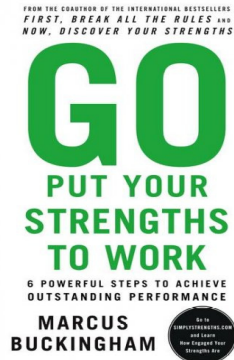


# Go Put Your Strengths to Work

## *6 Powerful Steps to Achieve Outstanding Performance*



**Author:** Marcus Buckingham  
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### ■ The Big Idea

You need to learn how to take your existing job, and each week, reshape it around your strengths—even in the face of interference from the outside world. To do this, you need to master a new discipline that brings order and focus to a series of incremental moves.

1. **Bust the myths.** You will succeed in putting your strengths to work only if you believe that capitalizing on them is the best way to compete.
2. **Get clear.** Sift through the deluge of each week's activities, responsibilities, and relationships and get clear on which are strengths and which are weaknesses.
3. **Free your strengths.** Generate new ideas about how your strengths can help the team and put these ideas into practice.
4. **Stop your weaknesses.** Learn the best strategies for lessening the impact of your weaknesses on the team and use effective tools to generate ideas and apply them in the real world.
5. **Speak up.** Master the art of talking about your strengths without bragging and your weaknesses without whining.
6. **Build strong habits.** Week after week, year after year, stay in control, always push toward activities that strengthen you, and remain ever vigilant for those that drag you down.

## **Features of the Book**

**Reading Time: 6 weeks, 298 pages**

In *First, Break All the Rules* (1999, with Curt Coffman), Buckingham offered front-line managers valuable guidelines on why and how to avoid the mistake of coercing people into overcoming their weaknesses (which only serves to cripple potential) and, instead, reach top-level performance by helping them use their strengths.

Now, *Discover Your Strengths* (2002, with Donald O. Clifton) continued this theme by showing businesspeople why they must not become experts in their weaknesses and providing a course in how to label their strength/talents and leverage them for personal development, management effectiveness, and organizational success.

*The One Thing You Need to Know* (2005) expanded this theme of leveraging one's strengths and provided a fundamental course in outstanding achievement, which captured the essence of great managing, great leading, and career success. In effect, this essence is a warning about what generally happens when people find themselves in roles that play to their strengths. They experience some success; this success leads to new opportunities, roles, and responsibilities, but only a few of these new opportunities actually allow them to continue using their strongest capabilities.

Buckingham calls this phenomenon, in which one's job slowly drifts away from one's strengths, career-creep. It is a situation in which people awaken one morning to find that they are bored, unfulfilled, frustrated, drained and, in the words of Henry David Thoreau, leading lives of "quiet desperation."

**Go Put Your Strengths to Work** is the "to-thine-own-self-be-true" antidote. It outlines a six-week course on identifying what is best and most effective in you and then applying it in the real world. As the Summary indicates, this course consists of a series of structured

exercises. Thus, this is not a book of theory (you will find no index, bibliographic notes, or bibliography), but a practical workbook, containing all the exercises, tools, and resources you will need to take control of your work and unleash the full force of your strengths. For example, you will find:

- the Strengths Engagement Track™ (SET) survey, a measurement of how engaged your strengths are, compared to the rest of the working world, which you access at [SimplyStrengths.com](http://SimplyStrengths.com) by entering an ID code found inside the book's jacket;
- the “Trombone Player Wanted” video series (also accessed at [SimplyStrengths.com](http://SimplyStrengths.com))—six short films, each corresponding to the same numbered steps in the book, to help bring the strengths movement to life;
- forms to facilitate completing the numerous exercises and questionnaires found in each chapter (e.g., mythbusting forms, reMemo™ pages for capturing strengths and weaknesses, strength and weakness statement cards, StrongWeek Plan forms, etc.);
- charts that summarize key points of each chapter;
- the experiences of real people as they work the process and learn how to put their strengths to work; and
- a Resource Guide for facilitating team participation in the six-step discipline.

