

## Praises

Fred's book is both inspiring and entertaining! Young readers will be taught to harness their own strengths to live successful lives while enjoying hilarious anecdotes and heartwarming stories.

—Greg P. Smith

International Business Consultant, President of Chart Your Course International, Author and Keynote Speaker

Fred has created a must read book for students, parents and educators. *Who's In Charge of Bob?* is an exceptional guide for discovering your uniquely created talents. The book is full of inspirational stories of overcoming weaknesses to become extraordinarily successful. You will be inspired, uplifted and entertained as Fred shares his heart for students.

—Brooks Gibbs

Youth Crisis Counselor and Bullying Expert

This book offers an opportunity for students to catch a glimpse of their full potential and strategize towards removing daunting barriers, as well as an opportunity for adults to discover effective angles from which to encourage and empower their students.

—Tom Henry

Director of Leadership Development,  
Ascent Outdoor Adventures

Fred Grooms has written a “must-read” book for anyone who is involved with leading, guiding, and developing the lives of other people. Parents, coaches, educators, clergy, and employers would benefit greatly from his wisdom and his passion for people. Fred has lived what he teaches, and his advice gets results.

—Michael E. Frisina, PhD  
CEO of The Center for Influential Leadership,  
Owner of BehaviorSmarts, and Alumni faculty member of  
the United States Military Academy at West Point

In his new book, Fred Grooms will guide you through an amazing journey during which you will uncover the talents you never thought you had, launching you onto a path of unlimited success. I found the use of his personal experiences to be quite powerful and I love the idea of reframing what was once thought of as a weakness into a strength.

—Stephane Gaskin PhD, PPCC  
Psychology Professor at Dawson College  
and Concordia University

Fred boils down, in an amazingly simple way, how to identify natural talents, and most importantly, employ them productively. Both as a father of teenagers and a Human Resources manager, I believe it is vital to identify natural talents and strengths early on in the educational and workplace journey. This book is a must read for high school and college students.

—Richard K. Deal, PHR  
Human Resource Manager,  
Corporate Transactions, Bank of America

This is an honest, straightforward approach to empower the young reader to avoid the trap of being an average teen, and instead, uncover their reality of being an extraordinary teen.

—Molly Kennedy  
Speaker, Educator, Life Coach

I love it when a dyslexic person wants to write a book—what a statement of courage! Give this book away like water and you will impact families for generations to come because dyslexia is also generational and it does not deserve to win.

—Chris Winkler  
Former Chair of the South Carolina Dyslexic Task Force,  
PhD Candidate, Educational Leader in K-12 schooling

I believe every student matters and every young person has something uniquely special about them. Unfortunately, too many students do not believe these statements are true. In his book *Who's In Charge of Bob?* Fred teaches students how to identify their individual talents. Students will read the firsthand story of Fred's personal struggle to uncover his dyslexia and find what ultimately made him who he is today. You will be inspired by the sheer number of examples from students, like Fred, that have discovered extraordinary success by uncovering their natural talents.

—Scott English  
Chief Operating Officer,  
South Carolina Department of Education



# Who's in Charge of Bob?

The Key to Moving from Ordinary  
to Extraordinary

FRED GROOMS

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For my mother.

She was always my biggest supporter,  
never letting me believe I was anything less than  
extraordinary. Her practical wisdom, humor and  
natural talent inspire me each day. Above all else, my  
mother taught me to give to others unconditionally  
and love with all my heart. I miss her so very much.

*There is no investment you can make that will  
pay you as well as the investment you make in  
discovering more of who you were made to be.*

~ Fred Grooms

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## Preface

I would like to say thank you for selecting my book on identifying your unique talents. It is my hope that if you are a student you will dedicate serious time to reflecting upon the unique nature of your talents as you read. Your talents will lead you to your personal strengths, and these strengths are key to living an extraordinary life—personally and in your chosen career or careers.

If you have come across my book as an Educator or Parent, my hope is first that you share this information with the students in your life. Second, I hope you find this work to be a valuable resource. Students spend so much time focused on remediation, it leaves them feeling stressed, weak and unmotivated. It's my experience that when students have an opportunity to spend time focusing on identifying and employing their unique talents, they begin to thrive and reach new heights in personal success. They truly have the opportunity to live extraordinary lives.

I can be easily contacted through my website  
[www.fredgrooms.com](http://www.fredgrooms.com)



## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to the people who have supported me on this journey.

- Sarah, the love of my life, without whom success would have been a hard fought battle. Sarah has always inspired me and given me the courage to move towards extraordinary success. She has supported my “youth habit,” which has required personal, family and financial sacrifice. Thank you for loving me for who I am.
- To my two children, Abby and Eric, for knowing the importance of my time away from home. They both motivate me to love unconditionally.
- Sean Riley, who had the painstaking responsibility of reading a dyslexic’s first 25,000 word manuscript. Sean, without your sacrifice and encouragement this book would not have been completed.
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- To the youth at Northeast United Methodist Church, for being my test subjects. For allowing me to test all my theories, speeches and teaching material on you, and offering your advice. So many of my students are found

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within the pages of the book. May you all continue to move toward extraordinary success.

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- Ken Maxon, for his work on the audio book. Ken’s work was exceptionally fast and professional. [www.inedavoicover.com](http://www.inedavoicover.com)

## Introduction

*It had long since come to my attention  
that people of accomplishment rarely sat  
back and let things happen to them.  
They went out and happened to things.*  
~ Leonardo da Vinci

If you plan on being successful, let alone extraordinarily successful, what you need to do is uncover your natural talents and build them into strengths. And just in case you might be wondering, you *are* talented; everyone is.

After twenty plus years of working with students from middle school to college, I haven't yet met a single student whose life pursuit was to be mediocre or average or well-rounded. Is this your goal? Are you seeking to be mediocre or average or well-rounded? No? Then perhaps, you're looking to become *more of who you already are*, and to master your life and your future.

Caution, however. The society you live in may be completely satisfied with you being mediocre, average or well-rounded. Why is that? Simply put, it is precisely where most people have found themselves. Therefore, they're most comfortable with

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you being just like them. For you to do otherwise, you would become a threat to their comfortably average life.

If you find this disturbing or frustrating . . . good! Keep reading, and you may find yourself becoming *more* irritated, even defiant. And you just may become motivated to take charge of yourself and your life.

Society is not only *comfortable* with you being average; it wants you to continue to focus most of your energy and time on fixing what it has determined is broken about you. It's what I call *The Weakness Trap*.

The Weakness Trap starts very early in life. Do you realize we have a scale or predetermined standard of some sort set up to track almost every growth, step, achievement, segment, and milestone in our life?

Consider this: it starts the moment you're born. The medical staff weighs you, measures you, and draws blood from you, all to get an understanding of how you "fit in with" or "measure up to" the standards. Any deviation from the norm and we immediately start to work on your weaknesses. This process of tracking how you fit in and measure up continues throughout almost every element of your life.

Once you enter the educational system, society's desire to track, label, and categorize you begins in earnest. We call it *standardized testing*. I'm sure you are already aware of the emphasis we place on the results. Our culture has an insatiable desire to know how well you're going to fit into our educational box. If you deviate from the standard, we have a whole host of labels at our disposal to categorize your weaknesses and start the process of remediation.

But don't think you're safe if your standardized test scores

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tell us that you're above average or that you excel in a particular area—because if you do, we have labels for that too. We're going to categorize your excellence, place you in advanced educational tracks, and set an even higher standard for you to meet (a standard that may keep you continuously stressed out). These advanced tracks are often not related to any desire on your behalf, or to the talents that you personally would like to further develop. These “tracks” often follow you right into the university system, where you find yourself in honors college, studying a subject you're good at but may have little interest in. You also discover there are a lot of other students just as intelligent as you; and you realize for the first time that you might not be the smartest person in the room—and that stings.

Perhaps the worst case is when you fit somewhere in the middle; you're just average. “Average classes with average grades” is your norm. We get so comfortable with you being average, we forget to ask you to excel at anything, and you end up getting lost in the crowd. This is often referred to as “the marginalized middle.”

You might assume that this is where I'm going to start bashing our public education system, but you would be wrong . . . mostly.

I wholeheartedly believe the majority of educators, including myself, are in education to make a difference in students' lives. Your teachers and professors have a passion for the educational process, for the art and science of teaching, and for helping students grow into highly capable adults; and for all of these reasons we want you to succeed.

Our educational system has introduced a number of new, compelling, and innovative “movements” that you may have

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had the pleasure of participating in; movements such as self-directed learning, character education, career counseling, and college placement services. We're increasing the emphasis on Career and Technology Student Organizations (CTSO). We continue to increase the value of college internships and hands-on learning, and we have expanded your choice of college majors.

I also wholeheartedly believe that our education system is going to have to continue to make major changes in the way we go about teaching you to succeed. We have to change our mindset about the teaching process and the value we place on standardization. We have to understand that the job market has become increasingly global, and that what the world's economy is looking for from you is changing much more rapidly than our education system. It's been reported that, in just twenty years from now 40 to 50 percent of all available jobs currently don't exist. These jobs don't exist because they have yet to be created. That's mind-blowing when you think of the possibilities for your future employment.

Let me be clear: I don't think the primary problem lies with our professors or teachers. The problems we are facing are intrinsically built into the system and design of our schools; a system that was built decades ago and designed to produce well-rounded factory workers, and a system that has trouble accepting rapid change.

There are an amazing number of highly educated and dedicated administrators, professors, and lawmakers working on the best practices for the future of students' education. Changes to any organization as large as the public education system always take time; but these are intelligent and innova-

tive people and they will find a way to change and advance our system.

The question is: will any of these changes be in time to make a difference to anyone reading this book? I'm sorry to admit that I'm less optimistic that there will be widespread changes in time to have a positive effect for *you*.

However, that doesn't mean there are no answers to how you can be more prepared for your next step. Whether it is getting a job, continuing your education, starting your own business, or leaving the education system to pursue self-directed education, there are important steps you can take to set yourself on the path of what I call *extraordinary success*.

The primary focus of this book is *to help you take one big step along the path to extraordinary success*. It's my desire and my passion to help you become more of who you already are—**by helping you to understand your unique personal talents and build them into strengths**.

I'm on a campaign to help students, parents, educators and administrators *to shift the focus from the remediation of your weaknesses to the development of your individual strengths*. My motivation to write this book comes from my desire to share with you what I have learned about surviving academic challenges and achieving career success by focusing on my strengths and learning to manage my weaknesses.

As you read, you will discover specific ways to develop your personal strengths by identifying your talents. The end goal is for you to continue to pursue mastery in the areas of your greatest talents.



## Chapter One

# A Glimpse into Personal Strengths

One afternoon I arrived at my office and found one of my students sitting outside waiting for me. She didn't look happy.

"Emily, how can I help you?"

Emily looked up at me with tears in her eyes and said, "I just can't do it anymore."

"What can't you do anymore?"

"Stay in school."

"Well, why not?"

"I'm f\*\*\*ing sick of always being wrong. I suck at math and science, and don't even get me started about the bitch of an English teacher I have. She hates me and everything I do. No matter how good it is, she always finds something to complain about."

"Emily, you have to stay in school and graduate."

"No I don't. I'm seventeen and I can drop out."

"What about your folks? What do they have to say?"

"My Dad will kill me, but my Mom is okay with it as long as I get my GED."

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“Emily, it’s hard to get your GED if your Dad kills you.” She laughed just enough to break the tension. “What caused this meltdown?”

“I failed a chemistry test today.”

“That’s not the end of the world.”

“That’s not it. I can retake the test and pass it, I think. It’s just that I’m sick of not being good at anything. Did you know that I haven’t gotten an A in a single class? I had to retake algebra, and the summer school class I took wasn’t because I was trying to get ahead. I take meds for ADD, but all they do is make me feel like crap. Did you know that my parents are paying for tutors?”

Her questions were rhetorical. She *knew* I was aware of everything she was talking about.

“I’m so tired of always doing stuff I’m not any good at. I hate that all my friends get A’s and don’t even have to work at it. I work my butt off and only get C’s most of the time. I suck at everything!”

I have to admit that her last comment made me laugh; it reminded me of the many times I had said the very same thing at her age.

“Emily, you don’t suck at everything; you’re good at stuff.”

“Name one thing I’m good at.”

An unfortunate truth about the current education system is that we are more concerned about fixing your weaknesses than we are about helping you discover your natural talents. I call it the weakness trap; but professional educators call it the deficit-based remediation approach and corporations call it employee evaluations or coaching up.

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No matter the name, it all boils down to you spending most of your energy on fixing what we believe is broken about you. We're stuck on a weakness-based philosophy for success rather than a strengths-based philosophy for success.

The weakness trap is our unhealthy and unproductive obsession with focusing on fixing your weaknesses. We want you to work harder and harder at what you're not good at so you can move from being bad at something to being . . . not bad at something. How does this make sense? Is that how you want to spend your time and effort? Is that how you want to spend your life?

How great would it be if we started helping students like Emily identify what their talents are, and how to develop those talents into their own unique personal strengths? The purpose would be to help them develop an understanding of their core natural strengths and help them create a vision of what they would like to achieve with their talents.

"Emily, how many friends do you have?"

"What do you mean?"

"Would you say you have just one or two friends?"

"No, I have a lot of people I would call my friends."

"Do you ever have trouble deciding who you're going to hang out with?"

"Sometimes."

"Do you think this is a problem for most people? Who are all your friends coming to for relationship advice?"

"Me, I guess."

"Does this make you unique among your friends?"

"I guess. . . ."

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“Please, you know it does. You’re good at being a friend, and people can trust you with their troubles, and they look to you for help. Emily, this is a talent most people don’t have.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

Emily didn’t say anything and I continued. “You said you’re not any good at math or science, right?”

“Yah, so?”

All the time that I had known Emily, she had enjoyed taking pictures. She had a digital camera but she chose to use film, specifically black and white film.

“Okay, would you say you’re good at taking pictures?”

“I guess.”

“How much math and science goes into taking your pictures?”

“A bit, I guess.”

“Come on Emily. I know enough about photography to be dangerous. To take really good pictures you have to calculate f-stop and ISO to get the correct depth of field. You have to understand how to use a light meter and set the camera for the effects you want. How many chemicals do you have to use in the darkroom? What is the precise measurement and time needed to achieve the desired results?”

“What’s your point?”

“Holy crap, Emily. All this camera stuff you’re doing takes both math and science, and you say you’re not good at math or science?”

“I didn’t really think of it that way.”

“Maybe you are good at stuff after all.”



So why should we learn what our talents and strengths are? First, our talents and strengths are *ours forever*. No one can *give* them to us nor can they take them away. No one taught Emily how to be a great friend; and no one taught her to have the ability to view life through the lens of a camera.

When we can identify our talents and strengths, we increase our confidence and optimism and hope; and we increase our overall academic performance. One major side effect of that is that people who identify their strengths report that they are happier. Who doesn't want to be happier?

Strengths are a great equalizer. They are not correlated to your age, race, or economic background. What do I mean by that? I mean that everyone has the ability to identify their talents and develop them into strengths. If your family is poor, you still have innate talents. If you're a minority, you still have innate talents. No matter what your age, you have the ability to develop your unique strengths; developing your strengths is a lifelong pursuit.

