



# Book Strengths Based Leadership

## Great Leaders, Teams, and Why People Follow

Tom Rath and Barry Conchie  
Gallup Press, 2009  
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### Recommendation

This useful leadership book supports its advice, guidelines and recommendations with solid research. Gallup Inc., the well-known polling company, has done far more research on leadership and the social sciences than any author could do alone. Here, Gallup executives Tom Rath – already a best-selling author – and Barry Conchie extrapolate significant findings on leadership from their company’s mountain of research. They explain what superior leadership requires and what a leader’s followers seek. Their book comes with unique access codes to leadership strength assessment. In a world of mixed opinion and amorphous authority, *BooksInShort* recommends this empirical approach to understanding leadership by way of reliable data.

### Take-Aways

- Over the years, Gallup Inc. has conducted massive research about leadership, which has led to several findings:
- The most effective leaders remain true to themselves.
- Superior leaders ensure that they have quality people to lead.
- Mediocre leaders often mistakenly try to become expert in all leadership areas.
- In contrast, great leaders always concentrate on their individual, landmark strengths.
- Leaders must understand their personal assets and liabilities.
- These attributes can be clustered under “executing, influencing, relationship building” or “strategic thinking.”
- The StrengthsFinder program helps leaders identify their primary leadership strengths.
- While no one leader can possess all the primary leadership skills, you can assemble work teams that have the entire palette.
- Leaders learn what their followers need and then supply it.

### Summary

#### Accentuate Your Strengths

Gallup Inc. knows about leadership. Its staffers have conducted more than 20,000 interviews with key leaders. In 50 years of polling people about their leaders, Gallup studied more than one million workplace teams. Its researchers asked 10,000 followers about the leadership characteristics that matter most to them.

“A leader needs to know his strengths as a carpenter knows his tools.”

Based on its research, interviews and studies, Gallup lists the three most significant factors in exercising strong leadership:

1. **“The most effective leaders are always investing in strengths”** – Managers must concentrate on their own strengths and on those of their employees. Some 73% of employees say they are more engaged when their firms focus on their personal abilities. Only 9% of staffers feel engaged when companies fail to make this effort.
2. **“The most effective leaders surround themselves with the right people and then maximize their team”** – Well-rounded individuals do not make the best leaders. This may sound like abject heresy, but Gallup research shows that well-rounded individuals turn out to be mediocre leaders. However, the best work teams always are well-rounded.
3. **“The most effective leaders understand their followers’ needs”** – These leaders work extremely hard to fulfill their employees’ requirements.

## Knowing Your Strengths

As a leader, you must know your strengths and capabilities so you can work to get the most from them, and to expand and enhance them. Leaders who are self-aware can leverage their primary assets. But many leaders lack self-awareness. Often, managers are completely in the dark about their own personalities, or their leadership assets and liabilities. Gallup researchers routinely encounter leaders who don’t know where they are strong or weak. For instance, many leaders tell researchers that they are particularly good at developing their employees, but Gallup’s interviews with those employees sometimes show the exact opposite: The leaders in question more often demoralize, instead of developing, their followers.

“While two leaders may have identical expectations, the way they reach their goals is always dependent on the unique arrangement of their strengths.”

Prominent leadership researcher Dr. Donald O. Clifton was the “father of strengths psychology.” Starting in the 1960s, he and his Gallup and academic colleagues initiated more than 20,000 90-minute interviews with business and government leaders, including some former heads of state. Clifton’s researchers used performance data to determine how successful the interviewed business leaders were and how they carried out their work. The most startling finding was that these leaders did not share any particular strength. As Clifton explained, “What great leaders have in common is that each truly knows his or her strengths...There is no definitive list of characteristics that describes all leaders.”

## StrengthsFinder

Clifton and his team developed the StrengthsFinder program, a tool you can use to assess your strongest skills. The more you know about yourself and your leadership abilities, the more self-confident you will be. Such confidence leads to greater earnings, more satisfying careers and fewer health problems.

