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HIDDEN STRENGTHS

UNLEASHING THE
CRUCIAL LEADERSHIP SKILLS
YOU ALREADY HAVE

THUY SINDELL *and* MILO SINDELL



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Hidden Strengths

Unleashing the Crucial
Leadership Skills
You Already Have

Thuy Sindell and Milo Sindell



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Hidden Strengths

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To Ava;

*an old soul in a child's body, whose charm and
wisdom enlighten us every day.*

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Introduction

All of us would like to know the secret of great leadership. Well, here's the secret: It depends. It depends on what you are naturally good at, what you are terrible at, and what you decide to develop—those Hidden Skills that are in the middle.

My name is Thuy (pronounced TWEE) Sindell. I've been an executive coach since the late 1990s, and I am also the president of Skyline Group's Coaching Division. I've worked with hundreds of business leaders over the years, and this is my opportunity to share with you the patterns and themes I've observed and the ways I've supported leaders in their growth. I have a no-nonsense style, so you can expect the information in this book to be direct and to get you quickly on your leadership path.

My name is Milo Sindell. Thuy and I work together, have written four books together, *and* we are happily married. I head Skyline Group's C4X Division, which is our hybrid technology coaching solution, as well as drive the direction and market position of Skyline. I have a passion for helping leaders make an impact on the world. I wrote this book to provide a proven methodology for lifelong learning and professional development to both current and emerging leaders.

We have worked with many companies—from hi-tech companies to insurance companies and everything in between. We have helped employees to increase their effectiveness in various departments and in positions like engineering and sales. Across professions and industries, we have noted certain patterns in human behavior and,

more important, consistent processes for identifying and developing the right skills at the right time to get you to your next level. We are talking, of course, about your Hidden Strengths.

Research has shown that effective leaders evolve and grow throughout their careers, whereas failed leaders get stuck in a pattern of overusing their strengths to the point of staleness.¹ Our emphasis on the relationship between constant learning, increasing agility, and long-term leadership success is not new. What is new is our system for creating a growth mind-set, identifying learning opportunities, and setting the stage for your ongoing professional evolution as an aspiring or current leader.

Many leaders and aspiring leaders usually concentrate on trying to leverage their Natural Strengths (the top 20 percent of skills) or minimize their Weaknesses (the bottom 10 percent). Our tendency as humans is to focus on the extremes. We distill things down to what we don't do well and try to fix them, or we rely on what comes easily and lean on our strengths.

Let's use Barbara, a woman we worked with a few years ago, as an example. Barbara believed that if she could only "fix" her weakness of being a poor presenter, she would be a great leader. Great leadership, however, depends on who you are, your environment, and what you are being called upon to achieve. There is no one weakness you need to fix to get there or one formula that works for everyone. Personalized learning is the key. That's why executive coaching is such a fast-growing solution to developing leaders.

What we have found in our executive coaching experience is that the most fertile ground for leadership and professional growth is the 70 percent of skills that fall in the middle of your range. These are your Hidden Strengths; you are not great at them (yet), but you're certainly not failing in those areas either. This is where your Hidden Strengths are hiding out, waiting to be unleashed.

We want to raise people's awareness of their Hidden Strengths. Everyone has them, and everyone can develop them! We know from experience that constantly identifying and developing your Hidden

Strengths are the keys to career and leadership development in today's evolving work environment. In this book, we share this highly effective results-oriented approach to leadership.

Imagine if you stayed locked in the belief that what worked well yesterday will work well today—and tomorrow and the day after that. You would eventually figure out that doing what you always do leads to professional stagnation. Alternately, the Hidden Strengths methodology shows you how to tap into and transform underdeveloped skills for ongoing professional development throughout your career.

The first part of this book introduces the concept of Hidden Strengths and explores the immense potential of this middle range of skills as a source for continued growth. The second part is a guide to assessing and getting familiar with your Hidden Strengths, your Natural Strengths, and your Weaknesses. The final part is a road map for determining which of your Hidden Strengths best supports your goals.

One last thing: *Hidden Strengths* is a book for leaders and aspiring leaders—basically, anybody who is motivated to learn more about themselves and how they can grow in their careers. We see leadership as a mentality. It involves being proactive about how you present yourself to the world whether you're an individual contributor, a middle-level manager, or a CEO.

When leadership is a state of mind, you prime yourself to grow and succeed, no matter your level or position. In other words, leadership development is professional development. And at each stage of your career, identifying and developing your Hidden Strengths are the means to unleashing the crucial leadership skills you already have. There's a gold mine of opportunity in the middle!