I was in my early twenties before I understood that I was, in fact, talented. Some years later, I began to use those talents more wisely and I started developing definite strengths. Unfortunately, it took several more years before I had the insight and education to name and claim my talents as true lifelong strengths.

Research tells us there are a host of benefits to being able to identify and employ your personal strengths. Within the formal educational context, research confirms that strengths-based curriculums, developed on an individual basis, are associated with increased academic motivation in secondary education and college.

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Let's look at that in more detail . . . Researchers Bower and Lopez (2010) present evidence that the students who are most skilled at capitalizing on their strengths within educational settings are better at building on past successes and also at mobilizing social support. Similarly, a study of corporate managers revealed that when managers emphasized performance *strengths*, performance increased by 36.4%; when managers emphasized performance *weaknesses*, performance *decreased* by 26.8%. That's a huge difference! Research continues to provide us proof that working within your strengths increases your happiness, health, and overall wellbeing (*The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 6: 2, 106-118).

We also know from research done by the Gallup Organization\* that students who reported that their school or university assisted them in identifying their *personal strengths* were 84 percent more likely to be engaged in school. Student engagement increases overall academic performance and achievement scores, reduces disciplinary problems, and increases both retention rates and graduation rates. I know that I want to be involved in anything that will help increase graduation rates.

Are you following me? All this simply means that when you can specifically list what you're good at, everything gets easier. You're happier, and you do better in school, home and work. You actually change your mindset regarding what you can accomplish, and this leads to the potential for greater success in life.

\*Gallup is a company that specializes in information gathering. They developed the Premier Strengths Assessment that is explained later in the book.

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As a student, I'm sure you will be interested to know that understanding your talents and strengths also increases your potential for future employment. Knowing your strengths allows you to articulate to a potential employer the ways in which you specifically and immediately can be a productive member of the team.

A great example of this is Ben. Ben graduated from high school at the top of his class. He had zero desire to go to college even though he had several offers that would have allowed him to go for free. Imagine how well this went over with his parents! A free ride to college and he was going to pass! Holy crap, are you kidding me!

Ben is a good-looking young man, athletic, and quiet. He was never excited about school, but he learned early what it took to please his teachers and parents. Basically, Ben was very good at playing the game of school. He followed the rules, listened to what was expected, and then delivered—and school was easy for him.

What Ben *really* liked to do was work on cars; working on cars was challenging. He was fascinated by the idea of taking something someone else had built and making it better, louder, and faster. So he went to trade school and learned all there was to know about auto repair and design. He graduated and spent two years working at a local car dealership, but his ultimate goal was to work on a NASCAR racing car.

Then Ben got an interview for an apprenticeship. Over the years, Ben and I had spent some time discussing his strengths; he knew that he was talented and that he had the ability to improve on others' work and anticipate what would need to be done in the future. Ben had also spent a lot of time invest-

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ing in his strengths, and he was ready for the interview. Most importantly, he was ready for the key question:

“So Ben, you have all the same basic skills as everyone else. What are you really good at?”

This was not a question about his automotive skills; it was a question about his personal talents. What was it that was going to make him a valuable member of the team? What was it that made him unique?

Ben's answer: “I have the unique ability to see beyond the present and look at what the future holds as it pertains to development. Improving and modifying something that is already good and making it great is difficult, but I can make that happen. I'm very cautious; I want to make sure things are right the first time. I'm also very loyal.”

The interviewer was impressed, and Ben got the job.

You would think, with mounting evidence like this, that we would all be jumping aboard the strengths-based train. Unfortunately, shifting our mindset from a weakness-based philosophy to a strengths-based philosophy takes time, education, and effort.

Here is a good example of how students—perhaps students like you—are trapped focusing on their weaknesses. I use this illustration when I'm teaching student and teacher seminars on developing strengths. So please follow along and do the exercise, just as if you were experiencing this course in person. Wow, that sounds very teacher-like; but just play along and have some fun with this. . . .

Take just 30 seconds and write down at least five things that you're not good at or that you have to work really hard at to be successful . . . in other words, your weaknesses. Come up with

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at least five things that you, or someone else, would describe as things you're not good at. Examples might be that you're not good at math, you're shy, you hate to lose, you get mad easily, you talk too much, or you read too slowly.

Ready, set, go . . . what are your weaknesses?

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Next, take a full minute to write down the things that you're good at. What are your talents? What do you do without any effort or what do others say you're good at? List at least five. Examples might be that you're good at science, you make friends quickly, you're very organized, or you love to write stories.

Ready, set, go . . . what are your talents?

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Okay. Did you do the exercises? If you did and you're like most people, listing five things you're not good at was easy. Most people come up with a list of *eight* things in just 30 seconds.

And how many things did you come up with that you're good at? You had a full minute to answer the question. But in my experience, most people come up with only *three* specific things they are good at.

Why is that?

We all know exactly what we we're not good at. It's the stuff that we want to hide or the reason we don't want to stand out in the crowd. We spend a lot of time focusing on what we aren't good at. I'm willing to bet that every day you think about what you suck at. It's always right there in front of you. Others are always pointing out your weaknesses or asking you to fix them, and you're probably not even consciously aware of that. I'm also willing to bet you spend almost no time thinking about what you're good at. This is the problem; we're all so used to working on our weaknesses.

I believe that each of us has to do something about not being trapped in our weaknesses. It's essential that we take charge of our life and learn to leverage our natural talents into strengths. Everyone has an abundance of natural talents, and everyone can develop their talents into strengths that contribute to their lives and the lives of others.

Believe it or not, this is actually *new* thinking, or at least it's gaining new *emphasis*. There is currently a great deal of science and study being done regarding talents and strengths. Let me explain. . . .

## A Brief History Lesson on Strengths Philosophy

Geek alert! This is a little on the academic side, but hang in there. Strengths Philosophy is, at its foundation, entrenched in the science of Positive Psychology, which leads to the question: What is Positive Psychology?

The field of psychology has been primarily focused on identifying mental illness and fixing what's *wrong* with people. History credits Wilhelm Wundt for modern psychology; he established the first laboratory dedicated to the scientific study of psychology in 1879. Since then, the field of psychology has had a long list of notable contributors, and the culmination of their work is published in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, better known as the DSM.

The DSM is about psychological, or mental, disorders; it's about what's *wrong* with people.

Leap all the way forward to 1998, which is the year Dr. Martin Seligman brought Positive Psychology to the forefront of the science of psychology when he made Positive Psychology the theme of his presidency of the American Psychological Association. He also published *The Character Strengths and Virtues* handbook, aka the CSV. The handbook is the first of its kind to identify and classify the *positive* psychological traits of human beings.

Positive Psychology, then, is the scientific study of positive human development. This relatively new field of psychological study brings attention to the possibility of focusing on the natural strengths and talents of the individual, and on *human potential*. It does not attempt to replace traditional psychology, but rather, to complement it.

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Regarding the benefits of Positive Psychology, it is centered on positive relationships, purpose, engagement, positive emotions and strengths. Positive Psychology is interested in building the best things in life, and it asks the question “what’s right?” rather than “what’s wrong?”

Application is the next practical step in the process, and this is where Strengths Philosophy comes into the picture. Simply put, Strengths Philosophy is the science of focusing on one’s unique set of strengths to achieve greater personal, professional, and academic success, as well as achieving meaning, wellbeing, engagement, and positive relationships. Strengths Philosophy is based on the fact that everyone has talents, and that these talents can be identified, focused on, and developed into an individual’s unique set of strengths.

Dr. Donald Clifton is referred to as “the father of Strengths Philosophy.” As a psychologist, Dr. Clifton and his team at the Gallup Organization took over 40 years of research and developed a unique language for identifying individual strengths. This research has produced a concentrated effort to teach people to name, and focus on, their strengths while minimizing weaknesses.

Out of pure necessity, I have lived much of my life employing the elements of what is now called Strengths Philosophy. Strengths Philosophy and its unique language and perspective can assist you in understanding and developing your strengths.

### **What Makes a Strength?**

**A Simple Formula: Talents x Investment = Strength**

*(Gallup: StrengthsFinder 2.0)*

Let’s take a closer look at the product of our formula: Strength.

Personal strengths are made up of two basic elements: your talents and the amount of time you invest in your talents to develop them into strengths. The development of personal strengths is, ultimately, what you are pursuing; and the mastery of your strengths is a lifelong pursuit.

*Gallup*, the leading researcher on strengths and the developer of the StrengthsFinder and StrengthsQuest Assessments, defines strength as: the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity or area of productivity.

Another definition that I like to use, especially with students, because it's more of a working definition, is that strengths are: "the areas or activities you work in that make you feel strong, and where you have the highest degree of confidence in your success each time you perform in that specific area or activity."

There are many different types or themes of strengths. They can be, and often are, divided into categories, including character strengths, activity strengths, learning strengths, and relationship strengths.

Perhaps the best way to name your strengths is to take one of the leading strengths assessments that are currently available. These assessments are all similar in form and follow the same basic methodology. They're web based, and many high schools and universities offer them to students at no cost.

It's important to note that these assessments actually measure **talent** and not **strength**. Discovering and uncovering your *talents* is the primary focus of this book. The reason for this focus is that your talents, and your investment in them, are the measurable variables within the strengths formula.

Remember the formula: **Talents x Investment = Strength**

In the Appendix, I have listed the three assessments that I

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recommend. However, I don't recommend that you take any of the assessments just yet. Taking one of the assessments now will only be confusing. Stay with the process here, and then take one of the assessments at the start of Chapter Four. I'll remind you when we get there.

A good example of identifying a strength is this: Let's say you have a natural *talent* for making new friends, similar to Emily. You might be described as the life of the party. You want to meet everyone in your class. You make mental notes as to your impression of each new person you meet. You instinctively know how to connect with these new people. You're rarely at a loss for words and can keep the conversation going. You could be described as an active listener. You keep each person in a mental spreadsheet so that you can later call upon their expertise or knowledge in the future.

Over time, when you put investment into these natural tendencies and talents, they become strengths. If you took the Gallup Strength Assessment, one of your strengths would probably be what they choose to call "Winning Others Over." In the Standout Strength Assessment, one of your strengths would probably be what they call "Connector."

It's vitally important for you to notice that I stated in the above example that you have a natural *talent* for making friends, and with some investment you can make this into a *strength*. Talents are the first variable in the formula, and that's where we will spend the next three chapters.

**Strengths Formula: Talents x Investment = Strength**

## Chapter Two

# You Are Talented

*It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad.*

~ C.S. Lewis

**W**e've all heard the saying: "*You can be anything you want to be, if you just try hard enough.*"

Well, that isn't true, but: "*You can be more of who you already are.*"

Statements like, "You can be anything you want to be," or "If you can dream it, you can be it," are at best misguided maxims passed on to you by parents and caring adults when you were a child. The falsehood of these statements lies in your possible lack of natural talent in a particular area. If you don't have the required talent that you can build into a set of strengths, you're just not going to be successful.

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Well-meaning parents, grandparents, teachers, and all manner of others, will tell you as a child that you can be anything you want to be when you grow up. This sounds great; and it makes adults feel good about all the possibilities for a child's future. And it also makes us feel nostalgic about our own past when we had so many choices.

We get a warm and fuzzy feeling about the grand future facing a child. It's fun to talk to a young child that is full of potential and seemingly without limits. But children are not a blank canvas of every opportunity and possibility that others can dream up for them. We'd like to think that every option, possibility, and dream is within a child's grasp, but it isn't.

The *reality* is that from the moment of your birth you have unique characteristics that will set you apart from others. And this is fabulous news. These characteristics are natural to who you are. Many people are of the opinion, and even science would seem to suggest, that these characteristics are, in fact, part of your DNA. How you choose to use what is naturally yours becomes *the key to your future*.

So, as well-meaning adults, we will most likely continue to make the same mistake, telling you that you can be anything you want to be until reality hits home.

Think of it this way. You come home one day and announce to your father you're dropping out of school to create video games for the expanding cell phone gaming industry. You're going to develop the next Angry Birds or Candy Crush.

Mind you, your dad has always told you that you could be anything you want, so his negative response surprises you.

"That's great, son. Where are you going to live, how are you

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going to eat, and where are you going to get that fancy computer stuff you'll need to develop those games?"

You're confused by his lack of enthusiasm. "What do you mean? I didn't say I was moving out; I said I was dropping out. Dad, it's my dream job!"

Your dad's response: "Great, son, but your dream needs to come with an apartment, an education and a job."

When I was a kid, I dreamed of being a basketball player. However, I'm a guy that can't jump, shoot, dribble, or pass. I'm so bad at basketball, I can't even watch it on TV. I turn the channel to ESPN to watch a game and the TV automatically changes channels. Seriously. When I was thirteen I was 5'5" and built like a tree stump; but still, I had a dream.

At thirteen, I played recreational basketball. Let me just say I was not good. However, as the season progressed I got better. I managed to learn to dribble the ball without hitting my feet. I could stand still and pass the ball. I understood the importance of getting the ball to someone who could actually score. I was given my mandatory two minutes of play in each game and my level of improvement was remarkable; it was even noted by my coach.

At the end of the season, the coach told me I had really improved. He put his arm over my shoulder and said. "Fred, you really improved this season. But, I don't think basketball is your sport, and you should seek other sports endeavors, like soccer." Oh yes, he did. This wouldn't have been so bad if the coach wasn't my dad . . . just kidding; the coach did say that, but he wasn't my dad.

Perhaps it might look like this: You announce to your

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parents you're packing your bags and moving to Nashville to become a country music star.

Your mom says, "Now let's be realistic here, honey. You don't play an instrument or write songs, and your singing . . . (uncomfortable pause) . . . is not really great."

"But Mom, it's my dream! You always told me that I could be anything I wanted to be."

"I understand, but you have to be realistic. You don't just decide to be a music star and it comes true."

"But you told me I could be anything I wanted. . . ."

If you're not exceptionally *talented* in a specific area; no matter what your dream is, it is unlikely to come true. The reality of life is that your real talents, gifts, abilities and personality are what determine your future success. You have to base your dreams on the reality of your talents, not on a fantasy.

Don't get me wrong. You should have high expectations and dreams for yourself. You should, in fact, have *extraordinary* expectations for yourself. The key to attaining success, however, is to make sure your expectations and dreams are based on your natural reoccurring *talents*, and not based on fantasy. My dream of being a pro basketball player was based in fantasy, not on my natural talents.

### Defining Talent

As described by Gallup's StrengthsQuest: "Talents are naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, behavior or attributes that can be productively applied. A great number of talents naturally exist within you, and each of them is very specific. They are among the most real and most authentic aspects of your personhood."

## **You Are Talented!**

You are talented! Even if you don't think you're talented, you are!

From all my years of experience with students, I know that telling you you're talented often falls on deaf ears. It's really hard to believe you have something special to offer if you don't feel special. You look around and compare yourself to others. Everyone else seems to have something you don't have. It doesn't matter whether you're at the top of the class, or barely struggling to get by, or maybe you fit somewhere in the middle. It doesn't matter because someone always seems to be smarter, better looking, more gregarious, or more athletic than you. They come from the right side of the tracks, or from families that seem to have everything figured out. Other people just seem to have it more together.