“At a company-wide level, nothing creates stability as quickly as transparency.”

No single leader can possess every leadership quality, but you can organize executive leadership teams whose members muster an array of complementary skills. Although organizations should customize teams to pursue particular goals, few companies approach team building this way. Instead, many leaders try to make their work teams mirror their personal traits. They seek members who resemble them. When you organize a team, that’s the wrong way to go.

“You are a leader only if others follow.”

Instead, realize that:

- **“Strong teams are magnets for talent”** – Good employees want to join successful teams.
- **“Conflict doesn’t destroy strong teams because strong teams focus on results”** – Debate is a source of strength, not weakness.
- **“Strong teams prioritize what’s best for the organization and then move forward”** – They adopt a long-range view.
- **“Members are as committed to their personal lives as they are to their work”** – Team members find time for their families.
- **“Strong teams embrace diversity”** – Focus on individual members’ leadership strengths, not their demographic characteristics.

## The Four Primary Areas of Leadership Strength

Gallup’s research indicates that the most successful leadership and work teams unite individuals with complementary strengths and assets.

“I’ve never met an effective leader who wasn’t aware of his talents and working to sharpen them.” (Wesley Clark, former NATO Supreme Allied Commander)

The StrengthsFinder system identifies 34 individual leadership themes, which can be sorted into “four domains of leadership strength”:

1. **“Executing”** – Leaders who are strong in this domain get things done. They can turn airy plans into concrete reality. How they execute depends on their particular leadership abilities. The themes associated with these leaders are: “achiever, arranger, belief, consistency, deliberative, discipline, focus, responsibility” and “restorative.”
2. **“Influencing”** – Leaders who are strong influencers can rally backing for an idea or develop political support for a project. Their paths to building influence depend on their particular capabilities. For example, a leader with strong self-assurance does not have to go overboard to sell a concept. This leader radiates inner confidence, so people automatically assume that his or her ideas are good. A leader with strong communication skills will create compelling word pictures about a new idea to impel others to support it. Themes and traits associated with this area are: “activator, command, communication, competition, maximizer, self-assurance, significance” and “woo.”
3. **“Relationship building”** – These leaders can turn a group of disparate individuals with different backgrounds into a finely honed team that works toward a common goal. A leader with strong “harmony” skills can keep a group enthusiastic about its team efforts, while leaders with strong “developer” skills may act as mentors to spur their team members to grow. The themes in this area are: “adaptability, developer, connectedness, empathy, harmony, includer, individualization, positivity” and “relator.”
4. **“Strategic thinking”** – This leader helps his or her team maintain its long-range focus. For instance, a content-oriented leader can explain how a team can use

the past to shape the future. The themes in this area are: “analytical, context, futuristic, ideation, input, intellection, learner” and “strategic.”

“A leader is someone who can get things done through other people.” (Warren Buffett)

Each of the following leaders illustrates one of these four facets:

## Executing – Wendy Kopp

As a senior at Princeton, Wendy Kopp chose “educational inequity” as the subject for her senior thesis. Studying this subject showed her that many children in depressed urban areas receive inferior education. A leader who strongly emphasizes responsibility as her theme (as well as putting energy into achievement, competition, strategy and relating to other people), Kopp organized other students to discuss the issue. She learned that while many of them would willingly volunteer for postgraduate teaching assignments in urban areas, they had no straightforward way to do so. Kopp decided to establish a “national corps of teachers” to organize such volunteers. After securing financial support, she started Teach for America, a national teachers’ program that college graduates have embraced. One year, it received in excess of 25,000 applicants for teaching posts, and it has already assisted more than three million students.