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About Hidden Strengths

Part 1 provides an overview of the Hidden Strengths methodology and why we believe it is a powerful way to optimize your continued leadership development. We explore the assumptions around the development of skills and set the groundwork for how you can transform Hidden Strengths into Learned Strengths at the top of your skill set.

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What Are Hidden Strengths?

When we are faced with a new challenge—playing a new game, building a new relationship, or getting a promotion—we usually rely on what we consider our strengths. And why not? Shouldn't what has worked for us in the past work in the future?

On the other end of the skill spectrum, however, we tend to get mired in futile attempts to fix things and improve the skills that are our true weaknesses. Our glaring shortcomings become the most obvious targets for improvement. Why is it so easy to focus on the extremes—our strengths and weaknesses—and overlook the gold that lies in the middle? This book is about what lies between what you are already great at and what you are inherently just not good at doing: your Hidden Strengths. These underdeveloped skills are your richest resources for growth.

In our experience working with hundreds of leaders, we have identified twenty-eight skills that are necessary to achieve professional success (see Chapter 3). What we have also found is that for each person, these twenty-eight skills fall into three buckets: Natural Strengths, Weaknesses, and Hidden Strengths (Figure 1).

1. Natural Strengths (the top 20 percent): the abilities you default to because they come easily
2. Weaknesses (the bottom 10 percent): the things you are simply not good at and will probably never be good at
3. Hidden Strengths (the middle 70 percent): the things you neither excel nor fail at

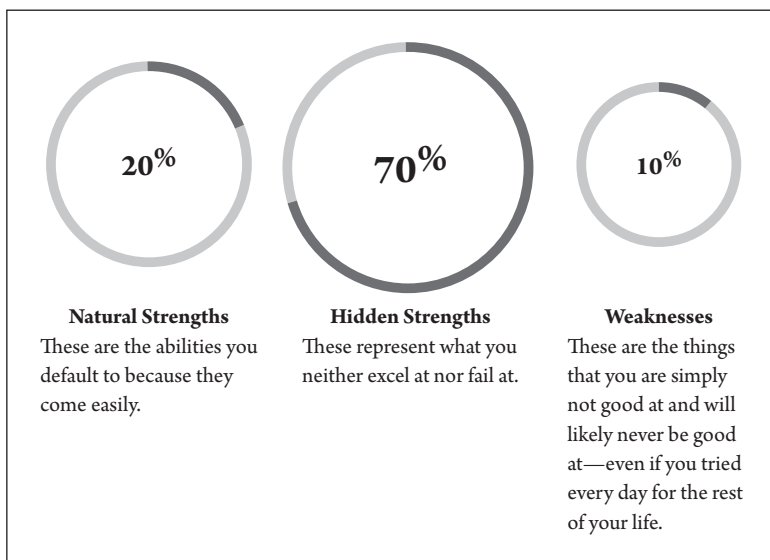


Figure 1. The Three Buckets of Skills

Despite being the largest pool, the skills in the middle are often overlooked by people who are too busy relying on their strengths or working on improving their weaknesses; that's why we call them "hidden." Effective leaders evolve and grow throughout their careers, whereas failed leaders get stuck in a pattern of overusing their strengths.² It is important to call out that our emphasis on the relationship between continual growth and long-term leadership success is not new. What is new is our system for creating a growth mind-set, identifying learning opportunities, and setting the stage for your ongoing professional evolution.

Why Hidden Strengths?

The subject of strengths in both popular and business culture has been a positive force helping raise the bar on personal and professional development. In *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, the book that

ostensibly started the strengths movement, Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton³ define a *strength* as a combination of the following:

1. Your talents (natural traits or propensities)
2. The knowledge required (both content/classroom-related and experiential)
3. The skills (or steps) you need to actually do it

When these three components—talents, knowledge, and skills—come together naturally, we call it a Natural Strength (Figure 2). What is the likelihood of this occurring? The answer is about 20 percent—as in your top 20 percent of skills.