Buckingham takes care to explain every detail of how to use these tools most effectively, so despite the fact that there are a lot of things to do, you're carefully guided through every step of the process, and given alternative approaches that you can choose, depending upon how you, as an individual, learn.

Each step in the discipline constitutes a week of reading, action, and learning, and each step builds on the one before. This is not the kind of book you can read in one or two sittings, nor will you find much value in reading the book from cover to cover without stopping and immersing yourself in the process. Throughout, you will be asked to put what you've learned into practice immediately.

Moreover, these are not theoretical exercises that you can do away from your work in the sanctuary of your den. Rather, because your existing work is the raw material for discovering your strengths and weakness, and for learning how to push your time toward the former and away from the latter, you are required to focus on your work as never before. The goal is to equip yourself with the *routines*, as well as the *insights*, that will get you “unstuck,” engage your strengths immediately, and make this engagement permanent.

So, as Buckingham says, (and we concur) it's critical that you read one step per week (each chapter corresponds to a step), and during the week, do the relevant activities. Stay on track as closely as you can, week by week, and try to resist the temptation to jump

ahead. The author maintains that if you keep up this rhythm, by the end of the book, you will know how to take a stand for your strengths and leverage them as never before.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Beginning with *First, Break All the Rules* and *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, Marcus Buckingham posited the idea that, because excellence is not the opposite of failure, all that can be learned from mistakes are the characteristics of mistakes. Thus, in order to learn about success, it is necessary to study success. This radical idea jump-started the strengths movement, which has since been dominated by efforts to *label* what is right with things.

Although this movement is now sweeping the worlds of business, public service, economics, education, faith, and charity, research has shown that most people still do not come close to using all of their strengths on the job. Thus, Buckingham believes it is time to progress into the second phase of the movement—the *action* stage. **Go Put Your Strengths to Work** is a six-step program, offered to take individuals in any business, and at any level, beyond the affirming power of strengths labeling and reveal the hidden dimensions of his or her assets. With structured exercises, the author demonstrates how people can engage with the real world and discover how to use their strengths to make a tangible contribution to themselves and to the organization.

## **PART I: FROM LABELS TO ACTION**

Before the strengths movement, virtually all business and academic inquiry was built on the idea that a deep understanding of failure leads to an equally deep understanding of excellence. Thus, unhappy customers were studied to learn about the happy ones, sickness was examined to learn about health, divorce was analyzed to learn about marriage, and so on. What became evident, however, in virtually every field of endeavor, is that failure and success are not opposites; they are merely different and, therefore, must be studied separately.

While conventional wisdom says that we learn from our mistakes, the strengths movement proposes that the only things learned from mistakes are the characteristics of mistakes. The radical idea at the movement's core is the only way to learn about excellence and success is to study excellence and success.

Fueled by this concept, the first stage of the strengths movement (the current stage) has been dominated by efforts to label what is right with things. The World Bank, for instance, has developed a list of positive labels that capture a country's overall level of well-being, such as social capability, economic self-determination, and sustainability of local customs. This list has replaced its former rankings, which were devised according to the negative qualities of poverty, violence, vulnerability, etc.

In the field of psychology, past descriptors were heavily slanted toward such negative characteristics as neurotic, psychotic, schizophrenic, and depressed. Today, with the addition of labels to describe the positives (e.g., Seligman and Petersen's list of "Character Strengths and Virtues") there is much more of a balance.

In the same vein, *Now, Discover Your Strengths* introduced Gallup's personality profile, now called the Clifton StrengthsFinder™, which measures 34 positive talent themes. Since 2002, more than two million people have taken the profile, and that number is increasing rapidly, demonstrating that humanity feels a deep need to label what is right with its world.

Nonetheless, Buckingham maintains that if this labeling is to be useful, *action*—the necessary next step—must be taken. This is where individuals learn to go beyond the affirming power of a label and engage with the real world. In this way, they are able to discover how to use their strengths to make a tangible contribution and deal with those who do not agree with them about what their strengths are. Putting one's strengths to work is where the real payoff is to be found.

