Nearly a decade ago, the Gallup organization unveiled the results of a landmark 30-year research project on the topic of leadership strengths. Gallup had surveyed over a million work teams, and conducted more than 50,000 in-depth one-on-one interviews, all in an effort to understand what it is that makes some people worth following, and others less so.

In Strengths-Based Leadership, bestselling author Tom Rath and renowned leadership guru Barry Conchie take this groundbreaking Gallup research to the next level by suggesting everyday ways to apply it at work, and at home. Rath and Conchie identify three essential ingredients to becoming a more effective leader: (1) know your strengths; (2) get the right talent on your team; and (3) meet the basic needs of your followers. They then propose a series of easily actionable ideas — illustrated in many cases with real life corporate anecdotes — to help aspiring leaders apply the three essential traits.

If Rath and Conchie's three-part recipe seems a bit simple, that's because it is. They believe becoming a great leader doesn't need to be complicated. You just have to pay attention to a few fundamentals. Now let's spend a few minutes looking at each one ...

1) Know Your Strengths

"If you spend your whole life trying to be good at everything you will never be great at anything," warn Rath and Conchie. While most organizations encourage people in key leadership positions to try to be "well-rounded," in the authors' view, this approach just leads to mediocrity. While organizations might understandably hope that their senior executives will be everything from visionary communicators to detail-driven executors, the reality is no single person can have world-class strengths in every area. Many different attributes are necessary for an organization to succeed. But they need not exist all in one person, so long as they exist somewhere in the leadership team. Those who strive to be competent in every area risk becoming less effective leaders overall.

If we can't possibly hope to be good at everything, it follows then that in order to lead effectively we must develop a strong awareness of our leadership strengths and then run with them. We all lead in very different ways, explain the authors, and serious problems can occur
when we think we need to behave exactly like the leaders we admire. Acting like someone you're not is unnatural, and is a sure fire recipe for leadership missteps.

Not only is it important that you "just be yourself," it's also vital that you not beat yourself up simply because you lack one or more characteristics of a leader you admire. Every great leader has a different set of strengths, note the authors. For instance, if you look at great historical leaders such as Winston Churchill or Mahatma Gandhi, you might notice more differences than similarities — and it is the differences that actually led to their success. Churchill's bold and commanding leadership succeeded in mobilizing a war-ravaged nation. It is unlikely he would have had as much success if he had tried to emulate Gandhi's calm and quiet approach. Yet Gandhi's style of leadership was effective because he did not try to emulate the domineering leaders of the past. Both men understood what strengths they brought to the table, and always played to them.

Playing to your strengths means being aware of — but not dwelling on — your weaknesses. As the authors explain, "If you focus on your weaknesses, you'll lose confidence." At a very basic level, it is hard for us to build self-confidence when we are focused on the things we don't do well. Indeed, several Gallup studies conducted over the years have revealed that people can experience significant gains in self-confidence after learning more about their strengths. By contrast, those same studies show that focusing on fixing weaknesses does not lead to similar improvements in self-confidence.

Why is it important to be self confident? Well, for one thing, highly self-confident people tend to earn a lot more money. Other studies have shown that people who have more confidence in their abilities at a young age (i.e. between 14 and 22) started off with slightly higher income levels — making, on average, $3,496 more per year than the low-confidence group. As each year went by, this gap continues to widen. When the researchers followed up with the same group 20 years later, the more self-confident folks were making $12,821 more annually compared to the lower self-confidence ones.

And even more important than the income and career benefits, some researchers also believe there's a link between self-confidence and physical health. If this is true, it only serves to further underscore the importance of leaders knowing their own strengths.

2) Build Talented Teams

In most cases, leadership teams are a product of circumstance more than design. Among the executive teams Rath and Conchie have studied, executive team members were typically selected based primarily on their individual knowledge or competence. So, the best salesperson eventually becomes the VP of sales. And the smartest person in IT winds up as the CIO, while the top financial guy gets promoted to CFO.

"Rarely are people recruited to an executive teams because their strengths are the best complement to those of the existing team members," write Rath and Conchie. "When is the last time you heard a leader talking about how his team needed to add a person who not only had a
lot of individual competence, but who could also help build stronger relationships within the
group?” they ask. This is a huge oversight because effective leaders must consciously surround
themselves with the right people, and build on each person's strengths. This means that
sometimes the top salesperson should *not* be promoted to the VP role, not because she doesn't
deserve to be, but because the overall mix of strengths she'd bring to the executive table is not
additive to what's already there. In other words, *although individual leaders need not be well-
rrounded, teams should be.*

Looking closely at the Gallup research, and layering on their own experience, Rath and
Conchie began to see that while each executive team member must, as a given, have solid
individual strengths, the most cohesive and successful teams always possess diverse groupings of
strengths. Specifically, they found that it serves a leadership team best to have a representation of
strengths in each of the following four domains. Instead of one dominate leader who tries to do
everything, or individuals who all have similar strengths, contributions from all four domains
lead to a strong and cohesive team.