Understanding what you are naturally good at is very valuable in finding the right job or career path. The more overlap there is between what you are required to do and what you are inherently good at, the easier your life will be. Conversely, finding yourself in situations where you are forced to rely on your Weaknesses—meaning areas

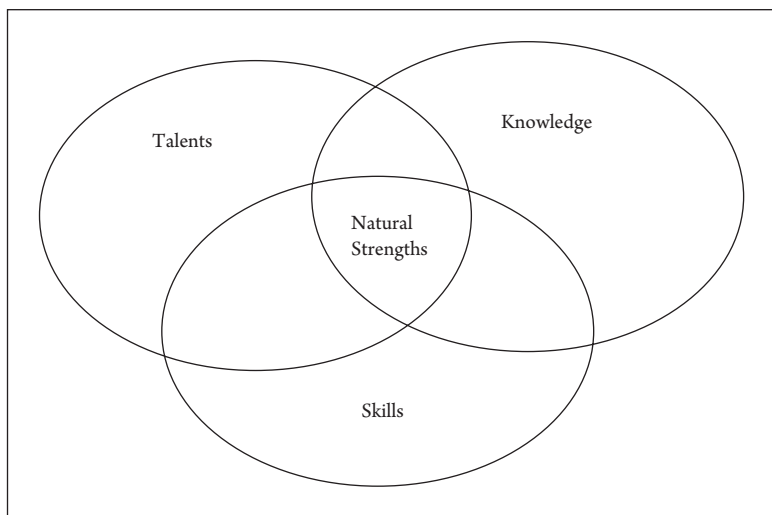


Figure 2. Natural Strengths

where you have no talents, knowledge, or skills—will make it much more difficult to be successful in your chosen profession. From a job security and personal well-being standpoint, you should not be in a role that requires you to rely heavily on your Weaknesses.

Understanding your Natural Strengths and Weaknesses is most relevant for determining job fit. Awareness of these two extremes sets the parameters that allow you to find your place in the work world. Where Hidden Strengths come into play is in the ongoing evolution of your career. For the vast majority of us, the skills we are hired for or are naturally good at in a given role will not be the skills we will need to progress. So how do we remain agile and ensure continued professional development? The answer here is by developing the rich pool of Hidden Strengths in our middle 70 percent.

Developing Hidden Strengths is fairly straightforward. Anybody can do it! First, it requires identifying which of your skills fall in the middle 70 percent range. You can find the Hidden Strengths Self-Assessment to help you with this first step at HiddenStrengths.com. Second, you must identify which of your Hidden Strengths you want to focus on (there will be many to choose from!), depending on your professional goals. Third, with practice and focus, you can begin to develop those Hidden Strengths and move them from the middle 70 percent to the top of your skill set.

Take this example: Jenny is an individual contributor in the Finance Department. She has a natural talent for *Influencing Others*, but she has never had the opportunity to use it. To unleash this Hidden Strength, she needs the knowledge and skills to reveal it. But what if her boss never gives her the opportunity to lead? Because she is not familiar with the existence of this Hidden Strength, she may never ask for leadership responsibility. Resulting in a lost opportunity to grow into a leadership role.

Here's another case to consider: Reese, a middle manager in a paper factory, is intent on moving up the career ladder. At the moment, his Natural Strengths seem to be well aligned with his job, but he is ambitiously focused on what comes next. He takes the Hidden Strengths assessment and discovers that *Influencing Others* is one of

his Hidden Strengths. He sees how this skill would be helpful if he were to be promoted to regional manager, so he takes the time to learn about it and practices developing it. Unfortunately, influencing others doesn't come naturally to him—it's not a talent—but with time and experience, he develops the knowledge and skills to be quite influential. *Influencing Others* becomes a Learned Strength for him, and by practicing on the job, he has proven to his boss that he's ready for more leadership responsibility.

Unlike Natural Strengths, identifying and transforming your Hidden Strengths into Learned Strengths are actions you control and drive. You decide how to evolve, grow, and change to meet the demands of the world around you. We look at this as not only empowering but exciting! Even if the stars don't align and endow you with all the right Natural Strengths, you can still become a leader and top performer in your chosen field. The first critical step is an awareness of your Hidden Strengths.

The Risk of Focusing on Weaknesses

The problem with focusing on weaknesses is that it takes a tremendous amount of effort to move the needle to a point where you can demonstrate improvement. Using economic terms, the investment in resources (i.e., time, dollars, and energy) and opportunity costs (i.e., not focusing on other skill development opportunities that yield higher returns quicker), result in a negative return. We suggest a bandage approach for managing your Weaknesses: avoid or delegate them if you can, or learn to do them adequately if you must, knowing full well you might never be great at it.

In situations where you have to perform despite a weakness, you should invest the necessary time and energy to become proficient, but you shouldn't try to turn your weaknesses into strengths. For example, if you are a CEO of a publicly traded company and you are horrible at giving presentations, you don't have the luxury of delegating this kind of responsibility. In this case, you will have to learn to speak publicly with a minimum level of competence.

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