

Teach With Your Strengths: How Great Teachers Inspire Their Students

by The Gallup Organization

History

For more than forty years, Gallup has studied the talents of individuals. Essentially, we've asked, "What makes people great?" In doing so, we have come to know what top performers in their roles have in common. In every role there will be a wide range of knowledge, skill, and talent. But, as our organization interviewed thousands of people, patterns emerged. Of all the seemingly infinite talents individuals possess, top performers had certain talents in common. Of those talents, Gallup grouped similar ones into thirty-four "themes." Our research tells us that those thirty-four, in their many configurations, do the best job of explaining how high performers naturally think, feel, and behave in their roles, and the findings help us identify other individuals likely to succeed in similar roles.

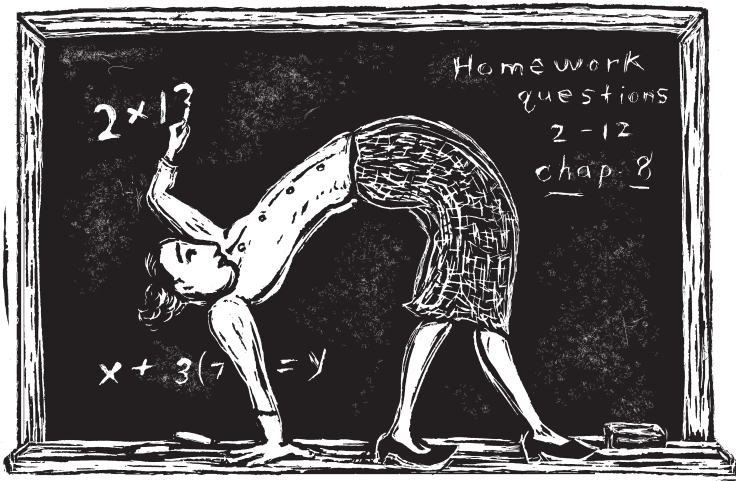
This research began as early as the 1950s, when Dr. Donald Clifton, an educational psychologist at the University of Nebraska, became intrigued by the influence many teachers had. One of his first assignments as a professor was to select and train freshman counselors. In talking to the students who were affected by his choice of counselors, he found that some of the freshman students complained bitterly that their counseling meetings were a complete waste of time; others remarked that the sessions were the best experiences they ever had in college. Pretty quickly, Dr. Clifton figured out that all the complaining students went to the same group of counselors, and the grateful students went to another group of counselors.

Dr. Clifton took a close look at the counselors, and he realized that the ones students liked best were all alike in a remarkable way: they

seemed to have similar patterns of thought, behavior, and feeling. Dr. Clifton assembled a team of researchers and began to study the counselor findings in detail. As a result, he devised a method of counselor selection that was highly predictive of success.

As a popular professor at the university, Dr. Clifton had many graduate students. With them, he conducted numerous studies concerning human relations, positive psychology, and student-teacher rapport. He was especially interested in developing testing instruments to predict teacher performance. During the 1960s, he and his graduate students conducted a number of studies comparing Clifton-developed assessment instruments with teacher-outcome measures such as student ratings of teacher effectiveness or administrator perceptions of teachers' performance. This original, breakthrough research provided the basis for much of Dr. Clifton's later thinking and inventions.

Eventually, Dr. Clifton left the university to start his own company, Selection Research, Inc. (SRI)—which later acquired The Gallup Organization—so that he could devote more time and resources to studying talent, how to find it, and how to deploy it. He was successful—so much so that the American Psychological Association commended him as “The Father of Strengths-Based Psychology.” In the past forty years, more than two million people have been studied in dozens of industries and in hundreds of job roles—including education—in countries around the world.



In fact, research that began as the study of counselors and teachers eventually revealed enduring truths about the way people behave on the job, no matter what job it is. This research uncovered a principle that had widespread implications: The differences among people influence how they do things. Each individual person has unique, innate tendencies to think, feel, and behave in certain ways most of the time. Gallup calls those prevailing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors *dominant talents*.

Although that statement may sound like common sense, the principle of dominant talents actually contradicts nearly everything people have been taught about themselves. What's more, the principle has altered several branches of psychology and created a new one: strengths psychology, which is essentially the study of what's right with people, not what's wrong with them.

Over the years, many teachers have found strengths psychology inspiring and liberating. "It validates you. It makes life easier, and it's an extremely valuable tool," says Cathy, a high school teacher for twenty-five years. "It teaches you to appreciate other people and the way they do things more than you did before."

Strengths research forms the basis of Gallup's Education Division selection and development practices, and the book *Teach With Your Strengths* (Liesveld and Miller 2005) seemed the perfect way to let the most educators in on our findings and how to use them to their advantage.

The Unorthodox Behavior of Great Teachers

After talking to thousands of teachers, Gallup found that the best ones don't always "do the right thing": that is, teachers sometimes "break the rules" because they know doing so is the most appropriate way to behave in the situation. Through both research and teacher testimonials, *Teach With Your Strengths* explores the unique ways in which great teachers think, feel, and behave. Those stories will help you understand exactly why some teachers adopt unorthodox behaviors and the ways in which great teachers naturally think, feel, and behave—their talents—help them become top performers in the classroom. *Teach With Your Strengths* explores three principles of great teachers that contradict what teachers learn in college and in professional-development seminars:

- Create flexible structure
- Share control
- Express emotions

Great teachers don't set out to be unorthodox; they don't "do wrong" for fun. They do it because, at times, doing what conventional wisdom considers the right thing is actually doing the worst thing:

betraying the education of a child. One telltale sign of a great teacher is an inclination at such times to do—for the right reasons—what conventional wisdom says is wrong. Outcomes may be standardized, but the ways teachers reach such outcomes are not. *Teach With Your Strengths* explores that idea in detail.

