

# Teams of Leaders: Identifying and Leveraging Individual Strengths within Teams

By Toni Mantych for the STC Roundtable, June 2019

When I was in junior high school, near the close of each term, our teachers would distribute a plethora of award certificates. Most of the certificates I received proclaimed that I had excelled in some academic discipline—math or language arts or social studies. But when I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, I started getting awards for “leadership.” And when I reached 9<sup>th</sup> grade, these awards culminated in my nomination to participate in a small, year-long “Leadership class.”

I recall being a little mystified about the leadership awards and the opportunity to take the class. Unlike many of the other students in the class cohort, I hadn’t run for—and I had no interest whatsoever in—student government. Because I associated “leadership” with specific positions or roles, I thought someone had made a mistake by celebrating my “leadership” and selecting me to participate in the class.

What I learned over the course of that year, though, is that leadership isn’t about position or titles. And that lesson has been repeatedly reinforced as I completed my education and moved into corporate life.

## Leadership without followers

Certainly, many leaders *do* have titles and occupy positions of authority in hierarchical power structures. But leadership researchers routinely find that effective leaders don’t lead *through* position, power, or authority.

*“Great leaders...are able to inspire people to act. Those who are able to inspire give people a sense of purpose or belonging that has little to do with any external incentive or benefit to be gained.”*

- Simon Sinek, *Start with Why* (2009)

“followers,” and there is an implied power dynamic in the leader:follower word pairing. But the best leaders are unconcerned about amassing followers or maintaining (or achieving) stature. As authors Simon Sinek and Danielle Harlan (and others) have shown, today’s best

leaders inspire others by creating an authentic, compelling, and ultimately infectious sense of purpose. Great leaders don’t inspire or expect others to *follow*, but to *act* and, I would add, even to *lead*.

Achieving the kind of rapport and connection with others that creates this infectious type of inspiration requires skills and approaches that are at odds with models and behaviors based on power and authority. It’s no accident that there has been a spate of recent books and articles that focus on servant leadership, “leading without authority,” and the importance of humility, vulnerability, empathy, and compassion to effective leadership. For those leaders who happen to hold titles and positions of authority, leveraging these approaches and capabilities is critical to being able to connect with and inspire others *in spite of* those titles and positions.



## Know thyself: Authentic, strengths-based leadership

Much of the literature on leadership also stresses the importance of authenticity. To lead with authenticity, leaders must first identify and understand their own innate talents, natural ways of working, and personal beliefs. There are numerous excellent tools and resources to assist with this self-examination and learning.

Many tools for assessing natural talents or capabilities employ a “strengths-based leadership” approach. The most well-known of these tools is based on work by Donald Clifton and extensive research by Gallup. Previously known as StrengthsFinder and now called CliftonStrengths, this assessment results in a personalized ranking of 34 strength “themes.”

The theory behind strengths-based models is that rather than working to identify and remediate areas of relative weakness, it is more effective to identify natural strengths and focus on amplifying and leveraging those strengths. Said differently, this approach eschews the notion of an ideal “well-rounded” leader who is strong in every capability or trait.

*“Each of us possesses the innate potential to make a unique and meaningful impact in the world. When we recognize and harness this potential, we naturally inspire and motivate others, increase our influence, and enhance our ability to ignite positive change in our lives, our organizations, and the world.”*

- Danielle Harlan, *The New Alpha* (2017)

These strengths-based approaches have met with some criticism. Detractors argue that it is not practical to simply accept that some individuals are not strong in some areas and cannot or should not invest in improving in those areas. The logical result of taking this approach to the extreme, critics argue, is that if individuals are urged to focus only on

their native strengths, organizations may either face gaps in some strengths or have to hire an oversized staff to cover all of the required capabilities. And, perhaps even more critically, weakness in key capabilities may put individuals in situations where they will fail, since it is impossible to isolate when the various strengths are needed during the course of everyday work.

But we do not need to subscribe to every aspect of strengths-based leadership theory to reap benefits from doing strengths assessments. Most of the assessments identify both strengths and weaknesses. With that information, we can choose to do any of the following:

- Take a strengths-based approach and focus only on amplifying strengths
- Take a more traditional approach and focus on remediating weaknesses
- Take a hybrid approach and do both

In addition to informing individual (or self) development plans, strength assessments also prove to be really useful in helping us all learn how to best work with each other. Knowing the natural strengths, weaknesses, and preferences of our colleagues can help each of us adapt our own behaviors and communications to best effect, based on what we know about our teammates,

collaboration partners, and audiences. For this reason, I have had my entire extended leadership team take one of these assessments and have plotted the results in a matrix, which I shared with the team. This has allowed us to see where our collective gaps are—which is a useful thing to consider when hiring. It has also allowed us to delegate work more effectively and structure partnerships and collaborations in ways that are more likely to be successful, based on what we know about each participant’s strengths and natural ways of working.

### **From qualitative to quantitative: Getting more personal**

Most of the strengths assessments rely on a series of questions that ask the subject to choose between two options. The responses are collected and analyzed to yield a ranking of strengths or the identification of a personality or behavior type.

