific activities make me feel strong?
- When I am at my best, I _____.

Composing this takes time and focus, but at the end of this process, you will come away with a rejuvenated image of who you are.



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Step Three: Use Performance Assessments

There are numerous personality and work assessment tools available. I use the DiSC assessments because it is an easy to use and inexpensive model for explaining behavior, motivation and communication styles. The assessment testing is done over the internet and is completed in less than 20 minutes. Each report is produced with astounding accuracy and insight. DiSC can help you and your employees:

- Understand your own behavior
- Learn how and when to adapt your behavior
- Improve communication
- Promote appreciation of differences
- Enhance individual and team performance
- Reduce conflict

This is a terrific complement to the first two steps explained above. If possible, work with someone certified in the DiSC assessments tools. She or he will explain the results of the report and help you gain deeper insights about your strengths.

Step Four: Recognize Patterns

Creating a table will help you make sense of all the feedback you have been collecting from the previous three steps. Cluster similar examples to compare responses and identify common themes. For naturally analytical people, this exercise serves both to integrate the feedback and allow for a larger picture of capabilities and strengths to develop. For others, this step sheds more light on the skills one takes for granted.

One of my clients, for example, was a lawyer who negotiated on behalf of non-profit organizations. Throughout her life she had been told she was a good listener, and from the feedback she collected in step one, she noted that the interactive, empathetic, and insightful manner in which she listened made her particularly effective. The feedback along with the strengths she identified in step two encouraged her to take the lead in future negotiations that required delicate and diplomatic communications.

Step Five: Put Your Strengths to Work

No more excuses or procrastination. Now that you know your strengths, it is up to you to put them into play. From this place of power, you can access your strengths and be more focused when the world twists and pulls at you. To be able to do this consistently and with ease, you will need to practice putting your strengths to use more and more throughout your daily work life.

In order to do this, I propose a challenge: Identify two specific actions that you can take that require you to step into the use of your strengths. Devise a plan to add two new activities each week that allow your strengths to flourish. Each time you add two new strength-activities, delete two old activities that diminish your strengths and leave you feeling small. This process will help instill a life long discipline for putting your strengths to work for you. Do this each week, every week, and the changes you want to make in your life will be profound and lasting.

Once you know how to transform your own performance, you can help transform your team, your colleagues, your division, or your entire organization. However, as the airlines would say, you need to put on your own oxygen mask before you start trying to help those around you. So, before you hand off this article to your employees, become an expert at putting your own strengths to work. You will know how to take a stand for your strengths and leverage them as never before.