When you say those things, you're just like every other student I have ever met. You suffer from a lack of self-confidence, self-esteem, and/or purpose. Yes, I said *every* student. The thing is, everyone has doubts and issues. I haven't met the student that has it all together. They might look like it on the outside, but they are struggling in some way or another.

Welcome to your life! All of us have times when we feel this way. Even the most outwardly confident people have their junk, their stuff, and generally crappy times.

Believe me, I understand why you might think you're not talented. When I was younger, I never thought of myself as talented in any way. In fact, I believed I was completely devoid of talent. I was an untalented goober surrounded by a world of talented people. You can see I had a very high opinion of myself; and I started thinking this way back in elementary school.

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From the very start, school was a challenge for me in almost every way. My first memories of being in class are ones of failure, fear, and loneliness. I was not a good reader, or good at math, or at any other subject. The only thing I seemed to be able to do was make people laugh.

It might sound good to make people laugh, right? Armpit farts and booger jokes are funny at any age, aren't they? Except in a classroom where you're required to sit still, be quiet, pay attention, do your work, and not be funny. I spent a lot of time sitting in the hallway by myself.

My teachers just didn't know what to do with me. I passed all the standardized tests of the day. I had an IQ that said I was smart enough not to have to be in a "special" class. Yet I didn't seem to have the drive or skill to keep up with my classmates.

It wasn't until the second grade that one teacher seemed to think I might have more going on than what was on the surface. My second grade music teacher was the first to see me differently. Don't get crazy here by assuming she saw any music talent in me; if I totally lack talent in any area, it's in the realm of music. My singing has been described as possibly similar to the sound you might get if you swung a cat by its tail. (Don't try this at home.)

What my music teacher did see in me was a kid that needed some direction and attention; she had a sense that I was more capable than others were giving me credit for. She became my first advocate, and she asked others to take a closer look at my skill level and my difficulties. Upon further investigation, it was determined that I had a learning disability known as Dyslexia. So, I have a music teacher to thank for believing in me, even though I have no music abilities.

Being diagnosed with the learning disability or difference known as Dyslexia comes with a host of issues. Statistics tell us that about 10 percent of the population, and perhaps even more, have Dyslexia; it is the most common learning disability. Dyslexia is a disability that includes difficulty in the use and processing of linguistic and symbolic codes—alphabetic letters representing speech and numeric symbols representing numbers or quantities. Simply put, I had a lot of trouble learning to read, write and do math.

Dyslexia is not something you can fix. You can't take medication to make it better, nor will you ever grow out of it. There are levels of severity from very mild forms to extreme forms; and I land somewhere in the middle. The good news is: the earlier you can identify someone as being dyslexic, the better chance they have at overcoming the obstacles that Dyslexia presents.

But I'm not fixed and never will be. As a dyslexic, I could spend years trying to master the rules of grammar and spelling. At some point, I could perhaps be good at it; but at what cost to other areas in my life where I am naturally talented? To this day, I'm a horrible speller and the king of the run-on sentence and comma splice. I also read slowly; and please, never ask me to read out loud in public.

Let me be really clear here. I'm not suggesting that you ignore your weaknesses or the things you simply have a hard time doing. Everyone has to have the basic skills to survive in society, including academic and social skills. Most of these skills have to be taught and learned, and they take practice. Also, your weaknesses have to be dealt with and managed. I will talk more about dealing with your weaknesses in Chapter Five.

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For me, being dyslexic meant special education classes and having to repeat the second grade, which by itself is not that bad. However, when you add in that I have a December birthday, it makes it worse; because at that time, to start kindergarten or first grade, your birthday had to be before November. So I was already one year older than most kids, and repeating the second grade meant that I was two years older; and that meant I would be nineteen and a half years old at graduation.

As you might imagine, being in special education classes and being two years older than my classmates attracted a great deal of attention, and not in a good way. I became the target of bullying—not the in-your-face pushing and shoving bullying, or being threatened; rather, it was a quiet form of bullying that I call academic bullying.

Academic bullying is quiet because it happens right in the classroom when the teacher isn't looking. The teacher passes out the latest graded paper or test and your classmates start asking, "What did you get?" I would cover my paper with both hands and hope against hope that no one would ask me what grade I got. The grades I received meant that I was called names like "dumb," "stupid," and "retard."

If you have ever been a victim of bullying, you know how unworthy you feel. It's scary to be picked on. Bullying comes in a lot of forms these days—academic, physical, and cyber bullying. The world we live in can be, and often is, a mean place. You have to become resilient. You have to learn to deal with the mean people in life. You have to build up your self-confidence and esteem. And if you're being bullied, you have to tell someone. Find a caring adult and tell them what is going on. You don't have to be afraid.

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For me, I never felt like I measured up in the eyes of my teachers or parents. Loneliness and failure are perhaps the best descriptions of what I was experiencing. I didn't think anyone else was feeling what I was feeling. Now, I know how wrong I was.

Perhaps you have felt this way at some point—like you just don't measure up. Maybe, unlike me, you were great at school—but your big sister was better. Or, you bring home your mid-term grades with all A's except for one B, and your mother just wants to talk about the B. Possibly, you're one of those people who is always comparing yourself to how smart you think other people are. Do you check your class standing at the end of each semester? That's a lot of pressure to maintain.

There is an extreme amount of pressure to succeed and “fit in.” It doesn't matter whether you're playing sports or you're in the band. Since I mentioned the band, holy hell, the band is one of the most pressure-packed places in school. Ask any band member and they'll tell you.

Football players think they have it bad at practice. Try being in the band. Practice never seems to end. Two-a-day practices weeks before school starts. Playing at the football game on Friday night. Then spend all day and late into the night most every Saturday at competitions. And these are pressure-packed events. Add in all the other music groups most of the students play in as well, and you have over-worked, over-stressed, and tired students.

Everybody has their stuff. Your stuff might not be the same as your buddy's stuff. To you, theirs might not seem as difficult as yours, but everyone has their stuff to deal with.

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But here is the good news. All of these experiences can help us uncover our talents. . . .

Being dyslexic also had benefits, although I certainly didn't realize it at the time. Some call these benefits "gifts" or "advantages," as Dr. Brock and Dr. Fernette Eide do in their book, *The Dyslexic Advantage*. I highly recommend their book if you're dyslexic or know someone who is.

Looking back on my childhood, I have to admit that there was a particular skill set that emerged because of my Dyslexia. Being dyslexic meant relying on humor and storytelling to get my point across. Anytime there was a class project, I would focus on it, because it allowed me to show what I had learned. But it wasn't really until college that I felt talented at anything. It wasn't until I expanded my view of what it meant to be talented that I actually began to believe I had talents.

This brings us back to my earlier statement: You're talented even if you don't think you're talented.

Our society tends to have a very narrow view of what it means to be talented, and the media perpetuates this notion. Who hasn't seen *American Idol*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, *The Voice*, *The X Factor*, or *America's Got Talent*? And let's not leave out ESPN as a source of misguiding our view of talent.

Must you be able to sing, dance, play an instrument, create lavish artwork, or be a sports star to be talented? Just in case you might be wondering, the answer is "No!" Anyone who can do the above listed activities at a high level is talented. Good for them! But if you can't do those things, it doesn't mean you're not talented.

Let's take a closer look at you . . . uncomfortable yet? You

have to understand that everyone, including you, is a unique creation. There is no one in the world like you. There might be someone who looks like you, but they are not you, and nor will there ever be another you. Think about how amazing that is: out of the billions of people on this planet, there has never been, or ever will be, another you. You are 100 percent unique.

You have unique DNA, neuro-pathways, body structure, and life experiences, and you are *full* of talent.

Each and every person has been given specific talents, often referred to as “gifts.” With these talents comes the responsibility to use them in service to yourself and especially in service to others. Those who can identify their talents are much more likely to make a major impact on others. The reason is simple: when you know what you’re good at, you want to share and to teach others.

### **Broaden Your View of Talent**

Let’s face it, you probably don’t have the natural talent to be an international pop singing sensation or rapper or rock star. You’re probably not going to be drafted as the next sports icon or win an Olympic gold medal; and nor is your artwork likely to gain you international fame. Yet, you do have talents that must be identified and then invested in.

Let’s begin to broaden your view of what it means to be talented, remembering our definition of talent: talents are naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, behavior or attributes that can be productively applied. Talents are not knowledge, or skill, or simply what you might be “good at.”

Here is an example. A student is extremely good at math.

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She actually describes math as fun. Can you believe that? Megan actually does math problems as entertainment. She is a true math geek. (I think I might be a little jealous.)

Megan did her senior project in high school on some math theory I had never heard of. She attended a prestigious college that is highly dedicated to math. Megan earned a degree in math and later started working on a master's degree in math. But all of a sudden she realized that she didn't want to "do" math. She was really good at it, but she didn't want to do math as a job or career.

Suddenly Megan's life was in turmoil. She had all this education in something she was good at, but she didn't want it to be her career. Math had come easily to her and so she had just kept on doing it. But now what?

Fortunately, Megan took some time to re-evaluate her talents and strengths. She realized that she loved helping others and that she was a great planner and communicator. She had a great deal of experience working with students and loved having an impact on others' lives. Now she works with students every day, and she loves her job working in student services at an Ivy League university. She still does math but just for fun.

Knowledge is simply what you have learned or know; you can acquire knowledge through education and/or experience. Knowledge includes basic education in math, science, history, and language. You can know a great deal about something or have experience with it and not be able to apply it productively. You might be great at algebra but not be able to apply it. Maybe you did fine in Spanish class but you can't order lunch off a menu in Spanish at your favorite Mexican restaurant.

Skills relate to the accomplishment of a task. They too can

be acquired through formal or informal training, and skills typically build toward knowledge. We first learn to count our numbers, then to add and subtract, and eventually we move to higher levels of math. You can learn leadership skills like how to delegate, or how to manage a team. These are skills that allow you to work well with others. The skill to write HTML computer coding can be learned and applied, but like the other examples, they are not natural talents.

Natural talents are not those things you're simply good at, though there are those that label them as such. It's much like Megan having a great deal of knowledge in math and not being able to, or willing to, apply it productively. The things you're good at are best described as affinities—a subset of talents, if you will.

Affinities might be activities you enjoy doing, such as playing recreational sports, taking art or dance classes, playing video games with friends, or cooking. Or, if you're like Megan, doing math for fun. You can spend a great deal of time doing these activities, but they aren't talents. You may actually be using some of your talents while participating in your affinities, but the affinities themselves are not natural talents.

Natural talents are, literally, *what you do without any effort*. They are your core personality traits—the types of things about which your parents might say, “I just don't know where he gets it.” Natural talents don't change over time. They are the things about you that remain constant.

Your talents empower you. They make it possible for you to move to higher levels of excellence and fulfill your potential. Researchers from Gallup tell us that most often your highest achievements will be linked to your greatest talents.

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Your natural talents often show themselves in the things that make you mad, happy or sad; and they may show up fastest when you're placed under stress. You will rely upon your natural talents when life takes a turn for the worse, because when bad stuff happens, we rely on what comes naturally to us to survive.

At this point, you understand that society is stuck on fixing what is broken about you, and that you need to break this cycle by learning to identify your unique personal strengths set. We've discussed that your strengths are made up of your natural talents. Next, you need to begin to broaden your view of talents. As you broaden your understanding of talents, you will start to recognize that you are, in fact, talented.

So let's begin to discover and uncover your talents.

## Chapter Three

# Discover and Uncover Your Talents

*Face the facts of being what you are,  
for that is what changes what you are.*

~ Soren Kierkegaard

**W**hat is it about your personality that is second nature—the things you do without effort? Are you funny, making people laugh without even trying to be funny? Or perhaps you have trouble focusing on buying the belt you need at the mall because you spend so much time watching others and asking yourself: what are they doing and why? No, this doesn't make you creepy; it's a sign of a valuable talent. When you go on the class field study to the museum, are you the person that everyone is waiting on? Do you have to read every plaque on every display? Another sign of a talent.

When life's pressure is on, do you take charge and act immediately or do you sit back and survey the situation and the alternatives? Are you always positive about the negative? Can you sit for hours on end, working on any given task? Are you highly organized? Perhaps you love to be given the latest

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project in class so you can show your stuff! Do you look at every task, class, or assignment as a way of winning? Are you the responsible person who's always left in charge of the group? If someone would pay you to do anything, what would you do? These are seemingly simply questions and statements but they can be very revealing. Each question gives you an answer. Each answer brings you closer to discovering and naming your natural talents.

As you begin to discover your talents, it's important to claim and name them. We want to *name* our talents and not just identify them. Don't get confused here; there is a difference. There is a great deal of power behind giving something a name.

Consider the extreme value a brand name has. Do you like Ford or Chevy, McDonald's or Wendy's, Aeropostale or Hollister? I'm willing to bet you have an opinion on each of these brands based on their name and your experience with the brand.

Think of it this way. Someone can stand on a hillside, look down on the lush green vegetation, and call it a forest. A forest is full of trees. They can identify each tree by its bark, leaves, height and structure, but until you give it a name it's just another tree. When you name the tree a Giant Redwood, then it has all the majestic power of a Giant Redwood.

A history course is full of people. Each person can be identified as male or female, as a freshman, student, classmate, or even by ethnicity. But each person in the room has a name, and when you know their name, they become more real. They have an individual personality full of stories, experiences, talents, and potential.

Just think about how much effort goes into naming a child. I guarantee that your parents put in a great deal of time picking

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your name. Even if you're John Smith III, your mother debated with your father over the merits of sticking you with a name legacy. Giving you a name was, and is, important. Your name is significant. Just saying your name will mean many things to your parents, other family members, your friends, and yes, your future family. Just announce to everyone that you have decided to change your name and see the reaction. This is the kind of stuff television sitcoms are made of.

My brother did it. He decided to change his name. Well, not completely change his name; he decided to use a different form of his name. I don't remember what his reasons were, but his announcement was not well received.

My brother's name is David Anthony Grooms and he had been known as Tony for 16 years. One day he decided that he was no longer going to be Tony; he was going to be David. "What the hell?!" I believe was my father's response; and our grandparents thought it was the dumbest thing they had ever heard. Don't even get me started on what our mother thought of the idea; to her, he was Tony and not David. I wasn't particularly surprised by the announcement because his friends had already started making the transition. But even though his first name was actually David, officially making the switch from Tony to David wasn't easy.

It also created confusion in official records, especially school records. There were times you didn't know who you were talking about. Our grandparents never were comfortable with the change and they called my brother Tony almost all the time.

Both my parents tried to respect Tony's desire, but it just didn't come as easily as my brother had expected. They had been calling their baby Tony for all those years, and changing

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that was difficult and somewhat painful. As Tony, his name held a host of memories, experiences, hopes and dreams. As David, he was someone different. Even though he had not changed who he was, it was different nonetheless.

I'm sure you can see the power behind a name; and being able to name your talents is no different. Naming your talents gives you a language to describe what you know about yourself, and it makes talents real. Naming your talents will empower you. Once you can give your talents a name, you can then begin to invest in developing them into strengths.

Remember, you have to start broadening your definition and view of what makes up talents.

A student of mine named Mike was an outgoing young man who was well liked by his peers. He was an average student and he liked sports but he wasn't a star athlete. Mike didn't think he had much going for himself and he couldn't recognize any of his natural talents. He was great at making friends and they were always looking to him to make plans for them. Mike didn't like to sit around; he needed to be doing something all the time. And he had a knack for helping his friends solve their personal issues.

