



FOLLOW UP NOTES

STRENGTHS SPOTTING

First, some context: I do not consider myself a thought leader in strengths psychology and research, but I have been on the "ground floor" during the rise of strengths psychology. I have dined with Don Clifton, the so-called father of strengths psychology, and am a Gallup-certified strengths coach (Clifton was CEO of Gallup). Markus Buckingham, a major advocate of a strengths approach, has brought me in to train his top strengths coaches. I made critical conceptual contributions to Alex Linley's thinking as he developed the Strengths Profile. I did the first cross-cultural validation study of the VIA strengths. I mention all of this to make two specific points: A) that I am model-agnostic and am well-versed in many different strengths frameworks, and B) my thinking on strengths has been cross-fertilized by my interactions with the top minds in strengths psychology, and this, I believe, has helped me to create some sophisticated approaches to using strengths in coaching.

1. What are Strengths? I don't know if you need to be wed to a single definition, but here are some thoughts. First, there is an intuitive understanding that strengths are the behaviors at which a person excels. That is, the stuff you are good at. Each person was dealt a hand of cards at birth and, to some extent, has cultivated these natural leanings across their lives. Alex Linley defines strengths as pre-existing capacities that are energizing when used and which we perform with a degree of excellence. The folks associated with Gallup-- notably Tom Rath, Markus Buckingham, and Don Clifton-- argue that strengths also work as filters for how we approach tasks and decisions and how we see life. This is also reflected in the personality approach to strengths found in the VIA, which emphasizes the values associated with and underscores our strengths.

2. Strengths Vocabulary. I believe the foundation of all strengths intervention is vocabulary. Building an articulate and robust strengths vocabulary will allow you to see every nuanced facet of your client and not be limited to just a handful of strengths. The VIA is a good place to learn a basic list of 24 strengths labels. I recommend adding many others to your list. This is also a place where you can have



fun and get creative in coaching. For example, "puzzler." Puzzlers are people who take joy in and excel at figuring things out. This is distinct from problem-solving, although it might also include that. Puzzlers tend to be attracted to puzzles-- actual puzzles-- or types of puzzles like crosswords or Sudoku. In some instances, they also enjoy figuring out people or seeing how parts of a problem fit together. Imagine that you had this clear definition with 40 or 70 different strengths! How cool that would be to work with your kids, clients, teams, etc.

3. Strengths Spotting. I know, it's like stage magic! Out of nowhere, you see the core of your client! Cool, huh? Here is how it works:

- A) Look at the baseline activation of your client
- B) Note any spike in enthusiasm (voice, posture, gesture, facial expression) and pay attention to the content of what is being talked about right then
- C) Label it

Here Are Some Issues to be Aware of:

- A) Clients sometimes acquiesce, and you want to guard against this
- B) Sometimes, you get the label wrong, and that is fine. Coaching is co-created so empower your client to label it how they like
- C) Be prepared to create a succinct definition for the strength you label (see what I did with "puzzler" above)
- D) This process opens the door to a strengths-based conversation. It also creates connection. I once got a piece of corporate work that took me to Thailand twice because I did this with a CEO in a hotel lobby. I once did this with a passenger on an airplane, and she bought one of my books for everyone in her wedding party. I have used this skill to solve interpersonal conflict and to better facilitate workshops. But mostly, I use it in coaching.

For those who feel uncomfortable using the coach's language rather than the client's language to start the conversation, I would refer you to my latest coaching book, Positive Provocation. Specifically, to the provocation, "Whose language Is It, anyway?"