While the labeling stage was driven by the theoretical idea that one learns little about excellence from studying failure, the action stage is grounded in the more pragmatic premise that people and organizations will excel only by amplifying strengths and never by simply fixing weaknesses.

People are their most creative, innovative, and show their best judgment in their areas of greatest strengths. Thus, the best organizations do not focus on people's strengths to make them happier but to make them better performers. This is why these organizations are now so public in their commitment to becoming strengths based.

Nonetheless, the evidence shows that people still have little idea of how to take control of their work and steer it towards those strengths. Despite more than two million individuals taking the Clifton StrengthsFinder profile, when people are asked, "What percentage of a typical day do you spend playing to your strengths?" only 17 percent answer "most of the time." Given this evidence, large organizations seem to be inefficient mechanisms for getting the most out of each employee.

Although Buckingham agrees that the important issue of how to build the kind of workplace where more than two out of ten people use their strengths most of the day deserves a great deal more focus than it is getting, it is not the concern of his six-step discipline. Instead, it asks, “Are you one of the two out of ten who are able to put your strengths to work most of the time? And, if not, how do you get to be?”

On high-performance teams, people say they call upon their strengths more than 75 percent of the time; thus, the challenge for individuals is to increase dramatically how often they play to their strengths. This, in no way, requires casting aside one’s current role and striking out for the perfect dream job, which does not exist, anyway. Whatever a job happens to be, it is comprised of many activities, some invigorating, some neutral, and some depleting or boring. Thus, instead of holding out for perfection, it is possible to take an existing job and each week reshape it around one’s strengths—even in the face of interference from the outside world. Accomplishing this task, says Buckingham, requires mastering a new discipline that brings order and focus to a series of incremental moves.

In contrast to the “pull” approach to work, this “push” discipline begins with people taking responsibility for identifying their own strengths and weaknesses and, then, taking a stand for these strengths. No one else, but the individuals involved, knows where they will be their most productive, come up with the best ideas, spontaneously set challenging goals, keep their spontaneity sparked, or willingly strive for that extra ounce of effort. When individuals put this discipline into practice each week, they will gradually tilt the playing field so that the *best* of their job becomes *most* of their job.

Thus, individuals must push colleagues, managers, and customers, along with the many expectations these people hold, away from activities that call upon their weaknesses and toward more and more of the opportunities, training, teams, projects, and colleagues that will allow them to play to their strengths.

Buckingham is not, by any means, advocating that people swagger into work and demand that they be allowed to do only strength-based activities. Rather, he is proposing that, each week, individuals start his six-step discipline, beginning with the simple question, “How will I ensure that I put my strengths into play just a little more this week than I did last week?” and ending with building one’s job around one’s best.

Although this approach may sound radical to managers, it is exactly what they want their employees to do—to push themselves to load up on their strengths so that they can be more productive today and more resilient tomorrow, creatively coming up with ideas and seizing the initiative. In other words, managers want their employees to take responsibility for their own performance and development.

## **PART II: SIX STEPS TO PUTTING YOUR STRENGTHS TO WORK**

Buckingham has found, from repeated polls, that 87 percent agree, or strongly agree, that finding their weaknesses and fixing them is the best way to achieve outstanding performance. They believe that: (1) as they grow, their personalities change, (2) they will grow the most in their areas of weakness, and (3) a good team member deliberately volunteers his or her strengths to the team most of the time.

### **STEP ONE**

Thus, the first step, for individuals who count themselves among this majority, is to **confront and bust these three myths** that keep so many locked in a remedial mindset:

Although 66 percent believe that as people grow, their personality changes, personality tests confirm that as we grow, we become more of who we already are. This is not to suggest that human beings experience no transformation at all—quite the contrary. Dreams, skills, achievements, circumstances and values will all change, but the core—the most dominant aspects of personality—will remain the same. Thus, the goal should not be to transform one's personality but to free up and focus what already exists.

