

D O YOU KNOW YOUR STRENGTHS?

by Patricia Hunter

Are you clear about who you are and what value you offer your customers? Why do your customers come back? What is it about you, the business owner, that attracts customers and that adds value?

According to Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton, the authors of *Now Discover Your Strengths* (Free Press, 2001), most of us don't know our strengths. When asked, we can't articulate what makes us perform well and why we gravitate toward certain tasks or opportunities. School and work environments spend years giving us feedback but much of it is designed to tell us what we don't do very well.

Why is it important to understand our own strengths? Knowledge and insight into who we are and what makes us unique contributes greatly to our ability to select careers that connect with our passions and are satisfying. Understanding who we are and how we best perform helps us select the companies we want to work for or the businesses we want to start or to make critical life choices about work and family.

Being able to talk about our strengths and provide examples of how our strengths enable us to contribute is especially critical during career changes, transitions, job searches and small business startups. Tough job markets demand that interviewees skillfully describe their experiences. Difficult economic conditions require that business owners differentiate themselves from the competition. In my coaching practice, a business owner who is adept at describing the business results and accomplishments may not be able to explain how she adds value in her own personal way—what it is about her pattern of strengths that gets the job done so well and attracts customers.

How do we learn what our strengths are? Assessment tools provide excellent data. The authors of *Now Discover Your Strengths* say that "talents, knowledge and skills combine to create our strengths." The book provides a link to the Gallup organization's, StrengthsFinder Profile on the Internet. Five "signature themes of talent" emerge from 34 dominant themes when the profile is completed and scored, providing a personal view of who you are. Feedback instruments such as *Managing for Success™* provide excellent information and are offered by coaches and consultants or employers. Live 360 degree interviews are often coupled with this data. Colleagues, peers, bosses, friends and family can provide feedback.

"Overlooking strengths can be perilous" according to Robert E. Kaplan, in *Harvard Business Review*, March 2002. Failing to recognize a strength can lead to overuse—then it can become a liability. Kaplan describes an executive who sees himself as lacking authority when others see him as commanding—as he tried to be more authoritative, he became overpowering to his staff.

What strengths might you be overusing that are inadvertently getting in your way with your employees or your customers? Do some reading, use an assessment tool, hire a coach, ask your employees and colleagues for feedback...find out!

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