**Domain #1 Executing**
Leaders with dominant strength in the *Executing* domain know how to make things happen.
When you need someone to implement a solution, these are the people who will work tirelessly
to get it done. Leaders with the strength to execute have the ability to "catch" a good idea out of
the air and make it an operational reality.

**Domain #2 Influencing**
Those who lead by *Influencing* help their team reach a much broader audience. People with
strength in this domain are always selling the team's ideas inside and outside the organization.
When you need someone to take charge, speak up, and make sure your group is heard, look to
someone with the strength to influence (for example, a leader with a lot of self-assurance may
use few words when she speaks, but her aura of confidence will project wisdom and authority,
and win loyal followers).

**Domain #3 Relationship Building**
Those who lead through *Relationship Building* are the essential glue that holds a team together.
Without these strengths on a team, the group is simply a composite of individuals. By contrast,
leaders with exceptional relationship building skills have the unique ability to create an
organization that's more than the sum of its parts.

**Domain #4 Strategic Thinking**
Leaders with great *Strategic Thinking* strengths are the ones who keep us all focused on what
could be. They are constantly searching for new information and looking around corners. These
leaders continually stretch our thinking for the future.

Rath and Conchie have studied a great number of leaders who built top schools, led big
businesses and transformed entire nations. But they did not accomplish these transformative
things on their own. They always had a solid, well-rounded team to help.
3) Meet the Needs of Your Followers

As legendary investor Warren Buffet once put it: "By definition, a leader is someone who can get things done through other people." In other words, in order to be a great leader, you must also have great followers. This seems like an obvious truth. But strangely, say Rath and Conchie, most leadership books tend to ignore the needs of followers.

"If you wanted to know why the president of the United States was making a difference in the lives of the American public, would you look to him for the best answers — or would you ask his constituents?" ask Rath and Conchie. "If we want to know why people rally behind a leader, then we must ask them why they follow. If you want to lead, it is critical to know what the people around you need and expect from you," say the authors.

Based on the Gallup research, it seems that most would-be followers have a remarkably clear picture of what they need from a leader: trust, compassion, stability and hope.

Trust – "As a leader, telling the truth is your bond," say Rath and Conchie. "If you send the message that your word is not worth much, you'll be paid back on that." As various political and business scandals have illustrated, followers will not tolerate dishonesty. Whether you are a coach, a CEO, or a head of state, trust is the "do or die" foundation for leading. Trust also increases speed in the workplace. When two people working on a project do not know each other, it takes a considerable amount of time for them to be able to collaborate productively. There can be a long getting-to-know-you period — a time during which two people warily look each other over. If you're unfamiliar with a colleague, it can take awhile to get accustomed to her style of work. But when the bond of trust is finally established, efficiencies will be created and the work becomes easier.

Compassion – According to the authors, in this day and age many leaders are understandably hesitant to show genuine compassion for the people they lead, at least in the same way they would with a friend or family member. Managers need to be wary of offering a hug or making physical contact with others in the workplace, regardless of how pure their intentions may be. But still, the results of the Gallup study suggest that great leaders must find ways to show that they truly care about their employees' wellbeing. Going out of one's way to show compassion is particularly important when bringing in new hires to the organization. As a leader, you should make it a point to learn the names and backgrounds of new staff as soon as they come onboard, and to introduce them to others and help them find connecting points. According to the authors, few people ever forget the first person who took the time to make them feel like they truly belong in a new place where they'd previously been feeling a bit shy, or uncertain.

Stability – Followers reported that the best leaders were the ones they could always count on in times of need. Followers also ideally want a calm and unflappable leader who will provide a solid foundation, and make them feel like their organization is healthy and on the right track. For example, employees who have high confidence in their company's financial future are nine times as likely to be engaged in their jobs when compared to those who have lower confidence about their organization's financial future.
Hope – Fourth and finally, instilling hope may seem like an obvious requirement for leading other people. Hope gives followers something to look forward to, and it helps them see a way through chaos and complexity. Knowing that things can be better in the future is a powerful motivator. When hope is absent, people lose confidence, disengage, and often feel helpless. Good leaders strive to convey a sense of optimism.

Conclusion

When we invest our own money, most of us understand intuitively that it's best to bet on winning stocks, and winning companies. Most of us know better than to sink our hard-earned savings into a business that has consistently struggled. Yet when we think about how to invest our other workplace resources (i.e. our time and mental energy), most of us continue to dwell on fixing our weaknesses, instead of building on our strengths. Instead of playing to our advantages, we strive to fill in what nature left out.

But as Rath and Conchie have shown us, the most effective leaders know better than to try to be someone they are not. Great leaders always stay true to who they are — and then make sure they have the right people around them to cover their blind-spots.

And the most effective leaders know how to convince people to follow. Perhaps this is why history's most extraordinary leaders did not see personal success as an end in itself. They realize that their impact on this world rests in the hands of those who follow. As Martin Luther King Jr. said on the evening of April 3, 1968: "I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land." The next day, Dr. King was assassinated. Yet his influence on the world had just begun.

With these insights in hand, how will you build on your own leadership strengths to accomplish great things in the here and now; and also ensure your legacy continues to grow long after you're gone?