Sixty-one percent believe that people will grow the most in their areas of greatest weakness; however, in reality, the opposite is true. We may not be creative in all aspects of our lives, but whatever our general level of creativity, we will be at our peak in our areas of strength. We may not be naturally inquisitive, optimistic, courageous, and/or ambitious, but we will be our most inquisitive, optimistic, courageous, and ambitious in our areas of strength. And, when we meet obstacles, we will bounce back fastest when those goals center on one of our strengths.

Everyone has development needs—areas demanding improvement—but, because strengths multiply and magnify individuals, we learn, grow, and develop the most in the areas of our greatest strengths. It comes down to nature's design to make human beings more competitive. When organisms find their natural advantages, and seek out unoccupied niches where they can capitalize on these advantages, they are more likely to thrive. This specialization, like an adaptive immune system and opposable thumbs, is nature's strategy for winning.



Finally, because individuals are told to be flexible, adaptable, well rounded, always ready and willing to step in and play whatever role the team may need them to play, 91 percent of people believe that a good team member does whatever it takes to help the team. Nonetheless, the truth is that, on the most effective teams, members are *not* well rounded. They do not chip in and do whatever the team requires of them. Instead, they live by the reality that a good team member deliberately volunteers his or her strengths to the team most of the time.

They realize that the most responsible thing to do is to identify their own strengths and then determine how to arrange their time and their roles so that they play to these strengths most of the time. They then seek out other team members who are strong where they are weak; thus, the *team* is well rounded, precisely because each of the players is not. Occasionally, each member may have to step outside his or her strengths zone and “pinch-hit,” but this is the exception to teamwork, not the rule. True teamwork occurs only when a complementary set of strengths comes together in a coordinated whole.

## **STEP TWO**

The second step in the process of putting strengths to work involves **getting clear about what your strengths are**. Strengths are the very qualities that could make people look their best, and yet when asked to detail them, most individuals lack the kind of detail that would make them worth listening to. For example, often, when people describe one of their strengths as liking to deal with people, they fail to mention which people—strangers, friends, customers, or prospects—or what they are actually doing with these people—selling to them, taking care of them, coaching them, calming them, inspiring them, etc.

Labels (e.g, the talent themes found on the Clifton StrengthsFinder profile) are not strengths. Rather, strengths are defined by actual activities—the things you do consistently and near perfectly—that are made up of your talents, skills, and knowledge. These ingredients show which aspects of your strengths are learnable and which are not. And, they reveal which aspects of your strengths will transfer from one situation to another (namely, talents) and which tend to be situation specific (skills and knowledge).

Nonetheless, in order to capture the *specific activities* that constitute strengths, you must go beyond the distinction between talents, skills, and knowledge and pinpoint how your actual activities, during a regular week, make you feel. In other words, you must look for the telltale SIGNs (**S**uccess, **I**nstinct, **G**rowth, and **N**eeds).



According to Buckingham, how effective you feel at an activity—your “self-efficacy” is a solid first indicator of a strength. And, because of this proficiency, others rely on you to continue with these tasks, tell you to invest time and energy learning how to do them even better, steer your week toward them, and seek out opportunities and roles where success depends on them. Nonetheless, *success* cannot be the only criterion, one must also be *energized* by the task. Thus, strengths must have an “I-can’t-help-but” quality that instinctively makes you look forward to performing them.

Because of nature’s design, the biological underpinnings of strengths are the presence of thick branches of synaptic connections in the human brain. Human beings grow the most new connections (allowing them to learn the most, come up with the most new ideas, and have the best insights) in those areas where they already have the most connections. However, people cannot see inside their own brains and identify these thick branches, so they must be on the lookout for how a thicket of firing synapses *feels* to them.

