

**“STRENGTHENING THE CURRICULUM IN A PERSONAL LEADERSHIP COURSE:  
APPLICATION OF STRENGTHSQUEST IN PERSONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT”**

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Presentation Track: Practice

Supported by three decades of research by The Gallup Organization, the “Strengths Philosophy” is quickly becoming the new paradigm for achieving excellence, including leadership development. We will engage you in the strengths philosophy and how it has been incorporated into our personal leadership development course and outcomes thus far.

Summer Felton wears two hats in the Department of Agricultural Education at Texas A&M University. Teaching multiple leadership courses and advising over 350 undergraduate students keeps her busy, but she enjoys it thoroughly! One of her favorite quotes is “Life is more accurately measured by the lives you touch than the things you acquire.”

Linda Powell has taught preschoolers through adults for the last twenty-five years while raising a daughter and participating in her husband’s Air Force career. Instructing leadership courses for AGED, taking graduate classes, conducting research, and advising a unit for the Texas A&M Corps of Cadets completely fill her days (and nights)!

## “*Strengthening* the Curriculum in a Personal Leadership Course: Application of Strengths Quest in Personal Leadership Development”

### **Introduction**

A course in personal leadership development was developed in our department at Texas A&M University to help students gain insights into their personal leadership strengths, styles, motivations, and values. Through self-assessment and reflection, students are guided through planning a course for self-improvement as a leader. This semester, students were introduced to the Strengths Philosophy. The Strengths Philosophy is a relatively new concept and has great implications for helping students develop their leadership potential. By attending this presentation, participants will:

- ✚ Gain a brief understanding of the Strengths Philosophy and why it is important in a personal leadership development course
- ✚ Engage in strengths philosophy activities
- ✚ Become aware of the 34 Strengths Themes and how they apply to leadership
- ✚ Take away examples of how the Strengths concepts have been incorporated into a personal leadership development curriculum

### **Background**

The premise behind teaching the strengths philosophy in a personal leadership development course is this: a leader needs to know themselves before they can lead others and knowing their strengths is part of this process. Also, “leadership is a process and becoming a leader is also a process. Becoming a “strengths-based leader” involves a process that begins with who you are, then moves to what you do.” (Clifton & Anderson, 2004, p. 14)

### **How it Works**

The Personal Leadership course is taught as a 2-credit hour course, which meets two days a week. Resources for the course include two books, *Now, Discover Your Strengths* by Marcus Buckingham & Donald O. Clifton and *Discovering the Leader in You* by Robert J. Lee and Sara N. King. The specific strengths curriculum also includes articles published by the The Gallup Organization “What Superstars Do Differently” and “Developing Leadership Strengths Through the College Experience.” The strengths curriculum is taught for two days of the semester and is also applied throughout the other topics in the course for the remainder of the semester. On the first day, students are given an overview of the strengths philosophy and given instructions on how to take the Strengths Finder instrument, which gives them their top 5 strengths. Some of the strengths from the Strengths Finder instrument include: achiever, responsibility, adaptability, arranger, belief, communication, competition and connectedness. Students bring the report of their top 5 strengths with them to the next class for discussion.

On Day 2 of the strengths philosophy, students have the opportunity to converse and share their strengths with members of their learning community\*. After students share

their strengths, they design a visual to represent their top 5 strengths. This addresses the fact that your strengths do not operate in isolation and no two people are likely to have the same list of Top 5 strengths. We want students to realize the uniqueness of their individual strengths and how they can make use of them in their daily lives.

As part of the student's grade for the class, they are required to keep a journal of their thoughts and answer some reflection questions on the class activities. Reflection questions for the Strengths philosophy include:

- What are your 5 themes?
- What key words or phrases from your themes' descriptions did you identify with as being very true of yourself? Did you find it difficult to think of a visual representation of your 5 themes? Or did you come up with several ideas? If so, what were they?
- After asking 2 people to "affirm" your strengths explain how they saw your strengths in you.

### **Results to Date**

This is the first semester the course has been taught, incorporating the strengths curriculum. Students really bought into the idea of strengths and have come to a better understanding of themselves and how their strengths affect their lives. Here are a few excerpts from journals students have submitted on strengths:

"Belief is another strength that I am very passionate about, as I think about my life I take pride in my morals and standards. I do definitely have certain beliefs that I will not venture from no matter what."

"The strategic theme states that I "create alternative ways to proceed" which is very true because I like to do things differently and not the way everybody else thinks they should be done."

"In the few short weeks that I have been in this class I have already learned a great deal about myself. I knew I always basically did the same things, reacted the same way in similar situations, I just never knew why."

### **Conclusions/Recommendations**

The strengths philosophy should be incorporated into a personal leadership course. Students get to know their own talents and how to develop them into strengths, which helps them build their own "leadership capital." In *Exploring Leadership: For College Students Who Want to Make a Difference*, the authors discuss that "clues to your strengths are all around you. Identifying them can affirm your confidence and esteem by acknowledging that you do bring reliable talents to situations and can contribute to the leadership of a cause" (Komives, Lucas, and McMahon, 1998, p. 110-111). Allowing students to get to know their strengths through discussing it with a small group of their peers, creating a strengths visual, and reflecting on their strengths is very important to the

development process. Students could simply buy the book and take the Strengths Finder assessment, but through a personal leadership course, we have created an environment for learning and provided guided discussion about strengths which makes students accountable for their self-discovery and helps to facilitate the application of the strengths philosophy in their daily lives.

\*The learning community is a teaching technique we incorporated into this class, which involves the class being split into groups of 5-6 students for intimate discussion about what they are learning about themselves. One day 2 of each week students are with the same group members.

### **References**

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