We all know people who are questioning what they are doing with their lives. They question if they are in the right job, their choice of vocation, the place they work, their choices in their personal life, and the list goes on. Because they are unsure of who they are, they are unsure about life in general. When a person does not have a sense of their talents and strengths they will be awash in a sea of ambiguity. The ability to delineate one’s strengths and craft a position around those in our professional and personal lives spells success or failure. The ability to match our personal strengths with our vocational and personal circumstances determines if we will live a life of value, or disorder.

The best advice we can give to others and ourselves in leadership positions is to clearly articulate one’s strengths, build our careers around them, and create the passion that comes from a commitment to synergize the organization around these values and visions.

Underutilizing important signature strengths is a major issue in health care today.

Signature strengths can be realized only when these strengths are engaged in a personal mission of mastery to a level of devotion to a higher mission.

Leading from strength must be applied personally first, and with the organization second.

What Were You Born to Do?

No one is created equal to another person on this earth. We each have individual strengths that are so unique that they can truly be called our “signature strengths.” Unfortunately, as our schools and life experience try to mold us to resemble an image, it is easy to forget that our strengths are our unique skills. Our DNA creates a uniqueness that is very special for each of us. The problem lies when a mismatch between the job and that person’s strengths occurs. Underutilizing these very important signature strengths is a major issue in health care today.

Buckingham and Clifton (2001) reference Gallup Poll results that indicate that only 20% of employees working in large corporations believe that their strengths are utilized in their position and organization. Obviously this presents a huge gap in the ability to do good work. When people are in positions where their expertise is first tapped, and secondly utilized in innovative and creative ways, a high-performing organization is created. With only 20% of people in the survey believing this is the case, there is a major productivity gap in this country.

Unfortunately, by the time people complete their educational journey and join an organization, they know what they don’t do well, and are unsure of their strengths.

At the end of our days, will we be able to say that life was wonderful and rewarding, and that we crafted a life that maximized our signature strengths? If the answer is no, then we missed a great opportunity to live the life we were born to do. Buckingham and Clifton (2001) quote Benjamin Franklin as saying that wasted strengths were like “sundials in the shade” (p. 12). Sundials were created to do good, but if they are never placed in the sun, they will never realize their
potential. Unfortunately, many people experience only the shade in our organizations.

Finding Your Strengths

Buckingham and Clifton (2001) suggest three tools to establish your strengths: (a) distinguish your natural talent from what you can learn, (b) identify your dominant talents, and (c) develop a language to describe these skills to others. These authors offer a self-assessment that includes 34 themes of strengths that can be aggregated into a description of one’s personal strengths. This “StrengthsFinder” system provides a way to assess your strengths, and also skills to manage people with these strengths. The ultimate outcome of this model is managing people of different strengths and building a strength-based organization where no one will say her/his strengths are not used.

A clear paradigm shift is in order. People beginning a career in management must know and operate from their strengths, not their weaknesses. Synergy happens when the position we are in matches our strengths and when employee’s strengths are matched to the work of the organization. We must identify our innate strengths, determine which of our weaknesses can be managed with further education or mentoring, and find positions where our weaknesses are not part of the major requirements of the position. We must do the same for the people we lead.

The Necessary Four Plus Spirit

Signature strengths can be realized only when these strengths are engaged in a personal mission of mastery to a level of devotion to a higher mission. Farber (2004) describes a model of cultivating love, generating energy, inspiring audacity, and providing proof as the four pillars that will lead to the re-engagement of people and their leaders in the work they were born to do.

Beyond the necessary four, however, there is also that intangible that many people refer to as the soul or spirit of leadership. Without the visible demonstration of love and passion for the work, leaders fail. John McCain (2004) quotes Napoleon as stating, “Courage is like love. It must have hope to nourish it” (p. 20). In an interview (Lucier, 2004), Herb Kelleher, the chairman of Southwest Airlines, states that his airline company does not train people to be something they are not. His people do not have to put on a mask and feel artificial and constrained by the workplace. They are encouraged to be themselves. Kelleher quotes Robert Frost as saying, “Isn’t it a shame that people’s minds work furiously until they get to work?” (p. 122). Farber (2004) quotes Kouzes and Posner: “Leadership is the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations” (p. 8). A leader can have many signature strengths, but if the ability to mobilize people toward a shared aspiration is not one of them, then the person will fail as a leader. Bing (2004) also reminds us that if you want others to sacrifice and commit to you, you must also be committed to die for yourself and also to live for yourself. You must be willing to make as much or more of a commitment than you are asking others to make.

Leading From Strength:
What to Do

Leading from strength must be applied personally first, and with the organization second. The first step is to know your own strengths very well. You are the CEO of your own company, which is you. It is necessary that you know your strengths, where they will and will not fit, what sells and what doesn’t about you. It’s important to keep that view of yourself clearly in mind at all times. There are many ways of obtaining this evaluation. It is necessary for a clear external view of your strengths. The second step is to build a support system of people and processes that supports your strengths and strengthens your weaknesses. For example, if you are not good at reading people, find someone who is and partner with that person to help in employment decisions and performance coaching. Partner with someone who is better at strategy than you are and build a coalition with that person where you can help with that person’s weakness and she can help with yours.

The third step is to be open rather than clandestine about your strengths and weaknesses and your plan to work with these traits. An excellent nurse who is promoted to a management position in an area that he is not as clinically familiar needs to acknowledge his lack of skills in this area and his plan to develop a clinical advisor group of staff nurses and advanced practice nurses to advise him on clinical issues. You will gain confidence from the staff with this approach rather than continually trying to become a clinical expert in this area. The fourth step is to similarly evaluate your area of responsibility to determine the strengths; the fifth step is to do a gap analysis of the effectiveness of this set of strengths in relationship to what you need in your area to achieve excellence. Perhaps your predecessor was very strong in empathy, communication, and connectedness, but lacked hard core clinical knowledge of how to achieve excellence in outcomes. To be successful, you will need to achieve a holistic mix of people who can do all of the tasks necessary to achieve a high-performing unit, which is the sixth step of creating a future of excellence.

Embedded in all of these steps is the constant question of how to mobilize people to become passionate about their strengths and the vision for their future. Success isn’t a matter of steps. Its building a program of strength that all will believe in and want to embrace.

Summary

All of us have signature strengths that make us unique and valuable. There are talents we were born with and the ones we have perfected over the years. If these are utilized well it will allow us to live out our inborn destiny. The good news about nursing is that there are many very different kinds of positions where one can find a niche that fits her signature strengths. Without a match, we will live our lives as a sundial in the shade. Where there is a match, we will live as we were born to live, as sundials in the sun, creating value for those around us. Our task is to find that sunlight for ourselves and our staff and to position all of us to work in the light of our signature strengths.$

REFERENCES