If I ever had to get a group of kids motivated or get them behind a project, all I needed to do was get Mike on board first and then everyone else would follow along. He could be very convincing and easily sway someone's opinion in his direction. This is an extremely valuable leadership talent.

Taking a closer look at Mike, I could see he was naturally talented at being an Influencer. An Influencer is someone who can engage people and convince them to take action (*Marcus Buckingham: StandOut*). His natural tendency of always

wanting to do something is an indication of being an Activator. An Activator is someone who wants to take action and not sit around talking all day about what to do.

Mike's ability to make friends and assist them in solving their problems is seen in the talent of Harmony. He doesn't like conflict and is frustrated when those around him are in conflict. With the talent of Harmony, Mike would seek to make peace and find common ground among his peers (*Gallup: StrengthsFinder 2.0*). Add Mike's growing ability to make plans and coordinate activities to his talents as an Influencer and Activator, and his ability to demonstrate the talent of Harmony, and you have a strong potential strength set as a natural leader.

As with Mike, being able to recognize your natural talents can be challenging at first but also a great deal of fun. If you are a student, many of your natural talents are just now beginning to develop more persistently. Your talents are starting to solidify into your core personality. Discovering your talents is about uncovering and developing the unique person you already are, especially around the age of 13 to about 21. But you can develop a reasonable grasp of these essential qualities even at a younger age.

Uncovering *more of who you already are* is so vastly different than what so many young people try to do. This is part of the obsession we have with fixing what we think is broken about ourselves and also others. We want to become *the person we think we should be*. Even worse, we want to become *the person we think others want us to be*. What you really need to do is just figure out who you are meant to be. You currently possess every quality you need to be successful.

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But success doesn't come without work. Too often I see students sitting around waiting for something good to accidentally happen to them. The thing is, it doesn't just happen.

Uncovering and naming your talents takes a shift in mindset. By the time you start to do that, you have spent so much time trying to remediate your weaknesses that you most certainly have trouble *seeing* your talents. Discovery takes time; it takes detective work and self-reflection on your part. You have to begin to observe the way you naturally act and respond to any given situation, be it social, academic, or work. How you act and react are indications of your natural talents and strengths. In her book, *Your Child's Strengths: Discover Them, Develop Them, Use Them*, Jenifer Fox calls this discovery process "strengths chasing."

So you have to give yourself permission to spend some time working on yourself. Take time to evaluate your likes and dislikes. What is it about you that others find helpful, or are asking you to do? One of the best ways to begin to uncover your talents is to ask others what they think you're talented at. Then allow yourself to receive this information and put it to use.

Do you remember in Chapter One when my student Emily said that she sucked at everything? Well, that simply wasn't true. No one sucks at everything, nor are they good at everything. I suggested several areas of talent that Emily had, and at first she shrugged my suggestions off. However, once she took a step back from the troubles of the day and spent some time reflecting on what I had said, she began to see that I was right. It took a shift in mindset; she had to allow herself to see that she did have talents. Fortunately, she invested in her talents.

Emily didn't drop out of school and she did manage to graduate with her friends. Today she owns her own successful and growing photo and video business.

Let's do a little investigative work. Sean is always reading. With this observation alone, one might make the assumption that Sean has a talent for reading because he reads a lot. You know the type—always has a book in hand. Upon further investigation, you discover he is actually reading books and magazines about website design. So he must be interested in web design, right? However, later you discover that Sean is now reading and studying the fashion industry. Each observation is leading you to a different assumption about Sean and moving you closer to his real talent. It turns out that Sean has a high level of curiosity; he is actually researching whatever subject has caught his attention at the time. He is developing his Input strength, where each new subject is an opportunity to collect new information.

People with a talent for Input are collectors. Like Sean, they often collect information. They might collect actual physical objects like books, stamps, baseball cards, or Barbie dolls, and they often collect more than one thing. They are fascinated by anything that captures their attention and they want to know more.

Sean is a friend of mine. I tease him because he is always on his smart phone looking for an answer to a question someone asked ten minutes ago. His mind is an archive of facts and information. He is definitely the kind of person one needs to have on the phone as a backup if you're ever on the game show *Who Wants To Be a Millionaire*.

So as you can see from the above example, you can take

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an initial observation and peel back the layers to find a talent hiding underneath.

### **Light Bulb Moments**

When doing keynote speeches or teaching seminars, I often refer to what is known as a “light bulb moment.” You’re probably familiar with this term, or at least with the cartoon character that has a light bulb over his head when he understands something or has a new idea for the first time. Light bulb moments are the times in your life when you realize the truth of something for the very first time.

When you discover you’re talented in a specific area, it creates a light bulb moment. Some of these moments can be life changing. Jennifer Fox calls them “strengths epiphanies.” They come when you continue to seek out answers to questions like the ones at the start of this chapter.

Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, one of the foremost experts and researchers in the science of Positive Psychology, offers additional insight into discovering and naming talents through “flow.” Csikszentmihalyi defines “flow” as a state of complete concentration on or absorption with an activity or situation. It’s a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter. The idea of flow can also be described as the feeling you might get when you are “in the zone” or “in the groove.” The state of flow is an optimal state of natural motivation, where the person is fully immersed in what they are doing. They are not easily distracted, even to the point of losing track of time.

Can you think of times when you were so involved in an activity or situation that time just seemed to fly by? Do you sometimes get so consumed with a project that you just can’t stop? If yes,

these might indicate times when you're in a state of flow. Being in the state of flow is a great indication that you are working within your talents.

Hopefully, the following examples will help you uncover and discover a talent, and you'll have your own light bulb moment.

Nic is easily found in a state of flow. He is a creator of all things website related. He creates HTML coding for use as a web designer for fun. You don't know what HTML coding is? Don't worry. Nic does and that is all you'll need to know. He can be found sitting in front of his computer for hours working on website designs; although only a sophomore, he has a small business as a web designer. Nic is highly focused on getting the job done, is very goal oriented, and likes to work on one project until it's completed to his satisfaction. If you can't stay on task and follow the plan, Nic will move on without you. This is the talent of Focus.

David has the strength of Competition. Society often thinks of highly competitive people as being athletes, but David was never an athlete, even though he looks like one. He is highly competitive in everything he does. With David, there is always a winner and a loser, and he wants to win. His high school, college and graduate school education were all opportunities to compete with his classmates. "Competition is about making a comparison about almost everything one does. If you can make a comparison you can compete. If you can compete you can win" (*Gallup: StrengthsFinder 2.0*). Does this sound like you? Are you the guy who hates to lose? If you aren't the best at something, does it bother you and make you work harder? Perhaps you have the talent of Competition.

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Or perhaps you think everyone has a purpose or mission, that you're put here on earth for a guiding reason. Are your beliefs and values important to you? Would you say you're spiritual? Judy is a person who has always been concerned about those around her. Others would describe her as caring, helpful and dependable. She is very active in her church youth group and makes an effort to share her personal faith through her actions. Judy is always looking for a way to have an impact on others. She has led Bible studies from her home and was a student leader at church and with Christian campus organizations in high school and college. Judy is guided by her talent theme of Belief.

Do you love to share what you know with others? Are you concerned that your classmates just aren't getting it? Do you have a knack for seeing a subject from a unique perspective? Do others seek you out to help them make sense of something because you have the ability to make the complicated seem simple? When this happens, do you stop what you're doing to help them understand the subject or information? Would others describe you as caring? If any of this sounds like you, you may have the natural talent of a Teacher.

Katie, on the other hand, could be described as a wallflower. She is most often quiet and contemplative; she often has her nose in a book; and she enjoys her alone time. Katie is an outstanding student in all subject areas, and she actually puts very little effort into school. She loves to put her personal touch into everything she does, and she makes all the birthday cards that she gives to her friends and family. If the two of you have a similar interest in a subject, she can talk your ear off, sharing

and discovering new insights, and she takes pride in her ability to “think outside the box.”

Katie has talents as a Creator and a Learner. She has to put her personal touch into every project she is involved in or she feels left out. People always want her on their team because they know she’s going to come up with an original idea. She is fascinated by research, and she wants to know how things work so she can apply that information to her next project.

You might assume being a Creator means being talented in art and music and you would be right; but let’s not limit our view of what it means to be creative. Often people who love to learn also want to apply what they have learned and do so in very creative ways. Learning is part of the creative process. If someone loves music, it’s likely they will learn to read music, play an instrument and practice their craft. Does this sound like you in any way? Perhaps your talents mean you are a Learner and a Creator?

In any given situation, are you the person who says, “Have you ever thought about doing it this way? I wonder if it might work if you tried to change it. Let’s figure out how to do that better next time.” Do you place little importance on the past but a great deal of importance on what is coming next? If so, you might have the talent of being Futuristic! So cool, right? People who are futuristic often make great entrepreneurs. They see things in a new and different light. They have the ability to see the possibilities in the ordinary. Think Steve Jobs. He had a unique ability to anticipate what others would want even before they knew they wanted it. Think iPad and iPhone. If you are someone who is inspired by the possibilities of what

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you can achieve next, or have been accused of being a dreamer . . . good! Go with it! The world needs people who are always looking for greater potential from others or from the activities in which they're involved.

Are you super responsible? Are you a rule follower even when no one is around to see you? Believe it or not, Responsibility is a talent. "Taking psychological ownership for anything you commit to, and whether large or small, you feel emotionally bound to follow it through to completion. You are the person people come to, to make sure stuff gets done and done well"(*Gallup: StrengthsFinder 2.0*).

My friend Danna was always just like this. We actually made fun of her because she was such a goody-goody. If you did something wrong and she was asked if she knew anything about it, she would so throw you under the bus! Don't get me wrong, she didn't run around telling on people; but you could bet she wasn't going to lie for you.

When I was a freshman, we were on a youth trip and a bunch of us decided to sneak out of the dorm to hang out by the creek. We tried to get Danna to go with us but she refused. She is the responsible one, remember? Well, we thought we got away with it, until an adult overheard some of the students talking about it. All they needed to do was ask Danna who had slipped out after lights out and she listed everyone's name. You would think everyone would be mad at her, but we all knew she wasn't going to cover for us; it was just who she was.

She definitely developed her talent for responsibility into a strength. Danna graduated from law school and later became a judge in Kansas City. As far as I know, she has never covered for anyone.

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Responsibility is one of the most important natural talents you can possess. In our culture, it's rare. Having a natural talent for responsibility is also known as trust and integrity. If this is you, be very pleased and invest in your talent.

As a dyslexic in high school, I realized I had a talent for projects. The subject didn't matter; what mattered was a project would allow me to show what I knew rather than just what I could remember for a test. I called myself "The Project King." As such, projects were my way of passing the course, because I could show my knowledge, creativity, problem solving skills, and desire for excellence. For group projects, other students sought me out to be part of their team. Later in high school and college, this talent allowed me to take the leadership role and select those on my team.

What is exciting to me is that as I continued to develop my Project King status, studying Strengths Philosophy gave me the language I needed to *name* my natural talent. Now I know I have a talent as a Maximizer. As a Maximizer, I love to take something from good to great, to be part of a team that seeks excellence and creativity, and to help others do the same.

Here is a strange way to discover and name your talents. What is it about you that *irritates* others? That's right. What do you naturally do that irritates the snot out of your family and friends? For example, Danna's talent for being responsible often irritated her friends. Sometimes your area of talent works against someone else's talents.

Greg is highly organized and has to have a plan before taking action. Others actually think he's a little crazy because he is so neat and organized—so much so that it's hard to be around him because his tolerance for others who are not like him is low.

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Greg is a student leader and is involved in planning almost every social activity that is happening on campus. If you ask him why, he will tell you it's because he knows it will be done right if he is in charge. Greg is not a very flexible person when it comes to things changing or going wrong; but he is your man when it comes to creating a plan and anticipating what might go wrong. Greg has the talent to be Strategic.

Being positive, or Positivity, is also a natural talent. For you, the glass is always full. The glass is half-full with liquid and the other half has air in it, so it's actually completely full—completely full of possibility and opportunities not yet seen. You're the kind of person that is full of praise for others and what they have to offer in any given situation or activity. You're full of positive energy; you smile a lot; and you're great at making even ordinary tasks seem fun. You're so positive about everything that people wonder if you're "faking it," And you see the positive even when everyone else is focused on the negative. Seeing someone get down on themselves drives you crazy; you're the self-appointed happiness officer.

Sometimes people with the Positivity talent might drive you a little nuts . . . but on the other hand, nobody wants to be around someone who is always a downer—someone who is full of complaints, no matter the situation. So stay positive. Science even tells us that the happier you are, the longer you live. Who doesn't want to live longer?

### **A Few Words of Caution about Your Talents**

Here's the situation with talents: sometimes you will find yourself with others who have "opposing" talents. If you're naturally spontaneous and you're on a team with two other people

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who are naturally systematic and analytical about everything, their talents are opposing talents to yours and this can create conflict. As you gain a greater understanding of your talents and the talents of those around you, you will learn to work through differences and conflict.

Also, as you develop your talents into strengths, you will begin to see the value of helping others to uncover and discover their natural talents as well. The more you know about the people you work with, about your friends and those you love, the better you will understand what makes them “tick.”

A key point of caution is to realize that no one has one single talent or strength. You are made up of several major talents, and you can also have lesser talents. These talents are less dominant to your core personality; sometimes they have received less investment and remain lesser strengths. It’s actually essential that you don’t put too much emphasis on, or over-utilize, one talent, as it can actually become a weakness and hinder your success.

A good example is our friend David, who has the talent of Competition. If David is not careful, the very talent that keeps him seeking excellence could derail him. Have you ever known someone who is so competitive that not winning completely destroys their mood? And if David was someone who flaunted his win over others, he would easily become unlikable. In a work situation, if you are always creating winners and losers; the losers will not want to stay around, even if they are highly productive employees.

If Nic, with his talent of Focus, is not careful, his talent could easily create problems for him. He likes to work alone and is very task oriented. But always working alone and not

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being able to work well with others makes you a very poor team member; at some point, we all have to work well with others. Being highly focused can give others the impression that you believe it's your way or the highway; and an attitude like that can make you very unpopular.

So you have to be very careful not to over-emphasize a talent. Sure, you should invest in your talents in order to create strengths (which we will be covering next), but hyper-focus on one strength can easily become irritating at best, or it can become an actual weakness. Don't allow only one talent to dominate your core personality.

### **Tying Up Talents**

We have named some very specific talent themes, including: Winning Others Over, Connector, Influencer, Activator, Harmony, Input, Focus, Belief, Competitor, Teacher, Creator, Learner, Futuristic, Responsibility, Maximizer, Strategic and Positivity. Believe it or not, there are many more to be discovered.

I want to encourage you to take some time and actually write a few notes about what you think are your natural talents. Doing a little investigative work is necessary on your part. No, it's not time to take one of the assessments yet, but you'll get to that soon. I want you to get a feel for what you think your talents are before asking someone else for answers.

This chapter has been devoted to helping you discover what comes naturally to you, and the power behind being able to name your talents. As you continue to peel back the layers of who you already are, you will uncover those natural talents.

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Hopefully the examples have given you the first spark to creating a “light bulb moment” of discovery.

