

Kelly Can: Leveraging strengths across the team

Written by Julie Desmond
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Strengthsfinder is a personality-test-slash-life-management-tool that focuses on playing from strengths, rather than training hard in areas where a person is not truly wired to succeed. Someone who competes in Olympic curling, for example, might also enjoy a game of ice hockey with friends, but winning a gold in both sports is pretty unlikely. People who want to take home a medal in anything know they need to focus their time and efforts developing talents they already possess.

Carrie Cunningham is founder of Cunningham Shift, an executive coaching firm, and she stopped into our office recently to conduct some training with our large group. We had all been assessed and knew what our strengths were, according to the Strengthsfinder system. I was already a believer, and my mind hasn't changed on that. For starters, the assessment is uncannily accurate. Taking the same test year after year, my top strengths don't change, even though I feel I have grown and developed new skills and uncovered new talents over time.

During the training, Cunningham helped us all to understand each other's inherent strengths, putting our team in a position to capitalize on our diversity. The goal is to become a stronger force not by working harder but by passing the work around in a smarter way.

The benefits of operating this way became apparent immediately. I told Cunningham about an idea I had for an event (one of my strengths is Ideation: I am an idea machine. Let me know if you need one). I asked her, "Looking over my list of strengths, do you see anything there that says I can make this event happen the way I envision it?"

Cunningham thought a while and then said, "No."

Sigh.

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Then she added, "But Kelly can. Kelly does this stuff in her sleep."

I've known since day one that Kelly and I have rose colored glasses with very different prescriptions. She likes details and parameters and policies and guides. In tech-speak, she's more waterfall than agile; she probably checks off her task list in order. Usually, I don't. Have a task list. And I was extremely grateful to have a co-worker around whose talents were different from mine.

When I explained my concept to Kelly, she was immediately all-in. "No problem," she said. "I can do that in my sleep."

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