

### Strengths Based Leadership

Leadership is a very important part of being an administrator. One of the most important parts of being a leader is understanding one's strengths, and areas for growth. After taking the Strength Finder 2.0 leadership guide, my strengths were apparent. I fit in the categories of strategic, ideation, individualization, learner and communication (in order). I believe these categories of leadership have been present to me in previous situations as an educator and leader.

It was comforting to me to discover that one of my strengths is Communication. I often worry that my forwardness and sometimes bluntness can be a turnoff to fellow employees. After reading some intriguing excerpts of Strengths Based Leadership, by Tom Rath, I realized that my truth-saying is very important as a leader. I know that my ability to communicate the truth has always been needed, but I did question whether or not if I was being too bold at times. I can recall a situation when I wasn't sure if what I was saying was being constructive or destructive. For multiple years, I have been asked to be a mentor for other teachers as well as the PLC leader and Q-Comp leader. I was given the task to assist a particular teacher in classroom management and instructional delivery. After meeting with this teacher, let's call her Sue, I understood that she needed a lot of verbal reassurance and idea bouncing. So I took the time to listen, observe, model, and listen again. I used cognitive coaching techniques such as clarifying, paraphrasing and adding analyzing questions to assist her. She continued to grow and gain her students' trust by using our discussions to determine best practices.

What was most comforting about the situation with this teacher is that she began the year with a defensive posture, as most of us do when we are challenged, and ended the year as a willing learner, and pragmatist. With this particular teacher, we often talked of EnVoy training that I had received in previous years and how that creates an effective and positive classroom. EnVoy is the idea that non-verbal communication and proximity can create a well-run classroom. It shows how to create consistency by speaking in the same area of the classroom, using non-verbal cues to redirect students, using tone of voice and always following through to show absolute consistency. After several model sessions and even more discussions, she was able to successfully demonstrate complete classroom control. Students followed her lead, increased their productivity, and eventually figured out the routines and need for consistency.

Another strength that was calculated by the Strengths Finder 2.0 was Strategic. This was my number one strength according to the leadership guide. This strength makes the most sense to me. My leadership team went to an MDE training. We found several of the concepts and ideas to be useful as

leaders and teachers. One of the concepts was about what strengths we presented. The demonstration was disclosed as North, South, East and West. The North educators were the people who loved to dive in. They were understood as the educators that you could count on to “just do it” as Nike would say. No task would be unattainable and if the boss said, “do it”, the Norths would make it happen to the best of their ability no matter if anyone would be offended, confused, or hurt by the actions. South was the exact opposite. The South educators focused more on the feelings of students and fellow educators’ decisions and feelings. This was and is the empathetic approach. Instead of “jumping in” like a North, the Souths take the time to make sure no one will be hurt, and if they are hurt, there is a plan to comfort them. East is a different beast altogether. The East educators are very detail oriented. Every month, every week and every day are incredibly important to the success of being a teacher. East educators make sure that there are no loopholes, gaps, or random occurrences can... well, occur. There isn’t really a big picture in mind, but what is actually happening today, and maybe even tomorrow. This brings me to the West. I definitely identify with this group. The West focuses on what is best for the “Big Picture” in education. My “Big Picture” unfortunately ends up being the MCA tests. These tests are the deciding factors, according to the state of Minnesota, in which teachers, students and administrators are judged as competent people in reasonable situations. With this said, I look at what is the school’s ultimate goal? Every time I look at that goal it ends up being to succeed. Well, Minnesota says that success is passing the MCAs. At my school, 97.5% of my 8<sup>th</sup> graders were passers. 75% of my 8<sup>th</sup> graders were exceeding the MN expectations. I believe that my general “West” approach allowed me to achieve this feat. With Strategic being my number one strength, I understood that the big picture was the most important thing as an educator for me. As I will continue to appreciate North, South and East, I will always understand that leaders need to focus on the big picture.

Another strength that was identified for me was Individualization. Individualization focuses on the unique qualities of each person. These types of leaders focus on how different people can work together productively. I take this as I am an observer of people. There is often times when my observations will surpass my fellow colleagues’ actions and intensions. Usually, it turns out that my colleagues are complacent with the knowledge I bring and often discuss the situations that they have found themselves in. One example is quite recent. My dean of students was acting strange and looked nervous. I asked him about his summer and he began to divulge his secrets to me. I was disheartened to learn that he was experiencing a divorce and that he had the “worst weekend of my life.” I understood immediately that he trusted me, wanted my compassion and needed to communicate his current life exploits. As a leader, I offered empathy, stability and hope. I began by discussing my own marriage and expressing that being together can present hard times. I continued with letting him know how much the students appreciate him in every face of turmoil and how that is what makes them drudge on. This led to his ability to create hope in students by encouraging the positives that students possess. I reminded him that hope is part of who we are. Sometimes we find ourselves lost, but it is important to remember the things that made us happy, and positive. As his trust for me is second –to–none at work, and my trust for him as well, he chose to work things out with his wife. Being a leader is more than being the guy at work who is in command.

One of the strengths that I was surprised about, according to the Strength Finder 2.0, was that I am a Learner, at least as an individual. I am currently in a master's program, but I have a hard time admitting I am learning something to better myself. I often declare that I am reflecting on lessons, curriculum, students and activities, but I do not express that I am learning. This revelation has made me discover that all of those concepts I have been doing and training for have been for the purpose of learning. In the past year, my 8<sup>th</sup> graders scored a 97.5% passing rate with the MCAs. Instead of celebrating this feat, I wondered how I would do better next year. The 2.5% was resembled as one, and only one, student. I couldn't focus on the achievement that was right before me. In one hand, I had surpassed any expectations that were beheld to me. On the other hand, I had let someone down. I am learning that it is okay to feel great about unprecedented success all the while feeling like I can do better the next time. I understand this as I am being a learner.

Lastly, one of my top five strengths is Ideation. "People strong in the Ideation theme are fascinated by ideas. They are able to find connections between seemingly disparate phenomena." I took this as someone who can truly think "outside of the box." As a math major, it is my job to problem-solve and think differently than others do. I am often consulted on how to recreate a schedule, deal with a student who needs intense differentiation, or come up with new and intriguing ideas. At the end of my last educational year I was tasked to figure out the 2016-2017 schedule. This is so that we could maximize our educational experience. Being a school that emphasizes on art, yet provides superior core knowledge, we wanted to add an extra art/exploratory class without damaging the basic core courses. Once I presented three different options to the administration, we decided on the best option and have since adjusted to make the schedule perfection. This is actually very difficult to do. All parties have agreed and shown happiness based upon the current schedule. In most cases, we do what is most convenient. In this case, my ability to think differently has allowed all parties to feel satisfied.

All in all, I have learned an immense amount about myself, and how my leadership skills continue to strive in the educational environment. Another training at MDE provided me with some insight on this topic. We are one of four situations on any given concept/skill. The first phase is being unaware/not practicing. This means that you don't have the skill and that you are unaware you don't have the skill. The second phase is that you don't have the skill, but do know it. The third phase is that you have the skill and you are working to better it and the fourth phase is that you really have the skill, yet you no longer think about it. It becomes natural to you and you can teach it without thought.

I am a "West" who continues to learn how to be better. I love criticism, feedback and new ideas. In the future, I will look at my strengths to build upon and determine what other traits to learn about. Learning is a continuous idea and may be one of the most important things that make leaders great.