In the next chapter, we will journey into the second variable in our strengths formula—investment.

Strengths Formula: Talents x **Investment** = Strength



## Chapter Four

# Investing in and Utilizing Your Talents

*My attitude is that if you push me towards something that you think is a weakness, then I will turn that perceived weakness into a strength.*

~Michael Jordan

Looking back at Mike from the start of Chapter Three, you may remember that I assigned a long list of potential talents to his natural abilities. It's important to note the key word here is Mike's *potential* talents. Mike was, in fact, gifted in many of the talent themes.

It wasn't clear where Mike's natural ability in these areas would take him. Mike could develop the talent as an Advisor, someone others look to for answers (*Standout*). He could have developed into someone who is Deliberative (*Gallup*). Being deliberative means you like to plan ahead and anticipate problems before they happen. You actually expect things to go wrong so you plan for it. Talent in this area lowers your stress

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and the stress of those around you, because everyone knows you are prepared for anything.

Unfortunately, Mike never invested in his natural talent for making plans and coordinating events, people, or activities. He has never really invested in any of his natural talents at all. This is precisely what you want to avoid!

The result is this: Mike is living an *average* life. He has had a number of jobs, all using one or more of his natural talents, yet he has not found career success or personal fulfillment. He feels like he just doesn't fit in. Mike has had significant issues with his supervisors in every job he has had. He believes his supervisors are always out to get him, or they just don't understand him. He has yet to be fired from a job because he always quits. The only common factor in the troubles Mike has been facing is Mike. He just doesn't know what to do with himself. He is not willing to spend time investing in his natural talents; instead, he is expecting something good to accidentally happen to him.

Your goal should be to avoid the same mistakes Mike has made. Identifying and naming your talents are the initial first steps in living a strengths-based life and achieving extraordinary success.

So now that you have taken the initial steps to uncovering and naming your natural talents, you can't stop there. If you do, the discovery process is wasted. You have to learn to *invest* in your natural talents so they become your strengths, and no one is going to do this for you.



Now it's time to take one of the strengths assessments. For students, I recommend that you take Gallup's StrengthsQuest, and if possible purchase the book *StrengthsQuest* by Donald O. Clifton, Edward Anderson, and Laurie Shreiner. Check with your school's guidance office; many high schools offer the assessment through the guidance office or college placement services.

Nearly nine million people can't be wrong. As I work to finish this book, almost nine million people have taken the Gallup strengths assessment. It is the leading assessment on talent because of its high level of consistency. StrengthsQuest provides vital tools in helping you name your talents. It will give detailed descriptions of each of your named themes so you can get to work investing energy to build your talents into strengths.

You will receive a list of your *top five strengths* based on their talent themes. StrengthsQuest has thirty-four specific strengths themes. If you wish to get a ranking of all thirty-four theme strengths, you may do so; but it's not recommended as a starting point. The goal is for you to invest in, and master, your top themes, and not to work on lesser talents or weaknesses. Remember, we are working at breaking the weakness cycle. No talent theme becomes a strength until you invest time and effort in its development.

### **What Does Investment Look Like?**

Investing in your talents to build strengths, if done right, is a lifelong process. Sure, there are a ton of short term gains as well. Investing in your talents will immediately raise your

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self-confidence. Your academic performance will increase as you begin to use your talents in class. Studies tell us that your overall happiness is going to increase as well; and your ability to see how your talents affect your relationships improves those relationships.

But the ultimate goal of investing in your talents is mastery of your *strengths*. Investing in anything of value takes time and effort. Too often, this is where fear sets in, because people fear change. Here is the awesome thing though: remember that you're not changing anything; you're shifting your focus from your weaknesses to your strengths. You're investing in becoming more of who you already are. You're learning to become extraordinary. Yes, this takes work, but as the saying goes, "Anything worth doing is worth doing right."

Starting off, we need to focus on knowledge and skill. Early on, we established that knowledge and skills are not talents. They are, however, vital multipliers for investing in your talents. I would venture to say that when you started reading this book, you had a very narrow view of talents. If you have done the suggested work, you have started to name what you're naturally good at and begun to discover your talents.

Hopefully, you have taken Gallup's strengths assessment and you have a list of your talents. This will allow you to start gaining skills and continue developing them. You can continue to educate yourself on your talents. I can guarantee there is at least one book on how to develop every specific talent that can be named.

Upon gaining initial knowledge of a subject, you then begin to acquire skills with this new information. The obvious next step is to practice using the knowledge and skills you have

gained. We're all familiar with the age old adage "Practice makes perfect." The problem is that this saying is actually misguided, which is not news for many of you.

New research, led by Michigan State University's Zach Hambrick, finds that a copious amount of practice is not enough to explain why people differ in level of skill. It seems to take more than just hard work to become an expert. Hambrick states in the research journal *Intelligence* that natural talent and other factors likely play a role in mastering a complicated activity. Practice is indeed important to reach an elite level of performance, but this paper makes an overwhelming case that it isn't enough.

Not everyone is going to get an "A" in everything. Let me tell you, when I make this statement around educators, it has a tendency to make more than just few of them nervous. How dare I suggest that a student accept anything less than their best!—the assumption being that their best is getting an "A" in all courses. Well, their best just might not be an "A." As you read this, you might be one of the students that think I'm crazy for suggesting you might not get an "A."

There are plenty of university students who already know that some of their classes are so hard that almost no one gets an "A" and that some courses are actually designed that way. The problem is that for many it will be college before you feel the sting of not being the smartest person you know.

It really is about investing in what is going to produce the best overall results.

Case in point: as a dyslexic, I'm never going to be great at grammar or win a spelling contest, no matter how much time I spend practicing. It's just not what I'm good at. Granted,

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with enough time, work and desire on my part, I might actually have been able to get an “A” in ninth grade grammar. But, you have to ask, at what cost? Would all the time studying for one class cost me in other classes? The answer is yes.

Let's be clear. Practice and persistence are vital to developing knowledge and skill. The key to success, however, is *investing in your natural talents first and developing the skills around your talents*. Own your talents so they actually become strengths. We have a tendency not to do this; rather, we spend all our time working on our weaknesses.

### **Investing in Your Natural Talents**

Perhaps the best way to describe what it looks like to invest in your talents is through a personal example. So I will use myself and my top five strengths as a primary example of how to invest in your talents to develop strengths.

According to Gallup's StrengthsFinder 2.0, my top five strengths in order are: Winning Others Over (WOO), Communication, Individualization, Maximizer, and Connectedness.

My life is an open book. I'm a natural talker. I have never met a stranger and I can talk to anyone, any place, anytime. Yes, I'm the annoying guy on the elevator that asks you if you've had a nice day! Talking has always come naturally to me and it's often gotten me in trouble, especially in classes.

Like my grandmother, I have an opinion on everything and often feel the need to share my opinion, even if you're not interested. Virtually every teacher or professor I've ever had has had to tell me to be quiet. I would venture to assume most would have liked to have just told me to, “Shut up and listen.” Fortunately, most teachers have better training than I deserved.

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As I have mentioned before, grammar and spelling cause me trouble. Producing powerful written content is not a problem; some of my very best projects have been written. And it's because I just know how to deal with the problems associated with being dyslexic. Your weaknesses are most likely different than mine but you have to deal with them nonetheless. I will discuss strategies to help you with your weaknesses later in Chapter Five.

I had to learn that not everyone wants to hear me yak on and on about stuff. Not everyone cares about my opinion, nor do they want me to share it so freely. When writing, I have to remind myself that just because I *can* use 1000 words to say something, it is often better said in 100 words.

I also had to learn that my opinion wasn't always "right." I started to pay attention to what was going on around me. I started to observe how other people could command the attention of a room full of people when they spoke. I took classes designed to help me become a better leader and speaker. I learned that listening was a skill, and that listening included valuing what others had to say. I also had to learn to value others' thoughts, feelings, and opinions.

Fortunately, I had an outstanding English professor who taught me how to use words to describe my thoughts and feelings. She held me accountable to the basics of grammar, and gave me leeway when it came to on-the-spot writing where I couldn't have someone else help edit my work.

When you put all this together, I developed my natural talent for talking, writing and sharing my opinion into the strength of Communication. I actually *earned* the right to be heard. My strength of Communication is one that I continue

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to work on because you can always become a better listener, speaker, and writer.

The Communication strength works well with being the “Project King,” also known as the Maximizer strength. As a Maximizer, I want to take a project and not only make it good; I want it to be *excellent* the first time around. I want those on my team to know what their strengths are and use those strengths to the best of their abilities. The goal for me is for everyone to be successful. A major step in the right direction for success is good communication on everyone’s part. You have to be clear upfront about your intended goals and outcomes.

As a Maximizer, I invest time in studying what others have done before me. I seek to find out where others have been successful and where they have failed. I want to learn from their experiences. There is a wealth of knowledge to be gained from others and I like to tap into it.

### **Utilizing Your Talents**

Most everyone is familiar with the legendary professional basketball player Michael Jordan. You might even have heard the myth that he was cut from his high school basketball team and yet became a legend.

What is certain about Michael Jordan was his extreme commitment and dedication to practicing his skill on the basketball court. You may not know that he was also a high school all-star baseball player and dreamed of playing professional baseball.

Michael followed this dream in 1997, leaving basketball at what seemed to be the peak of his career to play baseball.

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He failed. Even though he is an amazingly naturally talented athlete, and even though he invested his legendary work ethic into baseball, he came up short. He failed. He then returned to basketball and was a better basketball player than he had been before, earning three NBA titles.

You don't have to be a genius to understand the point here. Your greatest opportunity for success is in your areas of greatest talent. It doesn't matter how much you work at something or want it; if you don't have the talent, it's highly unlikely you will attain it.

Making friends has always been easy for me. I'm just a likeable guy, if I do say so myself. I know I'm a little on the irritating side sometimes. I fancy myself funny most of the time. Most people seem to get along with me, and I with them. It's the talent of WOO, Winning Others Over. I love meeting new people more than anything. Every new person is a new story. I have never met a stranger because people energize me. I can't stand to be in a room full of people and not have a conversation with someone. Someone has to break the ice and start talking, right? Well that's me—the guy who is always making conversation and shaking new hands. (You would think I would be better at remembering people's names, but there is always room for improving your strengths.)

Another one of my strengths that makes a good partnership with WOO is Individualization. Individualization is the talent to see the unique qualities each person has and where they might fit in a given situation. I used to say I was a people observer. Watching people is a favorite past time. Trying to figure someone out, what makes them tick, is fun for me. It's such a kick when you can help someone succeed by knowing

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what makes them unique, especially if they don't even know it themselves.

That's why I'm so passionate about helping others find their talents and develop them into strengths. My WOO and Individualization strengths have made me a successful teacher, mentor, and coach. I have always been able to develop and lead amazing groups of people to be successful in many different areas.

I wish I could tell you that I have always known and used *all* of my talents and that I developed them into strengths at a young age. Unfortunately, I had one talent I was under-utilizing.

I mentioned how over-utilizing a talent can actually be a weakness. Likewise, one of the biggest mistakes we can make is under-utilizing a talent. Having a talent that you have not recognized will often leave you feeling unfulfilled, or lost.

Even though my Dyslexia created difficulty with basic academics, I managed to graduate high school, talk my way into college, graduate, and serve the better part of five years as an officer in the Army. I did so by relying on my strengths, even though I didn't have the luxury of having the language to claim and name my strengths that we have now. For years, this lack of language actually caused me to miss one of my most important strengths—Connectedness. Connectedness was an underutilized talent and not one I developed into a strength until I was in my early thirties.

Upon leaving the Army, I went to work for Toyota, where I was part of a new business unit. We set up a rental car unit, renting only Toyota cars. This was very exciting and actually very profitable for me. My wallet was happy but the rest of

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me was miserable. Strangely enough, this opportunity played right into my strengths of WOO, Communication, Individualization, and Maximizer. The problem was that it left out one talent that I had yet to realize played a major role in who I was. It was a talent that eventually allowed me to become *more* of who I already was.

Connectedness is a talent for knowing that things happen for a reason. It's the sense that all people are connected in some way. It's the desire to be part of something larger, to work for a common goal, and to help and support others in a significant way. It's knowing that we all have a role to play and helping others play their part.

I needed to know I was making a difference, but at the time, I didn't feel that I was. I had achieved a lot of success, but I just knew I was meant for something else, something more.

I sought out a lot of counsel and finally realized that I was not using a talent that was core to who I was. So I left Toyota and started working for a non-profit organization that assisted mentally handicapped adults. I loved that job! I was using all of my top five core strengths and was very successful at it.

Speaking of jobs, I'm often asked why I don't suggest specific career choices based on specific strengths themes. Typically, I don't suggest career choices based on any one set of talents or strengths. There are too many possibilities and too many sets of core strength combinations to accurately suggest specific careers.

One thing is for sure. No set of talents or strengths makes us successful in any one career. What we do know about top achievers is that they understand what their strengths are and they use them to achieve success.

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For years I have been very successful teaching and working with students. I've done this by relying on my core strength themes of WOO, Communication, Individualization, Maximizer and Connectedness. I love helping others and I love the art of teaching. I have never met a crowd I wasn't willing to embrace; I have a unique ability to see where individuals fit in; and I thrive at getting things done. These are great attributes for being a teacher.

But they are certainly not the only set of strengths that a teacher could have. For example, someone who has the strengths of Learner, Input, and Responsibility may be an outstanding teacher.

With Gallup's thirty-four themed strengths, your personal set of strengths is unique. The University of Minnesota did the math: The chances of having the exact top five talent themes in the exact order as someone else is 1 in 33.39 million. The chances of having the same top five talent themes as someone else but in a different order are approximately 1 in 340,000. So you can see how unique your talent themes are to you.

You can get a copy of *StrengthsQuest* and *StrengthsFinder 2.0 and Your Child's Strengths* online. Each gives the reader some suggestions on how to apply your specific strengths in a career or job setting. In his book *StandOut*, Marcus Buckingham also provides avenues of opportunity you might seek based on your theme strengths.

I'm often asked questions about utilizing your strengths to pick a major in college. My advice is first to realize that studies show that somewhere between 65 and 85 percent of all students entering college have no idea what they want to "do" when they graduate. It's nice to be in the majority on this one.

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So, I suggest you try to pick a major that interests you based on your natural talents. Don't study history just because you're good at it; choose it because it's something that, when you do it, you're in a state of flow. Is it truly something where you lose track of time or something you find yourself strangely drawn to time and time again?

A former student of mine, Audrey, was an exceptional student in high school, making straight A's. She graduated and was accepted into one of the finest schools for geeks known to man, the Georgia Institute of Technology, aka Georgia Tech. (Audrey knows I'm just teasing her here.)

She enrolled as a chemistry major, mostly because she was really good at chemistry. But she quickly found that just being good at something was not a reason to seek it out as a career choice. What Audrey was really good at was math, not chemistry. After some investigation, she changed her major to engineering. Upon graduating and working for a few years, she pursued her dream of becoming a teacher. As a math teacher she has been very successful.

I've worked with students who wanted to be doctors, military officers, business owners, teachers, accountants . . . and they have done just that—followed their dreams and been very successful. I've also seen students change course and make new choices; as they pursued their career choices, they found their strengths led them to other activities and careers.