## Influencing – Simon Cooper

In 2001, Simon Cooper became president of The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, a prestigious luxury hotel chain. Most of its customers ranked the Ritz-Carlton in Gallup’s “95th percentile” for “customer engagement.” Cooper wanted more. Driven by his strong “maximizer theme” (along with “woo, arranger, activator” and “significance” themes), he told his employees that any Ritz-Carlton hotel in the “94th or 95th percentile” of customer engagement was operating in a dangerous “red zone.” The “yellow zone” was for hotels “in the 96th or 97th percentile.” He set a goal that all hotels should achieve “green zone” status, reaching the 98th percentile or above. The results? In his first seven years of leadership at Ritz-Carlton, Cooper set new records in customer engagement – and in profitability.

## “Relationship Building” – Mervyn Davies

Standard Chartered is a huge international banking firm. Headquartered in London, it has a workforce of 70,000 people and operations in 70 countries. Mervyn Davies is the firm’s chairman and former CEO. He has a strong futuristic leadership theme, along with strengths as an achiever, relator and learner with positivity. At a time when most international banks were trying to expand in North America and Europe, Davies focused on Africa, India and the Middle East. Thanks to his vision, Standard Chartered is one of only a few large banking firms that not only survived the 2008-2009 economic crisis but actually expanded during it. In terms of leadership, Davies says, “You must know yourself, know the people around you and then get on with it.” Much of his success is due to his relator theme. As the head of Standard Chartered, he constantly went out of his way to communicate openly about his activities and his reasoning. This transparency enabled Davies to develop crucial “relationships with key shareholders, business partners, customers and employees.”

## “Strategic Thinking” – Brad Anderson

Best Buy CEO Brad Anderson’s primary leadership strengths are context, ideation, input, learner and connectedness, all in the leadership area of strategic thinking. Before Anderson became president of Best Buy, the big box electronics chain paid its salespeople on a commission basis like most consumer electronic companies. The result? As soon as customers entered the store, anxious salespeople surrounded them and quickly tried to sell them high-priced and high-commissioned equipment. Using focus-group research, Anderson learned that, as a result of this policy, customers did not trust Best Buy. They felt that entering a store was like strolling onto a used-car lot. Anderson, then a member of the firm’s board, and Dick Schulze, the chain’s founder, recommended moving “away from a commissioned sales model.” This was a very successful move for the company, and many of its competitors quickly followed suit.

## Following Up with Followers

The best way to learn what followers think about leadership is to ask them, so Gallup did. From 2005 to 2008, it asked 10,000 respondents, “What leader has the most positive influence in your daily life?” Gallup asked these participants to “list three words that best describe what this person contributes to your life.”

“The best leaders get to live on.”

More than a tenth of those Gallup polled used the same words to describe what they seek from their leaders:

- **“Trust”** – In leadership, nothing matters more than trust. Without it, only one in 12 employees feels a sense of engagement with their firm. With it, “better than one in two” workers feel connected. Associated concepts include “respect, integrity and honesty.”
- **“Compassion”** – Employees want their leaders to care about them. When staffers know that their leaders care, productivity and profitability expand. However, most leaders do not exhibit compassion toward their employees. This is a big mistake. Closely associated concepts include “caring, friendship, happiness and love.”
- **“Stability”** – Employees want leaders they can depend on, for example, in knowing they will get paid reliably and on time. Associated concepts include “security, strength, support and peace.”
- **“Hope”** – Most employees (69%) who feel buoyant about their future prospects at their companies become fully engaged in their work. Without this positive feeling, only 1% feels a sense of engagement. To improve this, leaders must guide people to feel positive about the future. Associated concepts include “direction, faith and guidance.”

## What All This Means

Your success as a leader depends entirely on the people who follow you. To gauge your achievement, consider the number of other leaders that you train and develop. That is the ultimate measure of effective leadership.

# About the Authors

**Tom Rath** heads Gallup’s workplace research activities. He is the author of *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, and *Wellbeing*, and the co-author of *How Full Is Your Bucket?* **Barry Conchie** leads Gallup’s executive leadership consulting practice.

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