Buckingham says it feels so easy that whole hours fly by like minutes. It feels like interest and inquisitiveness to such an extent that you practice, read up on, and refine the activity with new techniques so that you can grow. And, it feels like true happiness—happiness and focus rarely exist, one without the other. These activities are not without effort, but the effort seems effortless—you become totally immersed in the activity, and you feel challenged, but in a way you like.

Whereas Instinct refers to how you feel *before* the activity, and Growth to feelings *during* the activity, Needs point to how you feel immediately after completing the task. These activities seem to fill an innate need—when you complete them, you may feel *physically* drained, but not *psychologically* depleted. Instead, you feel fulfilled, powerful, restored and, just as importantly, authentic. This “all-right-with-the-world” sensation is addictive, and the need to experience it repeatedly is what creates the Instinct to look forward to the activity, to volunteer for it, and to seek out situations in which you can experience it.

Putting these four indicators together garners the simplest and most useful definition of a strength—those activities that make you feel strong. And, by contrast, weaknesses are those activities that make you feel weak. Thus, you need to be aware of your Instincts, Growth, and Needs because they drive your Success. In other words, *appetites* drive long-term *abilities*.

Of course, conventional wisdom says that diligent practice drives success; but, because appetites determine which activities you yearn to practice, and which you are repelled by, you will not practice all activities with the same degree of effort. Appetites fuel practice, and practice drives performance: The **I** draws you in, the **G** keeps you focused, and the **N** makes you feel great, which, in turn, fuels the **I**, and so on.

Unfortunately, people are trained from an early age to look outside themselves (to parents, teachers, managers, and performance appraisals) for “objective” assessments of their “true” strengths. Yes, *performance* feedback is legitimate but, as regards the activities that make you *feel* strong, you (not managers, performance appraisals or, even psychologists) are the only, and the best, person qualified to identify them. In this arena, personal perspective will always be sure and true, and outstanding performance will follow, if you pay close attention to your appetites and capture, clarify, and confirm them.

According to Buckingham, the challenge in the months and years to come can be summed up in the question, “How can I play to my strengths a little more this week than I did last week?” Meeting this challenge begins by creating three Strength Statements that are precise, distinct, specific, and blow you away every time you read them. First, capture which specific activities, over the course of a week, play to your strengths. Next, clarify the specific activities captured and arrive at statements that are both precise enough to preserve the original emotional punch and general enough to be applied each week. For example:

1. “I feel strong when I interview someone who excels at his job and explore why he excels.”
2. “I feel strong when I present, but only to a large group of people, on a subject I know a lot about, when I’m completely prepared, and when I know my presentation will further a mission.”
3. “I feel strong when I take the time to study an organization that excels.”

The goal for the coming year will be to discover how to exploit each of strength activities a little more effectively week after week. But, before launching into exactly how to accomplish this, you should first subject your three statements to the Strengths Test™. Your ratings will allow you to confirm, or to question, that each of your Strength Statements does indeed accurately characterize a strength.

Ideally, when you capture, clarify, and confirm your Strength Statements correctly, you know where your power lies—you know that if you could put these strengths into play, you could contribute, tolerate, support, and create much more.

## **STEP THREE**

Unfortunately, because the world at large is, at best, indifferent, the most effective way to **free your strengths and make the most of them** (the third step in the discipline) is to turn the *best* of your job into the *most* of your job by establishing a specific routine—a Strong Week Plan™—that is straightforward enough to do regularly but substantial enough to keep work activities focused on, and moving continuously toward, your strengths.

It consists of two dials: one focuses on the past week and assesses the percentage of time spent playing to strengths. The other predicts how much of the coming week will be spent in this same manner. In this way, you can assess whether your weeks are getting stronger or weaker.

## **STEP FOUR**

The next phase involves identifying two specific actions to be taken each week to free your strengths. These actions will not change a work situation overnight, but if they are specific enough, and if you discipline yourself to follow through, you will create a ripple effect that will transform how your time is spent, week after week.