A student with a degree in geology has found joy working in information technology. Megan has a math degree and works in student services in an Ivy League University and loves it. Another student has a business degree and makes stained glass art for a living.

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The possibilities are bright and vast when you focus in on your natural talents. Take time to discover and uncover your natural talents, and then invest in your talents to develop them into your unique core strengths set.

## Chapter Five

# Dealing with Your Weaknesses

*“Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will spend its whole life believing that it is stupid.”*

~ Albert Einstein

### Weakness Defined

**W**eakness: Stuff you suck at. But this definition is somewhat broad. Just because you're not good at something doesn't mean it's a weakness. You're never going to be good at everything you do or try, and that's okay.

I used to play golf. Golf, above all else, is a game of consistency. In order to be successful, you have to be able to apply the fundamentals flawlessly over and over again. Golf is considered the most difficult game to master, and I never did master it. I could hit the ball straight and hard; my short game was good; but I couldn't putt to save my life. I would have to putt the ball at least three or four times every single time. Putting was my weak link, and if you can't putt, you suck at golf. My point here is that just because I'm not good at

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golf doesn't mean it's a weakness. It just means I'm not good at golf.

Just because you're not reading a book every free moment you have, doesn't mean reading is a weakness. It just means it's not your thing, and that's okay.

A better definition of weakness is something that is frail, feeble, or needing to be mended, fixed or strengthened. I believe the implication of the word weakness in our lives has a broader and more serious tone. Weaknesses in our daily lives are the things leaving us feeling frail, feeble, and broken. Notice the key difference here is that we are left feeling weak. I didn't feel weak after a round of golf. I was certainly frustrated but I wasn't personally defeated. I became so frustrated with my golf game that I sold my clubs, years ago. I have no desire to ever play golf again. Why ruin a perfectly good walk by chasing a little white ball?

Focusing on our weaknesses makes us feel and believe we aren't good enough. So many students, for example, are left feeling weak because each day they are faced with criticism from school, classmates, jobs, and even family. Everyone feels different about their weaknesses, and we are our own worst critics. We so desperately want to be good at what everyone else seems to be good at, so we put a lot of pressure on ourselves. All this leads us to frustration, anger, fear and often apathy. With apathy, we are left unmotivated and even unwilling to put forth effort to make ourselves feel better.

Nobody likes to feel defeated. We have to understand that our lives are full of both seen and unseen pressures. Do you realize, for example, that a student carries two book bags to school every day? One of those bags is seen and the other is unseen.

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The first book bag is the one we see thrown over the student's shoulder. It's full of textbooks, notebooks, pens, and paper. It carries bottled water, gum, snacks, and sometimes last week's lunch that got shoved to the bottom and forgotten.

The other book bag, the unseen bag, is overflowing with the stuff of life. This book bag is not fancy, and it's seldom ever put down, and it's never emptied out. Students and almost everyone else carries this bag on their backs every day, all day. The unseen bag is full of emotion, weakness, pressure, and a desire to belong.

- Will I have any friends this year?
- Am I going to get into college?
- Why am I so fat?
- Can I pass my math, science, or history class?
- My mom wants to know why I don't have a boyfriend.
- I'd rather have a job than go to school!
- Are my parents going to get divorced?
- Why does everyone hate me . . . especially my teachers?
- Will I be good enough to get that internship?
- Nobody loves me!
- I think I might be pregnant!
- My dad really wants me to play football. I hate football.
- How am I going to afford college tuition?
- Should I go to that party tomorrow night? Remember what happened last time. . . .
- I have no idea what I'm going to do when I grow up.
- I'm hungry!

This list could go on for pages, but I think you get the point. The unseen book bag that is full of life is weighing you down, breaking your back and spirits. Each year the pressure

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to succeed seems to grow. For students, much of this pressure comes from adults who feel the pressure to ensure their child succeeds.

As parents, we see the struggling economy and are anxious about what it will take for our children to be successful. So we push you. We wonder why you don't seem to have enough friends. So we push you. As parents we want our children not to have to face the same life struggles we have. So we push you.

Educators are faced with making sure students meet the standards set by others. So they push you. We want every student to get an A. So we push you. Our own performance is evaluated by the performance of our students. So we push you.

You also push yourself. You push to attain some standard the media sets that is unattainable for most. You feel the pressure to be liked, to be loved, to be cool, to matter, to achieve, and all the while you have little idea of who you are or what you have to offer.

Considering all this it would leave anyone feeling weak, it's amazing we can feel good about anything. A big part of not feeling weak or focusing on our weaknesses is about controlling our attitude. We'll talk more about attitude in Chapter Six.

But, should we just ignore our weaknesses? Maybe, just maybe, if we pretend we don't have any weaknesses they will just go away. . . . Sorry, that's not going to work out so well. Here's the thing: we have to learn to manage weakness. Everyone has to deal with the stuff they're not good at. As much as I believe that our society is trapped focusing on weaknesses, and that we need to join the strengths movement, we can't *ignore* weaknesses. Your weaknesses have to be managed, and in some cases fixed, in order for you to be successful. Learning

to manage weaknesses is a skill; and once developed, that skill can assist you on the path to extraordinary success.

### **Minimum Effective Effort**

Everyone has to put forth at least the minimum effective effort to manage their weaknesses. Depending on the type of weakness, the minimum effective effort may mean a great deal of hard work over time, and perhaps a lifetime. The minimum effective effort can vary widely, depending on one's desire to work on those areas and the value placed on a specific activity or task by others and by yourself.

Minimum effective effort is just that; it's the minimum effort needed to manage an area of weakness. Don't let yourself get fooled that the word "minimum" means little or no effort on your part. In fact, quite the opposite may be the case. Getting the desired results always takes effort. In many cases you are going to have to work pretty stinking hard to put in the effort to manage weakness. So why then have I chosen to use the term "minimum" rather than "maximum" effort?

It really comes back to the hyper-focus that society has on you putting the maximum effort into fixing your weakness. So much so that you may put too much work into your weakness and end up sacrificing other areas, particularly areas of greater interest. You also need to be realistic—which society often is not—when it comes to understanding that some weaknesses are never going to be fixed. Hence, my suggestion is that you use the *minimum* effective effort to manage weaknesses. I'm not looking for you to *fix* weaknesses, as much of society does; only to *manage* them. Your goal here is to get the desired results with the least amount of effort. Following are a few examples.

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Do you realize there is one thing that people fear more than death? What could possibly strike such great fear among almost everyone that is greater than the fear of death? Simple: public speaking. Public speaking is the number one fear people report having. As a society, we fear speaking in public, especially in front of our peers, more than we fear death itself. Of course, this is an irrational fear; I don't think anyone has died from giving a speech in history class. However, if just the thought of standing in front of your history class makes you want to puke on your shoes, speaking in public just might be a weakness. If you can't sleep days before a class presentation, or break out in hives before class starts, speaking in public just might be a weakness.

The reason that public speaking is considered a weakness is because virtually every job is going to require you to speak in public at some point. You're going to have to interact with your peers. You will find yourself working on team projects and with customers. So you need to overcome this weakness. For some, it will only take a little effort and practice. For others, it may take a great deal of additional coaching and training; and for some of you, it may take psychological treatment.

I personally don't get it. I have never met a crowd I wasn't willing to embrace. You should remember that communication, and especially public speaking, are strengths of mine. It should be, since I make a living from speaking publicly. But most people are not like me. Most people, as we have established, are afraid of public speaking. There is a difference between being deathly afraid and having a natural fear of speaking in public. Yet, if you're so shy, often referred to as

being painfully shy, that you can hardly speak to someone in public, it's something you're going to have to work on.

If you're a person that is painfully shy, your "minimum effective effort" at speaking in public is going to take a lot of work. Some people, with just a little practice and experience, can manage their fear and give a decent presentation in history class. Their minimum effective effort is basically low. But I have known students that are so afraid they skipped school, pretended to be sick, or actually refused to speak. If this is you, you're going to have to spend time dealing with your fear. Your minimum effective effort is going to be greater than average. Nevertheless, with a great deal of practice, coaching, and experience, most people who are painfully afraid can overcome the fear enough to function in a public society. It is unlikely they will be running for public office but they can keep their job.

Know anyone who can't seem to get anywhere on time? Are they chronically late for class, giving their instructors the impression they're disrespectful? Are you never on time to meet friends? Do you never get your assignments turned in on time? When you are assigned a project with classmates, is everyone always waiting on your part so the project can be completed? They press you for the information and you respond with, "I'll get it done before the deadline," leaving the rest of the group feeling alienated and stressed? The result will be that no one will want you on their team next time. As you get older, it might look something like this: At work, clients stop making appointments with you because you're never on time, leading them to the impression your product or service will perform as you do . . . poorly.

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You might be thinking: What's the big deal about being late? Everyone is late sometimes. Sure, that's true, but there is a big difference between occasionally being late and chronically being late. Basically, you're sending the signal that what you're doing is more important than anyone else's needs, even if that's not your intention. Being time challenged in this manner makes you disrespectful to everyone.

By most people's standards, being time challenged would be called a weakness. You have a time management problem. Most time management problems are simple enough to fix with minimum effective effort. Find techniques that will assist you, such as setting alarms, having and keeping a calendar, and scheduling with others to help you stay accountable. It doesn't take much effort and practice for you to manage, or even fix, this area of weakness. Unless you're not willing to change.

I've known several students for whom time management was such a problem that they could barely function in real life. One student—I'll call him Tom—was so poor at time management skills it actually cost him his scholarship to college. He was so late to class that one of his professors counted him absent every day he was late. The result was that he had over twenty absences. The university's attendance policy said that you could only miss ten days of class and still have that class count on your records. He passed the class according to his grades; however, the professor failed him due to the number of missed class. You might think this is unfair, but Tom was well aware of the university's absentee policy. It clearly stated that being late to class constituted an absence. Tom appealed. After further investigation, it was determined that Tom had a regular pattern of being late, not only for one class but for all of his classes. He had also

received counseling on the issue but he still didn't conform to the policy. Tom lost his appeal and moved back home. Seriously.

The minimum effective effort can look a lot different for different people. There are weaknesses that require a great deal of effort to manage and will never be completely fixed. My dyslexia is not something I can fix or grow out of. Nor are other learning disabilities such as autism, Asperger's syndrome, dyscalculia, or ADD/ADHD. In some cases, medications can assist in supporting the learning process but medications don't fix the disability. What is required most often is a tremendous amount of hard work and persistence.

My minimum effective effort to learn to read, spell and write using proper grammar took a tremendous amount of effort over many years. It took a ton of hard work on my part, and the dedication of my parents and teachers as well, to gain these basic academic skills; skills necessary to function in our culture. I spent years in special education classes working on my weakness. I had tutors in math and grammar. I spent countless hours doing what came easily to other students. I'll be honest: I resented how little effort others put into something that took such great effort for me. More on that later. . . .

I'm not done working at these skills, and nor will I ever be done. I have to manage my weakness in spelling and grammar even as an adult. And I can't procrastinate, because everything I write has to be edited or reviewed by someone else prior to being sent out.

Thankfully, technology has made my dyslexic life a lot easier as well, including spelling and grammar checks. And I have always made sure that someone on my team or staff is great at proofreading. It's one way I manage my dyslexic weakness.

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Here is the really good news. For the most part, managing the areas of your greatest weakness is not that difficult. Sure, it takes work; but every weakness is eventually manageable with effort. First, you have to allow yourself to be not perfect. Easier said than done for most students, I know. In fact, I know way too many students that think they have to be great at *everything*. They have to take advanced placement classes and get A's in every class. They have to play sports, be involved in their community, and work, all at the same time. The stress most students place on themselves is the greatest pressure of all. If you get nothing else from reading this book, hear this: Give yourself a break; you don't have to be perfect. In fact, you're not going to be, and that's perfectly okay. . . .

My story is about academics. Your story may be about something way more personal or serious. Perhaps your story is about self-image. You see yourself as fat, ugly, too short, or the wrong color. Maybe you have other stuff. Maybe you're from a highly dysfunctional family, or you have divorced parents, or you're living with your grandparents, or you have an absent father. These can be issues that play into your weaknesses, and that make you feel crappy about yourself and your future. But each one of these issues is manageable.

Also, remember that one of the greatest benefits of identifying your talents and building them into strengths is that they are *the great equalizers*. You are *talented*. Work on those talents and you can overcome the *stuff* in your life.

This story may resonate with you. In school, and especially high school and my first two years of college, I resented my peers' academic abilities. I hated the fact that they got A's. It was always very difficult mentally and emotionally to study

my butt off and only get C's, when I knew others studied very little or not at all and got A's. To hear my friends say how they didn't even study for the test, how easy it was, and how they got an A, was difficult to take. School for them was easy, but it wasn't for me; every subject took a lot of effort. It made me feel crappy about myself. I wondered if the effort I was putting in was even worth it. The system wasn't set up to play to my strengths, and I was stuck in that system for a long time.

### **Don't Get Trapped by Standardization.**

#### **It's Really All about Weakness.**

Public education was designed to be just that—public. The point of education is to educate the masses, not the individual. The original goal was to educate young people so they could enter the workforce of the industrial revolution with the very basic knowledge that was needed in the factory. Your individual desires weren't relevant to the factory owner, or to small business.

This, unfortunately, is still largely true for you today, even though the workforce you're entering is crying out for something much different. The system has tried to make school feel more like you have control; it allows you to pick your classes or to go to a specialized school or class. However, the education system has already made the decision as to what is important and the system is still designed so you conform.

I'm sure you get it. During your time in the public education system, you have seen the increase in testing and the importance placed on testing by your teachers and administrators.

Our school system has only made minor changes to the overall functioning of schools from where we were thirty or

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forty years ago. I find it shocking to walk into a “modern high school” and see that very little has changed. Sure, your school has updated. Black boards and whiteboards have mostly been replaced with smart boards. Typing class is now keyboarding. The curriculum has changed and expanded as our knowledge base has grown. Yet, your teachers are still teaching the same lesson plans that my teacher did and in much the same manner.

Of course, we have tried many different models and strategies for delivering content to you over the years. But when you examine the differences, very little has changed. One of the innovative improvements has been that the traditional bell ringing to change classes has been replaced with a more pleasing ringtone. It's said to be less shocking, stressful, and punitive sounding. Watch out for the next big change. . . .

The education system continues striving to create the myth of the well-rounded student. In fact, the system is focused on measuring weakness so it can identify and fix our areas of greatest weakness. This is exactly what standardization does to you, your parents, teachers, and schools. Standardization is a measurement of weakness. When all is said and done, every test measuring student achievement is about identifying what areas of weakness need improving. What is the lowest score and what do we do about raising that score? We do it collectively as a state, district, school and down to the individual.

My inability to perform on standardized tests has always left me feeling weak. My greatest memories of academics stress revolve around taking standardized tests. The SAT, exit exams for grammar and math courses in college, and entry and exit exams in postgraduate studies. Any time failure is not an option, and you're afraid of failing, you feel weak.

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The system has changed very little. It wasn't until later in college when others started to struggle and I started to excel, that my resentment of others' academic ability started to disappear.

When exams were no longer about simply filling in the blanks, but were questions that required individual answers or essays, my talents began to shine. One had to know how to apply the subject matter, not just memorize and report back what you could remember. Working in groups and demonstrating a commanding knowledge of the subject also became more important as my classes built on one another. I was now getting A's with less effort and others had to learn what it meant to study and come up with well-thought-out answers.

