

What's So Great About Being Well-Rounded?

Focus on your strengths.

By SANDRA BIENKOWSKI



Marcus Buckingham is a leadership expert, internationally renowned speaker and *New York Times* best-selling author of several books, including *First, Break All the Rules; Now Discover Your Strengths* and *Find Your Strongest Life: What the Happiest and Most Successful Women Do Differently*. He's the founder of TMBC, a management consulting company, and has been hailed as a visionary by corporations such as Toyota, Coca-Cola and Microsoft. He has appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Larry King Live* and been featured in major newspapers.

SUCCESS: What are the best ways for people to discover their strengths?

Marcus Buckingham: It's ironic that your strengths can be so easy to overlook, because they're clamoring for your attention in the most basic way: Using them makes you feel strong.

All you have to do is teach yourself to pay attention. Try to be conscious of yourself and how you feel as you're completing your day-to-day tasks. Most of the time, we're so focused on getting our work done that we don't really have time to notice how we feel about it. At the end of the day, we go home and tell our loved ones that it was a good day or a bad day, but we haven't made the effort to notice

why the day feels good or bad as it happens. When you make the conscious effort to notice yourself at work (or at play, for that matter), you will find that you experience what I call "strong-moments" throughout your day—times when you feel invigorated, inquisitive, successful. Those moments are the best clues as to what your strengths are. There's also a simple acronym to help you recognize the signs of strength: SIGN.

S—Success: Do you feel a sense of accomplishment about finishing this task?

I—Instinct: Do you instinctively look forward to this task?

G—Growth: Are your synapses firing? Are you mentally focused?

N—Needs: Does this task fulfill one of your needs?

If you notice yourself feeling any of those feelings while doing a task, chances are that activity is one of your strengths.

Why is it so important for people to be aware of their strengths?

MB: It's important to discover your strengths because the luckiest people are the ones who get to say to themselves every day: "Today, I had the opportunity to do what I am most invigorated by and what I do best." But

the people who can say that probably haven't gotten there by luck. They've gotten to a point of high satisfaction in their lives precisely because they have made the effort to figure out what strengthens them (even if they wouldn't put it in those terms). And based on that knowledge of their strengths, they have intentionally made decisions that will allow them to play to their strengths instead of worrying about things that weaken them. Everybody talks about their "dream job," but it's important to remember that you can push your current job, no matter what it is, in the direction of a dream job. The more you consciously decide to use your strengths, the more satisfying your current job will be.

Why do so many people think they need to be well-rounded, instead of focusing on their strengths to discover what they should be doing?

MB: People feel the need to be well-rounded because society gives us that message from the time we're schoolchildren. If a child comes home with a report card that shows five A's and only one C, chances are the parents are going to spend the majority of their time talking about improving on the C, rather than on celebrating the A's. This continues into our working lives, where performance reviews often consist of a brief pat on the

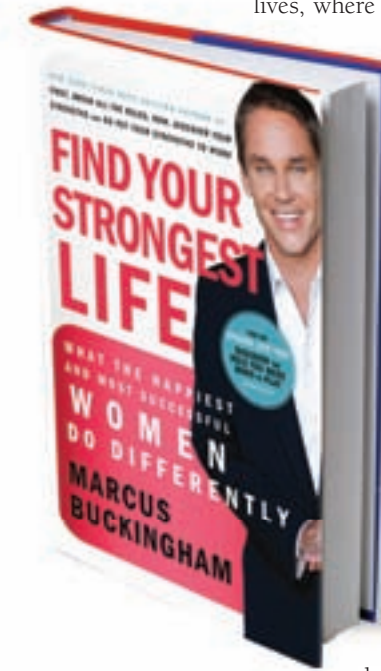
back for those areas that are working well and then a substantial focus on our "areas of opportunity." We internalize this. The problem with focusing on what doesn't work is that attention amplifies everything. If you focus on the problem with the intent of fixing it, despite your best intentions, that problem becomes magnified. Instead, we need to shift our focus and ask, "What's working well, and how can I get more of that?"

What is the secret to using our strengths to be happy?

MB: I believe we are all innately wise. When we make poor decisions, it's not because we've listened to our intuitions or yearnings too intensely; it's because we haven't listened to them enough. Listen to yourself very carefully, catch the moments that invigorate you, and cradle them—that means concentrate on them, celebrate them, look at them from new angles, follow where they lead, and you will end up making the right decisions for you.

In your new book, *Find Your Strongest Life*, you found that women's satisfaction has dropped steadily over the past 40 years. What's the reason, and how can women and men find more satisfaction in life?

MB: If you look at the happiest and most successful women—whether they are working or not, or have families or don't—they seem to realize that the challenge of life is not to juggle; the challenge is to catch—to select a few clear, strong moments from each aspect of your life and reach for those, draw them in to you. If you want to live a life that fulfills you, then you need to know, in each part of your life, which are the specific moments that really renew your energy and bring you joy, and go after them. You want to imbalance your life toward creating more of those specific moments. It's a very different approach from what most people are taught. **S**



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