

## Focus on Your Strengths

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*In April 2006, the APWA Leadership and Management Committee concluded its series of articles on public works leadership entitled "The Baker's Menu." This was the second series of articles (the first being "The Baker's Dozen") that discuss various leadership and management topics of interest to APWA members. The committee's current series—entitled "The Baker's Potluck"—touches on a variety of leadership and management topics, many of which have been suggested by members. Included in this issue is the fifth in the series recommended by the committee. For more information please contact Ann Daniels, APWA Director of Technical Services, at (800) 848-APWA or [adaniels@apwa.net](mailto:adaniels@apwa.net).*

*"Most Americans do not know what their strengths are. When you ask them, they look at you with a blank stare, or they respond in terms of subject knowledge, which is the wrong answer."*

— Peter Drucker

Are you one of the 20%? That's the number the Gallup organization came up with when they asked more than 1.7 million employees in 101 companies in 63 countries whether they had the "opportunity to do what they do best every day." That means 2 out of 10 people believe their strengths are in play every day at their jobs, which also means that 80% of us aren't using our strengths on a regular basis. Much of the information that I will weave into my article comes from works by Marcus Buckingham. I highly recommend his books *First, Break All the Rules*; *Now, Discover Your Strengths*; and *The One Thing You Need to Know*. He also has a DVD series called "Trombone Player Wanted" that focuses on strengths.

If you have read previous articles that I have written, you will note I have made a career change. It has been quite a year. You would figure a job change is traumatic enough, but add to that dealing with cancer surgery and six months of chemotherapy, all the side effects, and the mental gymnastics that results from that process and you realize that it is a lot to deal with. Fortunately I used these experiences to help me refocus myself on what are the important things in life and where I want to dedicate myself to be the most productive, to make the greatest contribution, and to do so while utilizing my strengths. That is one reason why this subject interested me so much.

Think about this. From our earliest days at home, in school, and now in the workplace, we have been told to spend our time improving our weak areas instead of making our

strengths even stronger. It seems that everyone is more than willing to point out our deficiencies but not focus on what we're good at. When you received your report card and got an "A" in math and a "C" in English, I bet you were told that you need to bring up that English grade. Buckingham suggests that we look at it differently. The response might be, "Wow, an A in math, keep up the good work. Let's get you into the honor's math program."

In a previous job, I attended a working session where we were told to write down the weaknesses of the other people in the room and their part of the organization. We were then given our list of deficiencies so we could come up with plans to improve. We didn't spend one minute celebrating our successes or our organizational strengths. Even in follow-up meetings, the lead-in to discussions about mission and vision was the question, "What *aren't* we doing now, that we could be doing to achieve our mission and vision?" Rather, I would ask the question, "What *are* we doing that works and is successful that we can make even better to serve our customers?"

How do you know what your strengths are? Some people think a strength is something you are good at. However, you can be good at things that make you feel empty. A strength has a yearning quality to it. It's something you keep coming back to, that you look forward to doing. It makes you naturally inquisitive and it has a restorative quality. It doesn't drain you. Simply put, *a strength is an activity that makes you feel strong*. One thing that makes me feel strong is photography. It renews me. It makes me feel good. I can't wait until the next opportunity to get my camera out and take photos. At work, things that give me strength are activities that focus on employee development. I feel strong when I see one of my employees get an award, a promotion, or when I receive positive feedback from a customer about something that an employee did for them. Two of my key people received promotions and I couldn't have been more proud. I know that by investing in employee development, individuals become successful and, in turn, it benefits the organization. By joining my current organization, I have the opportunity to impact many more people through leadership development plus other training and consulting services, and the reward for me will be the feedback I receive when the training we give makes a difference in the lives of individuals and organizations. That gives me strength!

Who is the best person to tell you what your strengths are? YOU ARE! We've grown up expecting our teachers, our parents, a guidance counselor, our HR department, or some test we take to tell us our strengths. In reality, no one can tell you what you like and don't like. The key is to find out what you like and try to spend more time doing it. Free yourself up from the things you don't like, the things that drain you, and spend more time on the things that make you feel strong. It won't happen overnight. It is an incremental journey. This sounds easier than it is. After all, when you go to work, your time is not your own. Sometimes you just have to suck it up and do what you are tasked to do. However, your plan should be to find out what you don't like and stop doing it. Don't invest yourself in things that have no return. Stop doing it and see if anyone cares!