You may know immediately which two strength actions you can commit to in the coming week, but if not, you can benefit from a sequence of procedures, captured by the word FREE: **F**ocus—identify how these strengths help you in your current job, **R**elease—find the missed opportunities in your current role, **E**ducate—learn new skills and techniques needed to build your strengths, and **E**xpand—build your job around this strength.

Because labeling weaknesses is just as important as labeling strengths, the goal of the fourth step in the discipline is for you to become intimate with three activities that drain you, label them for what they are, and take action to **stop these weaknesses** from corrupting everything on the job.

As with strengths, it is possible to capture these *specific activities* by looking for the inverse of the telltale SIGNs (i.e., the lack of **S**uccess, **I**nstinct, **G**rowth, and **N**eeds). The

next step, of course, involves clarifying three activities by creating Weakness Statements that are specific enough to capture the intensity of your feelings but generic enough to guide you into the next week and beyond (e.g., “I feel weak (drained, bored) when I have to mingle with a large group of people at any kind of gathering.”). Finally, use the Weakness Test™ to confirm that these three activities are indeed your most dominant weaknesses.

Buckingham warns that you should be vigilant about “should-ing”—that faint, but unmistakable, voice in your head that says, “If I want a promotion, I really *should* be making regular presentations to my team, *should* want to be responsible for other people’s work, *should* be more organized, *should* want to make cold calls to develop new customers ...”

Trying to conjure up a yearning for a task just because the boss, society, or even your remedial mindset thinks is something that you *should* do, is a recipe for both disappointment and poor performance. Thus, the most respectful, responsible, and lastingly effective thing you can do is to be clearheaded, strong willed, and figure out a way to cut the “shoulds” out of your life that may prevent you from accurately picking out what weakens you.

When people spend focused time detailing all the weakening activities in their work, they naturally begin to think that they must get out of their present occupations. And, though this is a normal reaction, it is also the most radical. Instead, of this radical (albeit, normal) reaction, they should trust that, by following the six-step discipline, changes will happen, no matter how regimented or bureaucratic the organization.

To get started, turn to the Strong Week Plan, and instead of identifying two actions to free a strength, pick two things to stop a weakness. As before, if you are not lucky enough to know immediately what two actions you can take, select from your top three weaknesses and subject them to a sequence of procedures—captured by the word STOP: **S**top doing the activity and see if anyone notices or cares. **T**eam up with someone who is strengthened by the very activity that weakens you. **O**ffer up one of your strengths, gradually steering your job toward this strength and away from your weakness. And, **P**erceive your weakness from a different perspective.

According to Buckingham, managers are held accountable for the performances of their employees, but because this accountability is inherently frightening, they alleviate the fear by exerting some form of control over *how* the work gets done. Therefore, if an employee tells a manager, “Your ‘how’ weakens me,” that individual is going to run right into the manager’s fear of losing control. Managers instinctively understand their own “hows,” but the “hows” of their employees are alien and scary.

The author also notes that employees have their own fears. For example, when it comes time for individuals to share their strengths with management, they are often afraid of appearing boastful, egotistical, inconsiderate of team needs, or of having strengths that are incompatible with their current roles. In addition, they often fear that their weaknesses will be interpreted as incompetence, laziness, or the tendency to be difficult.

## **STEP FIVE**

Step five—**speak up**—is a sequential guide for helping you through these fears. Specifically, it is about how you can have strong conversations with your manager and describe what strengthens and weakens you. And, it is about doing it in such a way that your manager thinks you are a responsible colleague, looking for ways to contribute more rather than someone trying to make life easier for yourself. The goal is for your manager to actively want to help you maximize your strengths.

Start by having a strengths chat with a family member, friend, colleague or, even in rare instance, a boss—someone who cares and wants you to succeed. This conversation is not about persuading anyone, gaining approval, or asking for help, but is simply about seeking an audience that listens as you try to discover the best way to describe your strengths.