Public education still attempts to compartmentalize our education into neat packages of science, math, history, and literature. Back in the day when I was a student in high school, teachers provided the vast majority of the information students learned or had access to, including the delivery method. If you needed to know something, you asked the expert—the teacher. Possibly, you ventured into the library, searched the encyclopedias, or thumbed through the card catalog to find a book on the subject; but the classroom lecture was the primary medium for the flow of information—teacher to student.

This is certainly not the case today. There is a vast and fast-flowing system of information available at the click of a button. There is no longer a one-way flow of information from teacher to student. Students like you and your friends are playing a much more active role in your education. This is a trend I hope will continue to grow for you. Your generation is going to be faced with the responsibility of making

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the most significant changes to the public education system in a hundred years. I believe it's a must for the survival of our nation as we currently know it. I also believe your generation will be up to the challenge.

Here's a great story from a friend of mine from a few years ago. Her son Ben, then in fourth grade, came home from school one afternoon very upset. When she asked him why he was so upset, he said that his teacher had gotten mad at him.

"Why did your teacher get mad at you?" she asked.

"Because I told her that she was wrong about something."

My friend immediately told her son that she could understand why his teacher might be upset with him. She realized that her young fourth grader was a bit of a know-it-all. Thus, she was giving the teacher the benefit of the doubt on this one.

"Teachers don't like to be told they're wrong by students," she said.

"But she was wrong," he insisted.

She continued her enquiry: "What was she wrong about?"

"Pluto."

"What about Pluto?"

"It's not a planet," he said.

"But it *is* a planet, Ben," said his mom. "It's the ninth planet in the solar system, the furthest one from the sun."

"No it's not," Ben insisted. "It's a dwarf planet, and there are other dwarf planets too. Scientists voted the other day to take Pluto off the planet list. So we only have eight planets now."

"Where on earth did you hear that?" she responded, assuming that he had been misguided.

"It was on the NASA website. I was looking for information on the space station for my science project. Scientists voted to

remove Pluto. So I told my teacher in class and she said I was wrong. But I'm not; she's wrong."

You may be well aware that Pluto is now not considered a planet. I, however, was not. Just as with his teacher, Ben was way ahead of me. All it took was a quick check of the NASA website to confirm that Ben was correct. Fortunately, that's what Ben's teacher did and she admitted her mistake to Ben and the entire class the following day.

This is a great example of how students like you have access to a lot of information, and you can know stuff that your teachers don't know, even when you're very young. I know that most of my students have access to a lot of information and they know a lot of stuff that I don't know.

Teachers are used to being smarter than their students. This isn't arrogance; it's just how it used to be—but it isn't that way anymore. Technology has vastly increased the information that is widely available. As a society, we are gaining new information about virtually every subject at an ever-increasing pace. So put yourself in the teacher's place. It's feasible that at any time a student can walk into class and announce that what you are teaching is wrong—that some archeologist or mathematician or scientist or researcher has made a discovery that changes what we currently know as fact.

### **What I Learned as a Guest Speaker at Tedxyouth Columbia**

But students can't learn everything from the internet. I didn't say that; the students did. Allow me to give some context to the conversation. . . . I was speaking with five students during a break; they were talking about the effectiveness of classroom

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instruction. Three of the five students were attending public high schools, and the others were being homeschooled.

The two homeschooled students commented that they believed instruction in the classroom was completely ineffective, “at least for us.” The other three agreed only in part, and they expressed frustration over the amount of “required” information.

I asked them what they considered to be “required.”

Their answer was, in part: any information they deemed only necessary for short term memory . . . “information needed for taking and passing tests to graduate.”

They were in agreement that passing a test was easy; and they saw tests mostly as a game to be won or lost.

They asked rhetorically: “Why don’t teachers get that we want to know *why* stuff is important?”

One student chimed in with, “If you tell me how I’m going to use the information later, it seems a lot more important.” There were nods of agreement.

Then one of the homeschooled students said, “I’ve learned more from the internet than I ever did at school.” Again, nods of agreement from everyone.

Then Cory said, “Yeah, but you can’t learn everything from the internet.”

This statement presupposes you can, in fact, learn *almost* everything from the internet. I interjected: “So classroom instruction is important and effective?”

“No, that’s not what I meant,” was Cory’s response. “What I meant was, that I can get all the information I need on the internet, including instructions on how to do complicated math and science. What I *can’t* do on my own is *experience*

stuff. I need teachers to help me actually *do* the stuff that I learn on the internet. I need help *experiencing* the stuff I've learned.”

Students need help experiencing what they have learned. This is going to be a game changer for everyone in education.

In this chapter, you learned *not* to focus on skills or talents that leave you feeling weak, depleted, and unmotivated. We discussed how to learn to deal with your weaknesses with the *minimum* effective effort. That is, you must make the necessary effort so that your weaknesses don't disrupt your ability to function in society. You don't have to *master* them, just *manage* them.



## Chapter Six

# Who's in Charge of Bob? Learning to Take Charge

**I**n this chapter, we meet the mythical Bob.  
“Who's in charge of Bob?”

This might strike you as a strange question. Well, the answer is both simple and difficult; and sometimes it's difficult for students to get a handle on this.

So I'll ask *you*: Who's in charge of \_\_\_\_\_ (Bob)? Place your name in the blank. I'll ask the question once more: Who's in charge of *you*? I'm willing to bet that I know how you responded—probably by asking yourself: “What's his point?”

I have been asking students the question “Who's in charge of Bob?” for twenty plus years. My motivation behind asking this question stems from years of hearing students complain. The actual complaints vary slightly, but the bottom line is about *control*. You and your friends all want control over your own lives. You think you should be allowed to do what you want, when you want, with whom you want, all the time. You feel you should be free to make choices and decisions for yourself. But there are a number of problems with this thinking.

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The first one is that you don't realize who is actually in control. So I ask students the question: Who's in charge of Bob?

After personally asking many hundreds of students this question one-to-one, I constantly get the same initial answer . . . silence. Students look at me as if I had two heads, and horns, and snot running out of both sets of my nostrils. The reason students respond in silence is threefold. First, no one has ever asked them the question before. Second, students have never really spent any time thinking about the answer. And third, students know the answer but it makes them uncomfortable to admit it.

The truth is that most young people have been fighting adults for control of their lives forever. Believe me, there is nothing new about wanting to make choices and decisions for yourself. It does, however, seem as though students start fighting for control at younger ages. The problem starts with adults not wanting to let go, but the problem also stems from students not understanding how much control they currently have, as well as not wanting to take *responsibility* for the decisions they do make.

Here's the thing: you are actually more in charge than you realize.

Too many young people complain about not being in charge even when they are. It sounds something close to: "I wish you would stop treating me like a child," or "You don't own me," or "When do I get to decide what I want to do?" Have you ever made any of those statements?

Perhaps you have said to your parents or another adult: "I just want you to get off my back about stuff. I'll get it done later." This is a good one: "You don't understand; it's different

now.” And here is one of my all-time favorite comments made by students: “My teacher hates me.”

All these statements are made in times of frustration, and the root source is the issue of control. It’s a struggle for control over who is in charge of decision making in your life. My position is that teenagers are *more* in control than most teenagers realize.

For the majority of students, somewhere around age twelve to fourteen they start making decisions for themselves. This doesn’t mean others don’t have power and influence over them. There’s always someone who has some power and influence over you throughout your life, even as adults.

Take a closer look at the statement “Stop treating me like a child.” I have to then ask you the adult follow-up question, “Are you acting like a child?” Is your behavior such that you don’t deserve to be treated according to your age? Are you throwing a child’s tantrum because you didn’t get your way? Unfortunately, just because you have turned 16 doesn’t mean you get the keys to the car, a no-limit credit card, and a license to do whatever you wish whenever you wish. Stop watching reality TV.

Sure, there are times when adults aren’t treating you age-appropriately. But, if you’re not coming home when you said you were, or you’re throwing a tantrum when you don’t get your way, you might deserve to be treated like a child.

“My teacher hates me.” This statement assumes wrongly that your teacher is going to put forth the actual effort to hate you. I’ve never met the teacher who stands in the doorway the first day of class and makes an on-the-spot decision as to which students they’re going to hate that semester. Hating someone

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takes work. They don't have enough time in the day to hate students. I have also never met a student making this statement who has an A in the course.

You're not always going to "click" with every teacher you have. However, if you're not turning in assignments on time, you're always late for class, you're not participating in class, or you're just not showing up at all; the odds are your teacher is not going to be your greatest fan.

No one is going to hold your hand on the path to success. Remember, society is comfortable with you being average. So if you're going to set extraordinary expectations, you have to know, "Who's in charge of Bob?"

There are four key points to remember. . . .

First: Recognize right here and right now that you're actually in charge of making decisions about your life. Odds are that if you're failing your classes, it's because you have made the decision not to get the work done, not to seek assistance, or not to study. Similarly, if you're battling with your siblings or friends, it's because you have made a choice to be in the fight. If you're late for curfew, odds are that you made a decision that what you were doing at the time was more important and that you would be late by choice. I don't think anyone is forcing you to have sex, drink, or do drugs illegally; these are all choices. If I'm wrong on the last point, contact someone for help immediately.

Second: The choices that you make have an effect on others. I admit that I get very frustrated with students who simply *don't* understand that every choice they make has an effect on those around them. This seems to be especially true for

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younger students. Have you ever said, “Why should what I do matter to anyone else?” My answer is, “It just does.”

As a student you have to understand that you don't live in a vacuum. The choices and the decisions you make affect other people. Even the smallest choices you make have an effect on those around you. Yes, you desire the power to make choices, but until you grasp that those choices affect others, you don't truly understand the power of choice.

Here is a simple example. What happens if you choose not to get out of bed on time in the morning? This single choice will cause a chain reaction.

You're late. You don't get a shower or brush your teeth, nor do you eat breakfast. You miss the bus. Your mother now has to take you to school but first she has to take your sister to daycare. You are late for the first period class and you miss the review for the upcoming test. By the way, your mother was late for work again because this isn't the first time you have done this. Lunchtime comes around and you realize you didn't pick up your lunch off the kitchen counter and your wallet is in your other pants on the floor of your bedroom. This means you're bumming food or money off your friends. You begin to wonder why you're having trouble getting your friends to talk to you. Then you remember, “Crap. No shower, no deodorant, and I didn't brush my teeth.”

Third point: You are accountable for the decisions you make, both good decisions and bad decisions. I have yet to meet a student who has set out to be obese; but donuts for breakfast, burgers and fries for lunch, pizza for dinner, no exercise at all, and cookies before bed are all choices that will lead to obesity.

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Granted, there are rare situations where this situation might be largely due to an economic issue or a family system issue, but not for the majority of students.

I have noticed that many students have a tendency to believe that the choices they make are independent of other choices. The reality is that each choice you make is a building block. No choice is solely independent of other choices. This building block process creates who you are. *Ultimately, you are the sum of your choices and experience.* It's vital for you to understand that the choices and decisions you're making today shape who you are; both in the near future and throughout your life. You need to grasp the reality that your decisions today affect your job, your career or careers, your relationships, your health, and your finances in the future. Dropping out of school, for example, will affect each of the above and most likely in a negative way.

The fourth point to remember is that every choice we make has a *result*; and these results lead us to additional choices and decisions. It's my experience that educators and parents tend to focus on the word "consequences" when we talk about the choices students make. I don't like to use the word "consequences" with students because it has such a negative connotation. We often say, "You'll suffer the consequences of that choice," meaning the negative results. It's as if the word "consequences" means the outcomes of poor choices. I prefer to just say that every choice has a *result*. The results can be bad or they can be good.

I think we can agree that most students make relatively *good* choices most of the time. I also think it would be great if adults, including teachers, spent more time catching students making

*good* choices and pointing them out, rather than always focusing on the dumb stuff students do.

As I said before, no one is going to hold your hand on the path to success. Therefore, the fourth key point is to decide *what success looks like for you*. Steven Covey, the author of the wildly popular book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, lists as the second habit: “Begin with the end in mind.” In other words, decide what you want out of life and then start making choices that will take you there. His first habit, in case you’re wondering, is “Be proactive.”

### **What Does Success Look Like for You?**

It often seems that our culture, and especially youth culture, automatically assumes that success is all about wealth or fame. This is a poor assumption to make. If this is your view of success, I’m concerned that life is going to be highly unproductive and ripe for failure. You may be wealthy simply because your grandfather was successful in business, which has nothing to do with your success. Drug dealers can be wealthy but I don’t think many would consider them successful. One only has to stop at a magazine rack or turn on the news to see how fame and success don’t always make for a good partnership.

Sure, there are cultural norms for success, like graduating from high school or college, having quality relationships, and being a productive member of society by getting a job. Each of these examples is to some extent markers of success in life. Yet, the definition of success can be different for each individual.

You might consider yourself successful if you owned a boat, drove luxury cars, had a five-bedroom home, and went

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on vacation to five-star resorts. But when you compare that kind of wealth to, for example, Steve Jobs of Apple, or a doctor making a difference by doing aid work in the Congo, or an astronaut who's been to Mars, or Alex Rodriguez of the New York Yankees, every definition of success is different. *You* get to determine your definition of success; no one else does.

You have to determine what success is going to look like for you personally or you will never be successful, let alone extraordinarily successful.

It's also important to note that success can come in many different areas of life, while at the same time you could be struggling in other areas. You might be successful in your chosen profession and struggle in your relationships.

Success can be about the level of engagement you have in the activities you love. Success can be measured by how happy you feel in your relationships—when spending time with your friends and family, or at work. Many people gauge success by the impact they have on other people's lives or the contribution they make to society. For some, success is about expressing creativity. And yes, success can be about gaining wealth and fame. Each example is a great way to determine success as an individual.

I personally feel most successful when I'm working with others. I want others to be successful, especially students. Above all else, I'm happy when I know I've had an impact on someone else's life.

It's essential to remember that you're most likely to be successful when you're working in your greatest areas of strength. So as you determine what success looks like for you, it's vital

to consider how your strengths will contribute to achieving success.

A simple task I recommend is to write yourself a personal definition of success. What does success look like for you a year from now, and five years and ten years from now? Try to be as specific as you can. Do this for your career and for your personal relationships. Once you have done this, think about how your personal strengths set can help you become successful according to your definition. Then start setting challenging, yet attainable, goals on your path to success.

Darrin Hardy, publisher and founding editor of *Success Magazine*, has the unique opportunity to be surrounded by the most successful people in the world. *Success Magazine* profiles individuals from all walks of life. Hardy said in an interview: “You have to figure out what your unique and special strengths are, and success will be easy for you.” He continued sharing about his experience with “super achievers” by saying, “Eighty to ninety percent of their success is related to their attitude about themselves and not to their specialized knowledge of their industry.”

## Attitude

*Attitude is a little thing that  
makes a big difference.*  
~ Winston Churchill

If Darrin Hardy is right and 85 percent of success is about our attitude and our unique strengths, we should pay close atten-

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tion to what we are producing with our attitude. Are we projecting negative energy or positive energy? Is your attitude lifting you and others up or bringing everyone down?

It has been said by many: "Attitude is everything." But harnessing the power and control of your attitude at a high level is achieved by few.

