

# The StraightTalk Coach

## Insights for Leading From Strength

### Developing Difference-Makers

By Cathy A. Higgins & David J. Kreischer

People become successful leaders by applying their strengths, not their weaknesses. Yet the constant emphasis that parents, teachers and managers place on overcoming our flaws can easily sidetrack us from leveraging our strengths. In contrast, empowering leaders seek to unleash strengths as “difference-makers” that help energize individuals to achieve their organizations’ strategic objectives.

#### What Makes the Difference?

Each individual brings a unique combination of perspective, functional skills, operating style and motivations to their positions, teams and broader organizations. The result is usually three to five primary talents or potential difference-makers that each of us can use to impact an organization – if we and our superiors perceive, focus on and intentionally apply them.

However, these unique talents do not become difference-makers unless they are applied to significantly improve an organization’s performance. For example, an increasingly relevant difference-maker in today’s globally dynamic marketplace is an openness to new ideas, which includes a leader’s ability to readily forge alliances and continually learn from others to generate new opportunities. Like many difference-makers, this one is self-reinforcing; broader, deeper knowledge and stronger alliances enhance it further.

Identifying difference-makers among your team members is not as difficult or subtle as you might imagine: people’s unique abilities appear in everything they do, so you likely have some sense of each individual’s talents. In addition, try asking about the accomplishments of which someone is most proud and the abilities used to achieve them. Above all, defining and developing difference-makers is best achieved by applying them to obstacles and opportunities that hone their uniqueness and relevance.

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“People are born with natural gifts. Unfortunately, many of us take these gifts for granted. We fail to make full use of our talents and instead spend much of our time trying to improve [our weaknesses].”

~ Robert H. Rosen,  
“Leading People”

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The challenge for a leader and team members is to constantly learn how to apply these difference-makers with

greater impact. The payoff is increasing the team’s contributions and sharpening the organization’s competitive edge.

#### Recognizing the “Right” Difference-Makers

Difference-making characteristics have the strongest influence when they are closely aligned with an organization’s strategic direction and future opportunities. For example, an organization seeking to grow through innovation may need to select and develop more inventor-style leaders (see The StraightTalk Coach, “Change the Rules!” parts one and two.).

As with most critical initiatives, aligning difference-makers with future opportunities starts with an external perspective. Look at your current and potential customers and stakeholders, and project their likely future needs. Based on these, how must your organization change to successfully serve your customers? What capabilities will be required to make those changes?

Then work backwards to your team and yourself. What talents must you and your team contribute to help your organization grow to meet customers’ and stakeholders’ future needs? The answers to these questions should help clarify the required difference-making abilities.

Now it is time to take inventory, comparing the difference-making

capabilities already present on your team to those required. What skills do you need to bolster? Where are the gaps? Can people stretch to fill them? If not, are there people who can join your team or do you need to hire?

### Deploying Difference-Makers

Effective leaders position team members to fully leverage their difference-making talents. In today's fast-changing environment, that requires constantly combining and recombining team members to address emerging problems and opportunities – much like a basketball coach or orchestra conductor.

To illustrate, a company that provides medical instrument systems teamed its most creative product, most experienced service and most knowledgeable sales managers with a high-profile client to tailor a system that allowed it to break into a market dominated by a competitor.

In another example, the regional business manager of a financial services firm placed at the helm of a moribund business banking unit an executive whose difference-makers were leading people and innovative thinking. Sales took off – despite the fact that the new leader was not an experienced business banker.

Deployment decisions should seek to optimize both application and development of difference-making abilities. As you watch your team work, you will begin to see which skills are missing. You will also discover emerging talents. Encouraging, strengthening and reinforcing those talents is the art of developing difference-makers.

### Reinforcing and Rewarding Difference-Makers

Meaningful feedback is essential to helping individuals understand how to apply their unique talents most effectively. Consistently using “balanced” feedback reinforces and supports better use of difference-making abilities. Effective balanced feedback begins with what worked well in applying an individual's difference-makers to a specific situation, and

then proceeds to what could be done to apply those talents more effectively.

A rule of thumb for ensuring balanced feedback is to focus on two “worked wells” and one “do differently.” Because balanced feedback is an evenhanded StraightTalk dialogue, it naturally leads to exploring new ways to use an individual's talents.

Applying one's unique strengths and seeing their impact is intrinsically gratifying. However, because individuals are motivated in various ways, it is important to reinforce difference-making behavior through a combination of non-financial and financial rewards.

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“...research shows that maximum productivity comes from getting people to focus on their strengths and having them manage around their weaknesses... The secret is to discover what people do well and ask them to do more.”

~ Robert H. Rosen,  
“Leading People”

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For example, someone who truly made a difference may be even more invigorated after her contributions are recognized at a meeting. Incentives that address an individual's motivations – such as sending someone to a conference in his field – can be especially reinforcing.

If your organization is committed to using difference-making talents to improve results, be sure your performance measurement and compensation systems are aligned. The systems should evaluate how well individuals strengthened and

applied their skills, and the extent to which these efforts affected team and organization results.

Frequent reinforcement is one of the most productive ways to encourage people to recognize and use their difference-making skills. Do not wait for formal performance reviews to praise people for using their difference-making abilities; instead, comment each time you see those talents in action.

Finally, by constantly offering new challenges and opportunities to stretch difference-making skills – and by fostering an ongoing dialogue about what is working and what could work better – individuals', teams' and organization-wide commitment to learning, change, innovative solutions and better results flourishes.

### The “Wrong” Difference-Makers

Are you spending significant time focusing on a team member's weaknesses? That is a clear sign you are not making good use of his difference-making capabilities. Perhaps that individual does not have enough difference-makers to address the objective, or perhaps strategic priorities have shifted and his talents are no longer relevant.

Whatever the reason, such individuals are likely on the wrong team, and effecting a transition is best for all parties. They will face better opportunities in another situation; you can concentrate on strengths instead of limitations; your team can obtain the difference-makers it needs to deliver results.

Gaining a competitive edge is the primary reason for leaders to concentrate on developing difference-makers at individual, team and organization levels. At the same time, using one's unique strengths to make a significant impact is energizing. Leaders who fully leverage difference-making capabilities individually, and in team and leadership roles, achieve a “win-win” that creates higher morale in the workplace – and fuels greater success in the marketplace. [HK](#)

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