But to develop into deeply authentic leaders, it is helpful to dive deeper with our self-study and get more personal—to understand what matters to us, what drives us, and what greater purpose we want to achieve. Harlan’s book, *The New Alpha*, advocates (and provides a roadmap for) this type of deeper personal analysis because, as she puts it, “Leadership is about becoming the best version of yourself in order to maximize your positive impact on the world. It’s about developing into someone whom people genuinely respect and admire and want to work with—and using that power and influence to be a force for good in the world.” Sinek’s *Find Your Why* also provides a model for unearthing a unique and inspiring purpose that can catalyze loyalty and sustained excellence across teams and organizations.

### **Building teams of leaders**

On the next page, I’ve provided some additional details about Harlan and Sinek’s books, the Gallup tool, and other tools and resources for identifying and leveraging leadership strengths and catalyzing inspiration. I believe these tools hold immense value for *all* employees in the same way that my 9<sup>th</sup> grade leadership class held value for me. If leadership is about inspiring action, we can all participate. A team may have a nominal leader who organizes the work of the team. But why not empower everyone to extend their leadership potential? Why not build teams of leaders?

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## Tools and resources for identifying and leveraging natural talents

**Strengths-Based Leadership: Great Leaders, Teams, and Why People Follow, Tom Rath, © 2008.** Provides an updated introduction to the strengths-based psychology developed by Donald Clifton based on research and tools developed by Gallup. Also includes a code to take the updated “StrengthsFinder 2.0” assessment (now called CliftonStrengths), which yields a ranking of 34 “themes” based on your unique, innate talents. The latter part of the book breaks down the research that developed the themes, describes each theme in detail, and provides ideas for “leading with” each theme. (For a shorter guide to the assessment and themes, see **StrengthsFinder 2.0, Tom Rath, © 2007**, which also includes a code to take the assessment.) Gallup also provides numerous guides and coaching options for teams and individuals, such as the **CliftonStrengths Team Activities Guide: Helping Teams Learn, Appreciate, and Use Their Talents and Strengths, ©2018**.

**StandOut 2.0: Assess Your Strengths. Find Your Edge. Win at Work, Marcus Buckingham, © 2015.** Another book-plus-assessment tool combination, *StandOut 2.0* helps you identify your top two “strength roles” (based on various combinations of 18 talents) and provides guidance on how to use your strengths to “win at work.”

**The New Alpha: Join the Rising Movement of Influencers and Changemakers Who Are Redefining Leadership, Danielle Harlan, Ph.D., © 2017.** Harlan believes that “regardless of their official title or position, people who strive for excellence in all areas of their lives and who can bring big ideas to life—especially those rooted in a purpose greater than themselves—are often the best and most inspiring leaders. To them, success and power are incidental.” Her book provides assessments and tools for discovering what matters to you, developing a “personal leadership identity,” and creating individual and team plans of action.

**Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action, Simon Sinek, 2009 and Find Your Why: A Practical Guide for Discovering Purpose for You and Your Team, Simon Sinek, David Mead, and Peter Docker, © 2017.** In *Start with Why*, Sinek uses compelling stories from a wide range of history and disciplines to illustrate and support his belief that leadership is about “inspir[ing] people to act.” For him, “Those who are able to inspire give people a sense of purpose or belonging that has little to do with any external incentive or benefit to be gained,” and that leads to persistent excellence and success. This sense of purpose is rooted in identifying a compelling fundamental “WHY” for an organization. *Find Your Why* provides a guided approach to using stories to discover personal or organizational themes that can inspire foundational WHY or purpose statements.

**Korn Ferry ([www.kornferry.com](http://www.kornferry.com)).** This consultancy describes itself as a “people and organizational advisory firm.” They have a large collection of instruments and materials that can be purchased and used independently or with consulting. Their Leadership Architect framework includes 38 global competencies that can be useful for determining what is most important for an organization or role. The book **FYI: For your improvement** (© 2017) provides detailed descriptions of these 38 competencies, including descriptions of how they manifest at different levels of maturity.

**Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI).** Developed in the 1940s and based on Jungian theories, this assessment returns one of 16 “types” that are based on innate psychological preferences. There are multiple options for taking this assessment online. (A newer personality assessment option is **True Colors** (<https://truecolorsintl.com/the-four-color-personalities/>.)

**The Thomas-Kilman Instrument.** A research-backed assessment for understanding different styles for dealing with conflict.

**Kolbe Indexes ([www.kolbe.com](http://www.kolbe.com)).** Kolbe Corp provides a number of assessments and indexes that were initially created to help students but have since been expanded to help all manner of folks (from students to CEOs to professional athletes) leverage their own natural strengths and preferences to solve problems and achieve success. What differentiates Kolbe from other assessments is that some of the indexes go beyond assessing personality (what we feel) and cognition (what we know/how we think) to also consider “conation” (how we take action, our methods of operation). Understanding which of four “action models” you and your teammates utilize can help you delegate work and collaborate more effectively.