Everyone is comfortable using the language of hyper rationality, characterized by such terms as abilities, skill sets, experience levels, leadership style, promotability, and high potential, but this is the wrong language to describe strengths and weaknesses, which can only be described effectively in emotional terms. Thus, to capture strengths properly, you must use such phrases as: “This *thrills* me.” “I *love* this.” “I *can’t wait* to ...” “I get so *excited* by ...” And, to do your weaknesses justice, employ emotional phrases: “I *can’t stand it* when ...” “I *feel* wasted when ...” “I’m so *bored* by ...”

Buckingham suggests practicing these kinds of conversations with several different friends as a means of finding the phrases that work for you and pushing yourself to become even more specific and vivid. If you cannot find a way for your friends to understand you, then undoubtedly your manager will not understand, and your job will not change in quite the way you wish.

The next stage involves a how-can-I-help-you conversation with your manager to describe one of your strengths and exactly how you can exploit this strength to advance a specific project or improve a certain performance outcome. Thus, you must come to this meeting armed with practical ideas about exactly what you want to do differently, how, when (i.e., a definite timeline), and by how much (concrete numbers).

The goal is for your boss to think, in descending order of importance, that (1) you have great ideas for how to help the team, (2) you have far more initiative than anyone thought, and (3) you know yourself really well. If this outcome is achieved, you will have set yourself up perfectly for subsequent conversations about your weaknesses and how the manager can help you minimize their impact.

After a couple of weeks, schedule practice weakness chats with your friends, using the same guidelines you employed with the strength chats. These conversations are even more critical than the first, because during them, you must practice two skills you are not very good at but must master before the next meeting with your manager. The first involves becoming proficient in claiming weaknesses as weaknesses, and owning them clearly and precisely, rather than hiding them under positive-sounding words and phrases. The second skill is the art of the comeback.

Buckingham notes that whenever someone confesses a weakness, the knee-jerk reaction of others is to offer up a practical tip for overcoming the limitation. The advice is well intended, but no one wants to learn some trick for getting better at a weakness, it will not become easier once “you get into it,” and no one needs a weakness in order to fully appreciate his or her strengths.

Thus, to ensure your conversation stays on track, you must learn how to deflect this advice, using some version of the following: “Thanks, but what I really want to do is spend less time on it so that I can do more and achieve more with my strengths.” No one can argue with your desire to achieve more.

The next meeting with your manager is a how-you-can- help-me conversation. The objective is not to complain about some aspect of your job, or to alert the boss to your personality quirks, but to ask him or her to help you be more productive. In preparation, pick the weakness that distracts you the most from playing to your strengths and develop three or four ideas for minimizing it.

Buckingham notes that this is not about developing momentarily creative strategies but developing the discipline of learning how to describe your weaknesses and devising a few of your own ideas for managing around them. The objective is to come across as a volunteer, trying to do the most with what you have, and not as a petulant whiner, expecting the world to conform to your desires.

## **STEP SIX**

At this juncture, you have captured your strengths and weaknesses, made some difficult decisions, had some productive conversations, and altered how and where you spend your time at work. Ideally, you are playing to your strengths more consistently and more deliberately than you were six weeks ago. Thus, the challenge in the sixth and final step is to continue your progress and accelerate it by **building strong habits**. Buckingham offers five that he insists are absolute musts:

1. Every day look over your three Strength Statements, and your three Weakness Statements, and learn them by heart. They will keep you focused and show you how to stay productive, creative, and resilient. They will also reinforce where you have made the greatest contribution and will indicate where you will make greater contributions in the future.
2. Every week complete a Strong Week Plan.
3. Every quarter, close the books on your strengths. Look back over your Strong Week Plans and identify three tangible achievements in which you contributed more to the team, based on either exploiting your strengths or minimizing your weaknesses. Have a conversation with the boss to preserve in your mind, and in the boss's mind, exactly where and how your strengths have helped. The second objective of this conversation is to provide the raw material for where and how you can contribute more in the next quarter.
4. Twice a year, pick a week and capture, clarify, and confirm your strengths. Maintaining peak levels of performance and contribution throughout your career requires keeping track of how you are growing.
5. Take the Strengths Engagement Track™ (SET) survey every year as a means of measuring your movement, performance, and contribution.