Your attitude determines so much about your potential success and failure. Attitude controls how you deal with and react to new challenges. Will you face them with confidence or fear? Your determination is based on your attitude regarding overcoming obstacles. Your desire to set extraordinary expectations and dreams for yourself is a reflection of your attitude regarding achievement.

An attitude that supports your desire to achieve has to include confidence. Confidence is about your ability to make your strengths work for you. If you have an attitude of confidence in yourself, this is noticed by others, and they're drawn to your success.

Being in control of your attitude also means being adaptable to change. Life is certainly going to crash down upon you at some point. It might come as your failure to achieve a goal. Or life may bring sickness to you or your family. Or you may be sidelined by the economy or some other even more uncontrollable force. No matter the circumstances, how you control your attitude in the situation will determine your ability to recover.

Controlling your attitude is about remembering you're in charge of Bob. It is amazing to me how so many people allow others to control their attitude. Sure, we all have times when we get down in the dumps. But that doesn't mean we have to

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give away our power to control our attitude, either to someone else or to a situation beyond our control.

Think of it this way: have you ever been mad at someone for something they have done or said? Sure you have. The question is: how long have you allowed that situation to control your attitude? Do you hold a grudge against someone who has done you wrong? Have you ever said you hate someone for something they did? If so, you're giving the power of your attitude to someone else. You're allowing them to control how you feel.

We all know this guy—the crazy sports fan. The fan that is so excited about their team that they live and breathe based on how well their team does. This is the guy that is still depressed on Wednesday because their college football team lost on Saturday. Silly example, but you can see how this person allows a situation he has no control over to affect his attitude about life. Don't be that guy.

If there is one place in the world where you can see bad attitudes on display, other than the hallway of a local high school, it is in an airport. Airport travel is never easy. I have traveled more than most and certainly less than many, but it's never easy. Long security lines, delayed or cancelled flights, crowded airports, bad food, and the poor seating on planes can all contribute to the bad attitude of travelers.

I was on a trip with three students when, after a four-day conference, we were delayed at the airport. We had boarded the plane and taxied out to the runway.

“Fourth in line to depart,” said the Captain.

An hour and a half later we were still sitting in the same

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spot . . . weather delay. Everyone on the packed flight had a bad attitude. We were hot, hungry, and tired. Then I decided to see if we could manage to have some fun. Fortunately, the students that were with me wanted to give it a try.

There were two children about 10 years old sitting behind me. We started playing some simple games with them, like "I spy with my little eye." Then we started in with improvisation games. At first, we were only adding to the irritation of most of the passengers. Then one of the stewards joined in; she was really funny and good at the games. People started to have fun, and their attitudes changed. Before long, we had a larger group joining in. Then we broke out into silly camp songs. I had a set of portable speakers in my bag and we got those out, plugged them into my iPod, and, believe it or not, started a dance party. Before it was over, we had half the plane doing the YMCA. No joke.

The story didn't end there. We finally took off and landed in the Dallas airport, knowing our next flight would be delayed. It looked like we were going to be spending the night in the airport. Even my students had bad attitudes at this news. So I challenged them to a new game; the challenge was to find the person in the crowd who had the most grandchildren. Why grandchildren? Every grandparent loves to talk about their grandchildren, so it was an easy way to start a conversation. What started out as a way to stay distracted turned out to be an encounter none of us expected.

One of my students started talking with an older gentleman, who, it turned out, did not have any grandchildren. But what he did have was an amazing life story. He was a WWII veteran, an Army Ranger who was part of the first wave of

soldiers to land on Omaha Beach on D-day. We all sat at his feet and listened to him tell his story and we were all amazed. He talked for well over an hour about his experience and then all of a sudden he stopped. After thanking us for listening to him, he just got up and walked slowly down the concourse. We never saw him again.

What could have been a disastrous time turned into one of the most impactful moments in the lives of these students. They still talk about their experience on that trip—all because we decided to take control of how our situation was going to affect our attitude.

It's important to understand how your *expectations* affect your attitude. And never underestimate the power your *attitude* has on your *achievements*. If you view the world pessimistically or in a negative way, it affects your self-concept.

If you expect to have a crappy time, you probably will. If your friend tells you how much she hated a teacher based on her experience, you're more likely to have the same attitude even before taking the teacher's class. If everyone tells you the movie sucks right before you see it, you're going to have a much lower expectation.

The opposite is true as well. If you have a positive self-concept and high expectations, you'll get what you expect. If you go into a situation with a positive attitude, you're more likely to have a good experience. If you believe you're going to make a positive first impression, you're more likely to do so.

Science has proven time and again that your attitude is a powerful force. This is easily demonstrated by the placebo effect, which is most often tested as a form of medical deception. Simply put, the placebo effect tells us that when you

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*believe* that something like a pill will help you feel better, it does. Whether the pill contains any drug or not, the effect is the same: you feel better.

The placebo effect also works on your attitude. Simply believing things will be better, maintaining positive thoughts, and having faith does affect our attitude in a positive way. So next time you're in a situation that sucks, remember who's in charge of Bob. Take control of your attitude, don't allow others to hijack your feelings, and stay positive. Don't focus on who you aren't; focus on who you are.

A successful attitude is also one of *gratitude*; "an attitude of gratitude," as the saying goes. I have always believed that one of the most satisfying feelings you can experience is when you help someone. You might teach someone a new skill, help them with math, or serve at a local soup kitchen. It doesn't matter *what* you do; the satisfaction you will receive from serving others will lift your attitude faster than anything I'm aware of.

It's also important to realize that no one achieves extraordinary success without others being involved. Supporting those around you that have supported you is vital to maintaining quality relationships.

## Closing Thoughts

The teacher in me wants to make sure I leave you with a repeat of the key points, so here they are.

You are talented. You are uniquely gifted with natural talents. Invest in discovering these talents and then develop them into strengths. You have within you the ability to be extraordinarily successful. Go after your heart's desire based on your talents and strengths. Set out to uncover what you have to offer for yourself, your community, and your future. Be flexible, because life will get in the way and you will have to adjust your plans. You don't have to have all the answers about your future today; relax and enjoy the journey.

Like talents, everybody has weaknesses. Don't let others define you by what you're not good at. Learn to manage your weaknesses so that they are not a barrier to basic life skills, success, or relationships. Managing your weaknesses may take a lot of work. Nobody said it was going to be easy, but that's okay. Once you have them under control, move on to success by focusing on your talents and strengths. Remember, if you're not good at one thing, I *guarantee* you're good at something else.

Remember who's in charge of Bob! You're in charge of yourself, and nobody else is. So step up and take responsibility for your choices and decisions and make good ones. Life is not

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about blaming others for your stuff. It's about taking charge, living up to your full potential, and doing something that matters.

Attitude is everything. Okay, perhaps it's not everything, but it sure goes a long way in making an extraordinary life possible. Don't give your power away to others. Stay positive, seek happiness, be good to others, and give yourself permission to have fun.

Armed with knowing your personal strengths, you have the potential to achieve extraordinary levels of success.

Live An Extraordinary Life!

## Appendix

### Strengths Assessments

The Clifton *StrengthsFinder*<sup>®</sup> Assessment is a web-based assessment of normal personality from the perspective of Positive Psychology. The assessment divides personal strengths into 34 distinct themes, and the basic assessment will provide you with your top five strengths. For additional information, see their website at [www.strengths.gallup.com](http://www.strengths.gallup.com).

*StrengthsQuest*<sup>®</sup> is the student version of the Clifton Strengths Assessment. Each student taking the assessment will receive their top five strengths of the 34 distinct strength themes. The report a student receives upon completion of the assessment is geared toward students' needs.

I highly recommend that every educational professional interested in developing student strengths purchase a copy of *StrengthsQuest*<sup>®</sup> as well.

Educational Institutions can create affiliate relationships with *The Gallup Organization* by contacting them directly.

I highly recommend that every student taking the assessment purchase a copy of this book, which offers insights into using your strengths in your education and career.

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The following are the 34 **Theme Strengths**:

Achiever	Deliberative	Learner
Activator	Developer	Maximizer
Adaptability	Discipline	Positivity
Analytical	Empathy	Relator
Arranger	Focus	Responsibility
Belief	Futuristic	Restorative
Command	Harmony	Self-Assurance
Communication	Ideation	Significance
Competition	Includer	Strategic
Connectedness	Individualization	Woo
Consistency	Input	
Content	Intellection	

*The Gallup Organization administers the assessment.*

*Gallup®, StrengthsFinder®, StrengthsQuest® and all theme assessments are the property of The Gallup Organization. This book is not affiliated with the Gallup Organization nor does it represent Gallup®*



*The StandOut®* assessment by Marcus Buckingham is a web-based assessment designed to discover and activate your unique competitive advantage at work. It focuses on what you do rather than who you are. StandOut® boldly goes where StrengthsFinder® does not. It suggests ideal careers based on the 9 Strengths Roles measured.

The following are the 9 **Strengths Roles**:

Advisor	Equalizer	Provider
Connector	Influencer	Stimulator
Creator	Pioneer	Teacher

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I recommend purchasing the book along with taking the online assessment.

For more information, visit [www.standout.tmbc.com](http://www.standout.tmbc.com)

*TMBC® StandOut® administers the assessment. StandOut® and all Strengths Role themes are the intellectual property of TMBC®. This book is not affiliated with StandOut® or TMBC® and nor does it represent them.*



*Values In Action Inventory*, better known as VIA®, is a web-based assessment designed to measure values and character strengths. There is no purchase necessary to take the initial VIA Inventory.

There are 6 virtues and 24 character strengths that fall within each category. The categories are:

Wisdom and Knowledge	Justice
Courage	Temperance
Humility	Transcendence

The VIA Institute is also proud to announce the **NEW VIA Me! Pathways Report** for anyone interested in diving deeper into understanding their personal character strengths. This engaging 18-page report is customized for each individual based on their unique constellation of strengths. The report can be purchased.

For more information visit: [www.viacharacter.org](http://www.viacharacter.org)

*VIA® administers the Character Inventory. VIA® model is the intellectual property of The VIA® Institute on Character. This site is not affiliated with VIA® nor does it represent them.*

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**T**here are other self assessments available. I encourage you to contact your school guidance office for additional assistance in finding more about available assessments.

## About the Author

**F**red Grooms is a popular youth motivational speaker, a teacher, an author, a student expert, and the owner of Barnabas Consulting. His success is a direct result of learning to develop his natural talents and to manage his weaknesses, including overcoming his Dyslexia.

Fred has more than two decades of experience teaching, mentoring and motivating students. He speaks to middle and high school students at assemblies and student conferences; and he leads seminars and workshops for students and educators on the subjects of discovering and developing individual talents, making healthy choices, controlling your attitude and leadership.

Barnabas Consulting works closely with college and university student services, college and career placement services, and leadership groups, as well as other organizations to provide Fred's speaking and lecture series.

For more information, please see:

[www.fredgrooms.com](http://www.fredgrooms.com)

[www.strengthsdevelopment.com](http://www.strengthsdevelopment.com)

[www.fredonchoices.com](http://www.fredonchoices.com)



## A Personal Note

**I**t has always been my passion to serve others, whether serving my country, working to create new business units in the private sector, or working with non-profits.

As my passion for serving others grew, I was called to work with students, and I served as a youth and children's pastor for fifteen years. It was in this position that I came to realize that so many students were struggling to find their place in a world that focused on "fixing" weaknesses rather than developing natural strengths.

Today, my calling is to teach others, and specifically students, to understand that they are created as unique and talented individuals; that every person has talents and gifts to be shared with those around them, and perhaps the world.

Please join me, as we teach students and individuals to be more of who they already are.

~ Fred



## Program Examples

### The Anatomy of Choice: Learning To Make Healthy Choices

(Offered as a workshop and/or as a keynote speech)

As students, you're faced with some of the most critical choices of your life; choices that will determine your immediate future and set you on life's grand journey. Your choices will affect your career path, your overall financial stability, your personal and professional relationships, and your physical health. We hope that you will make quality life and career choices, but the problem is: we don't teach you or coach you when it comes to how to make good choices. How great would it be if you learned how to actively evaluate your alternatives and make value-based choices?

"The Anatomy of Choice" will give you a framework for understanding both the science and art of making choices. You'll look closely at the five components of choice and you'll learn the difference between a choice and a decision—and how they are unquestionably linked.

There are three primary drives when you're making choices: experience, integrity/values, and core personality. Fred will teach you how to utilize each drive to your advantage. You will

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also be given the tools necessary to identify how your perspective affects the three primary drives.

You're faced with choices every day, and often you don't even notice. However, whether you're just going through the daily motions of life, leading others on campus, contributing as a member of a team, or making critical life choices, this keynote or workshop will equip you to make better decisions. When you truly understand the art and science behind making choices, you will reduce stress, increase confidence, decrease conflict, and improve your overall well being. Making healthy choices will make a difference in your life.



### Discover and Uncover Your Natural Talents: Every Student Has Something Special To Offer

**W**e spend an intense amount of time teaching students academic skills. These skills are necessary for survival in a growing global economy, but basic skills and knowledge are no longer enough. In addition, you have to be able to identify your personal strengths; and to do this, you need to discover your natural talents. Yes, you are talented . . . everyone is. As a society, we have a very narrow view of what it means to be talented. If you're like most students, you're more aware of your weaknesses than of your strengths. It's what I call "the weakness trap" and we have been in it for decades.

Learning to identify your unique talents takes discovery. Fred will show you how to broaden your perspective of what it means to be talented. Once you can identify your unique talents, you learn the essential formula for developing your

talents into lifelong strengths. We will investigate how discovering your talents is rooted in the science of Positive Psychology and Strengths Philosophy. We will discuss a number of strengths assessments available at your campus, including Gallup's StrengthsQuest and the Values In Action (VIA) Survey.

When you can identify your strengths, you're *84 percent more likely to be engaged*. Engagement in school increases academic performance, confidence and graduation rates. It's particularly relevant when you consider that only a little over half of students entering college actually graduate, and only one in three students find a job in their career field. Let's work together to make sure these aren't your stats!



## Success Starts With Your Attitude

**W**e've all heard the saying "attitude is everything." Perhaps it's not everything, but it is a significant gauge for highly successful individuals. There are numerous studies that support the notion that maintaining a positive or healthy attitude increases the likelihood of success in virtually every area of your life. Your happiness, health, and potential success are among the areas directly affected by your attitude.

Fred gives you practical steps to maintain a healthy attitude. You will learn to identify the triggers that shift your attitude from positive to negative. In this thought-provoking keynote or workshop, you will discover how to harness the power of your attitude to control your confidence, overcome obstacles and adversity, and reduce stress.

You will be empowered to control the power of your attitude.

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“As an educator, teacher, coach, and parent I understand the value of having an experienced speaker reach students with a real life explanation. Fred Grooms does just this in person and through his book! A devoted dyslexic dedicated to the success of others struggling to find their place in school, and after their education. Fred is outspoken, encouraging, and causing many parents to shift their perspective for their child. He shifts the struggles and failures to moments of laughter which provides both he and the learner with a platform for success.

“Thank you Fred for your winning words!”

—Chris Winkler

Former Chair of the South Carolina Dyslexic Task Force,  
PhD Candidate, Educational Leader in K-12 Schooling