Teaching Myths

Great teachers know that much of what they've learned about teaching is tremendously useful—but some of it isn't, and they can tell the difference. The distinction is important. Operating from poor assumptions about education and student behavior can undermine learning, poison spirits, and encourage students to “tune out,” sometimes permanently. In fact, interviews with educators have uncovered two essential feelings common to great teachers. One is love—love of students, learning, and teaching; the other, unsurprisingly, is exasperation with educational nonsense—conventional wisdom about teaching that is, in fact, misinformation.

So what misinformation do great teachers reject? *Teach With Your Strengths* debunks the following myths:

- “Some students are inherently lazy, rebellious, or difficult.”
- “Anyone can teach.”
- “The more education or experience, the better the teacher.”
- “Keep a professional distance.”
- “Set high expectations.”
- “Public praise gives students a big head, and public rebukes keep them in line.”
- “A magic curriculum, method, or theory will work for everyone.”
- “Teachers must love all students all the time.”

Just as great teachers are different from the pack, and even different from one another in many ways, they share several important commonalities. One is their recognition, based on their natural teaching talents, that some of what they've been taught about teaching is misinformation.

But how do teachers realize what their most dominant talents are and apply them to address misinformation about teaching and ultimately build strengths? *Teach With Your Strengths* helps educators do so in two ways: 1) Every copy of the book includes an access code that allows readers to take the Clifton StrengthsFinder and immediately receive a report of their top five Signature Themes of talent; and 2) the book provides all thirty-four theme descriptions and action items for each theme.

What Is the Clifton StrengthsFinder?

Grounded in more than three decades of studying talents, strengths, and success, the Clifton StrengthsFinder has served as the starting point for self-discovery in Gallup's strengths-development programs since 1998.

By measuring the presence of talents in thirty-four general areas called "themes," the Clifton StrengthsFinder helps people discover their greatest talents—the ways in which they most naturally think, feel, and behave as unique individuals. Talents serve as the crucial starting points in the development of a strength—the ability to provide consistently near-perfect performance in a specific task through a combination of talents, knowledge, and skills.

Clifton StrengthsFinder online assessments have initiated the development of individuals in hundreds of roles, including teacher, nurse, lawyer, manager, leader, student, school administrator, customer-service representative, salesperson, pastor, and many others.

Putting Talents into Action

Included in *Teach With Your Strengths* are five action items for each theme of talent. Action items are designed to help put each individual's talents into action. They can serve as starting points in creating strengths. For example, take the Arranger theme. Anyone who has ever been referred to as a juggler—someone who can arrange all the pieces and resources at play for maximum productivity—will probably identify with the following theme description for Arranger:

You are a conductor. When faced with a complex situation involving many factors, you enjoy managing all the variables, aligning and realigning them until you are sure you have arranged them in the most productive configuration possible. In your mind there is nothing special about what you are doing. You are simply trying to figure out the best way to get things done. But others, lacking this theme, will be in awe of your ability. "How can you keep so many things in your head at once?" they will ask. "How can you stay so flexible, so willing to shelve well-laid plans in favor of some brand-new configuration that has just occurred to you?"

But you cannot imagine behaving in any other way. You are a shining example of effective flexibility, whether you are changing travel schedules at the last minute because a better fare has popped up or mulling over just the right combination of people and resources to accomplish a new project. From the mundane to the complex, you are always looking for the perfect configuration.

Of course, you are at your best in dynamic situations. Confronted with the unexpected, some complain that plans devised with such care cannot be changed, while others take refuge in the existing rules or procedures. You don't do either. Instead, you jump into the confusion, devising new options, hunting for new paths of least resistance, and figuring out new partnerships—because, after all, there might just be a better way.

How could someone especially talented in the Arranger theme make the most of such talents in an educational setting? Here's an action item from the book that might spark some ideas:

Some people tend to observe; others tend to participate. Think about instances in which your Arranger talents may have naturally led you to convert observers into participants. How did you do it? What key factors led to your success in motivating people to become involved and take action? When you isolate those factors, look for more opportunities to leverage them with students, parents, and other teachers who are prime candidates for engagement and growth.

Conclusion

Although *Teach With Your Strengths* offers several ways to get started using your talents, its efficacy doesn't end there. An individual can't just learn five top personal themes and suddenly become twice the teacher he or she was before reading the book. Learning to make the most of one's talents is a lifelong learning experience. Every day will bring new challenges, new opportunities, and new ways to understand how to use them. *Teach With Your Strengths* concludes with advice about continually maximizing talents to build strengths and create a talent-friendly culture. The more educators use their talents—especially, use them in concert—the greater impact they can have on their students.

Reference

Liesveld, R., and J. A. Miller. 2005. *Teach With Your Strengths: How Great Teachers Inspire Their Students*. New York: Gallup Press.

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