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Dependable Strengths®: Finding Your Unique Excellence

First in a series

By Katharine Hansen, PhD

Here's an amazingly simple concept: Think about the good experiences in your life. Sit with a group of three other people and tell the stories of your top five good experiences while the others listen for and record the strengths they believe you demonstrated in your experiences. Consider additional possible strengths listed on a chart and look for patterns. Pinpoint your top four strengths and conduct a reality test to measure the validity of each strength. Then use your top strengths to compile a report that can be a remarkably effective job-search tool.

That's the crux of an intervention called the Dependable Strengths Articulation Process (DSAP) developed by Dr. Bernard Haldane in 1945. While the process entails more detail than I've described here, it's a remarkably uncomplicated way to get to know yourself and what you're good at. I know because I've experienced the 18-hour workshop in which job-seekers and others can partake to identify and articulate their Dependable Strengths®.

Once you have this knowledge of your strengths, the scope of ways in which you can apply it is almost limitless. At the very least, articulating your strengths will probably boost your self-esteem. But you can also use this information to determine what kind of job or career fits your strengths, choose a college major, communicate your strengths in networking situations, develop a resume that emphasizes your best strengths, respond effectively to job-interview questions, and much more. You can even use Dependable Strengths® in workplace team-projects to determine, based on each team members' strengths, which project tasks are best suited to each team member.

The Dependable Strengths Articulation Process

While DSAP practitioners have developed modifications of the process for a wide variety of populations and situations, the intervention is at its core always a group process guided by a trained facilitator. Before breaking into groups, participants mine their own history, typically using a detailed Biographical Questionnaire to identify "Good Experiences," which Haldane defined as "something you feel you did well, that you also enjoyed doing, and are proud of."

Participants then break into groups of four and tell the stories of their top five Good Experiences while the other members listen and offer feedback on the strengths demonstrated in these stories.

Back on their own, participants further mine for strengths using a “Dependable Strengths Exploration Chart,” looking for patterns. Here was where I learned something about myself. I had considered my excellent memory a strength, but using the chart, I saw that my memory rarely came into play during my Good Experiences.

Participants then list at least four top strengths and conduct a “reality test” to identify “proofs” of using each of the strengths. Here is where participants distinguish strengths from *dependable* strengths. As the DSAP facilitator’s manual notes, a Dependable Strength® shows up in your top Good Experiences, is something you’ve used often in the past, is something you enjoy and want to use in the future, and is a strength you have inner motivation to use.

With the knowledge gained in the first five steps, participants are now equipped, with assistance from members of the same group that helped identify strengths, to craft a Dependable Strengths Report. The report is a unique document with unusual formatting; it’s not a resume, but rather a tool to be used in making contacts.

In the workshop I attended, participants were sent out to the University of Washington campus to use our Dependable Strengths Reports and a script in a networking process called the “Job Magnet.” Reactions to this assignment ranged from skeptical to horrified – but every one of the 13 participants came back having made valuable contacts that could lead to jobs.

Participants who follow up on job leads and are invited to job interviews can then apply their Dependable Strengths® in those interviews. Let’s take the most frequently asked interview question of all (which is a request rather than a question): “Tell me about yourself.” DSAP participants are taught to respond like this:

“I do a number of things well. Three of those are [strength], [strength], and [strength]. Which one would you prefer I talk about first?”

After telling a story that illustrates his or her effectiveness using the strength the interviewer has asked to hear about, the interviewee can ask the interviewer if that’s the kind of information he or she is looking for. Then the interviewee can offer to elaborate on the other strengths.

Objective vs. Subjective Strengths Assessment

You may be aware of other assessments that help people identify strengths. The best known is StrengthsFinder 2.0, developed by the Gallup organization. With the purchase of the book *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, users get a code that enables them to access the StrengthsFinder 2.0 assessment. Where StrengthsFinder 2.0 is an objective assessment, DSAP is subjective.

“The main difference between Dependable Strengths® and StrengthsFinder 2.0 is that Dependable Strengths® are generated based on people’s memories of life experiences and to which they’re emotionally connected,” said Dependable Strengths facilitator Carmen Croonquist when interviewed by career coach Nancy Branton, “whereas, the StrengthsFinder 2.0 provides test takers with data on their top natural talents and provides them with further information to confirm them,” Croonquist said.

Jerald Forster, director of the Dependable Strengths Project at the University of Washington, completed both the DSAP and StrengthsFinder 2.0 and compared them in a paper to be published in the *Proceedings of The XVIIIth International Congress on Personal Construct Psychology*. "The meanings of these two sets of descriptors of my primary strengths were quite different for me," Forster wrote. "The objective strengths [from StrengthsFinder 2.0] had little experiential meaning for me. ... In contrast, I had a number of personal experiences that I could relate to each of the strengths articulated while participating in the DSAP," he noted.

Forster acknowledges some advantages to the objective approach and suggests that individuals experience both the subjective Dependable Strengths Articulation Process and an objective assessment such as StrengthsFinder 2.0.

Final Thoughts

Inherent in the Dependable Strengths® approach is the belief that deep within each person is a unique form of excellence. That's a very powerful idea. If you are not using your best strengths, you will probably not be happy in your work. A process that helps you articulate those strengths can help ensure that you are performing work you will truly enjoy. As the DSAP Website notes, Dependable Strengths® is "a process proven to help people improve their quality of life through meaningful work."