Finally, Buckingham warns that even if you implement these habits rigorously, you will inevitably face a few situations that will slow or halt your progress. Thus, he advises becoming aware of the nine most common obstacles and the action you can take to overcome them. For example:

1. When you are unsure whether you should take a job, remember the best reason is always that the activities of the job intrigue and strengthen you.
2. When you think you should not have taken a job, identify a specific strength, take a stand, volunteer this strength to your team, and see what happens.



3. If you are new to a job, pick one of your strengths and lead with it. Not only will this showcase you at your most confident, it will provide a launching point from which you can start filling in the gaps in your knowledge.
4. If you find yourself constantly overworked, pick one of your frenetic weeks and capture your strengths and weaknesses during that time. Pick your top three strengths and commit to making them a priority for an entire month. You may find that a lot of useless stuff falls by the wayside, leaving you to concentrate on what you do best.
5. When you think your manager does not understand you, the burden falls on you to understand yourself in as much detail as possible. By doing so, you can vividly describe to your manager which activities and situations will draw the best out of you and which will not. However, if the manager is still not open to ways in which you can maximize your strengths and minimize your weaknesses, you may want to consider moving on.
6. If you think your manager is an “idiot,” consider the probability that this person just does things that are wrongheaded, and that cause your department to lose respect within the organization simply because he or she lacks the same strengths you have. Identify one of your strengths, which this person is frustrating; seek out one small situation during the week in which this strength can prove useful to one of your department’s clients; and push yourself to apply it as well as you can. If you do this week after week, your frustration will fade, and your department’s reputation will be enhanced.
7. If you find that you are burned out, remember that burnout is not the result of working long hours on invigorating activities but of working long hours (or even regular hours) on activities that weaken you. Pick a week; capture, clarify, and confirm which activities strengthen and which weaken you; and then start the week-by-week process of pushing your time toward the former and away from the latter.
8. If you believe that, in the grand scheme of things, your job is just not that important, you must look beyond society’s judgments of what is valuable and what is not. Although some work may be more important to the world than your work, you must become deeply comfortable with your own particular strengths. You must realize that your strengths lead you to make a certain kind of contribution. Do your utmost to make this contribution real. And, proudly tell the world that you intend to keep at it.

Whenever you hear that small voice win your head, whispering “maybe you’re not as good as everyone says you are—maybe you don’t really know what you’re doing,” look to this six-step discipline and take confidence in it. According to Buckingham, it is all you need to make your greatest possible contribution for the longest period of time.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

MARCUS BUCKINGHAM SPENT 17 YEARS WITH THE GALLUP ORGANIZATION, HELPING TO LEAD RESEARCH INTO THE WORLD'S BEST LEADERS, MANAGERS, AND WORKPLACES. THIS RESEARCH BECAME THE BASIS FOR TWO BESTSELLING BOOKS: *FIRST, BREAK ALL THE RULES* (COAUTHORED WITH CURT COFFMAN) AND *NOW, DISCOVER YOUR STRENGTHS* (COAUTHORED WITH DONALD O. CLIFTON). HIS THIRD WORK, *THE ONE THING YOU NEED TO KNOW*, EXPANDS THE THEME OF LEVERAGING STRENGTHS TO EXPOSE COUNTERINTUITIVE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GREAT MANAGEMENT AND GREAT LEADERSHIP. BUCKINGHAM, WHO HAS BEEN THE SUBJECT OF IN-DEPTH PROFILES IN *THE NEW YORK TIMES*, *FORTUNE*, *BUSINESSWEEK*, AND *FAST COMPANY*, NOW HAS HIS OWN STRENGTHS-BASED CONSULTING, TRAINING, AND E-LEARNING FIRM.

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