When I talk about spending time working on your strengths, it doesn't mean ignore your weaknesses. You should learn to manage around them and minimize their impact on the organization. If you are not good with details, make sure you have someone on your team that likes dealing with structure and detail. If you know what you want to say, but don't know how to package it into something that will be received well by your team, make sure you have someone that can take your content and turn it into something creative. I like doing PowerPoint™ presentations. I can take some pretty dull content and with some graphics, photos, and more creative use of language, turn it into something that will keep

the attention of the audience. It gives me strength and I look forward to doing this type of work.

Here are a few myths that Marcus Buckingham relates to us regarding strengths:

MYTH: As you grow, you change.

TRUTH: As you grow, you become more of who you already are.

As children, we developed patterns of behavior that carry through life. It is our foundation and we continue to grow and develop in that mold. Think of the things you were known for as a child and see how they have carried over and developed into adulthood.

MYTH: You will grow the most in your areas of greatest weakness.

TRUTH: You will grow the most in your areas of greatest strength.

You already know that what you are weak at bores you, frustrates you, and drains you mentally. You will never get the return on investment trying to improve your weak areas. Spend your quality time doing things and developing the areas that give you the most enjoyment and fulfillment. Spend time making your strengths even stronger. That is where you will grow the most.

MYTH: A good team member does whatever it takes to help the team.

TRUTH: A good team member deliberately volunteers his strengths to the team.

There are five seconds left in the game and your team needs a three-point shot to win. Are you the one who gets the ball to take the shot or are you the one who makes the inbounds pass or sets the screen? Each team member plays a role. You should play the role that brings out your strengths. You shouldn't be forced into a role that isn't your strength just to pitch in. It is your obligation to let the team know what you can offer. When you put all the strengths of the team together, you get synergy, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

As Buckingham indicates in *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, there are two assumptions that guide the world's best managers:

1. Each person's talents are enduring and unique.
2. Each person's greatest room for growth is in the areas of his or her greatest strength.

There are too many people in life and in the workplace ready and willing to pour cold water on you and douse any spark of energy, your ideas, your desires, and creativity. They are

## THE BAKER'S POTLUCK TOPICS

- Oral Presentation Skills
- Coexisting with the Unions
- Interviewing for the Right Skills
- Performance Evaluations
- Focus on Your Strengths
- A Leader's Legacy
- Identifying the Skills Needed for Crew Leaders and First-Time Supervisors
- Mentoring for the Future
- Leading through Change
- Determining Your Level of Service
- Connecting with Your Community
- Creative Problem Solving
- Creative Recruitment

the fire-fighters. You are the fire-lighter. You have talents and so do your people. Here is my challenge to you. As a leader in your organization, are you going to spend your time with your best people making them better, keeping the spark going, or spending time trying to fix their weak areas? After all, the reason you hired them is because you saw something in them that you considered a strength. Keep investing in that strength and you will see great return on your investment. The same goes for you. If you've never really thought about your strengths, do so, NOW! Then you can answer the question, "Am I one of the 20%?" I hope you are.

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*"Identify the areas in which you are most likely to add unique value to your organization—something no one else can match—then leverage your skills to their absolute max. That's what your employer expected when he put you on the payroll! More importantly, leveraging yourself generates the greatest and most satisfying return on your God-given abilities."*

*"Upgrade your performance by playing to your strengths and delegating your weaknesses. This one decision will do more to enhance your productivity than anything else you do as a leader."*

Both quotes by Andy Stanley, from *The Next Generation Leader: Five Essentials for Those Who Will Shape the Future*.

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## APWA LEADERSHIP MEETS WITH TRANSPORTATION SECRETARY MARY PETERS

In a meeting at the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) headquarters on January 10, 2007 in Washington, D.C., APWA President Bill Verkest congratulated U.S. Transportation Secretary Mary Peters on her nomination and confirmation as the 15th Secretary of Transportation. Joining President Verkest were Past President Bob Freudenthal, President-Elect Larry Frevert, Director-at-Large, Transportation John Okamoto and Executive Director Peter King. President Verkest also thanked Peters for her service as Federal Highway Administrator, her leadership during the reauthorization of the highway and transit act, SAFETEA-LU, and the strong working relationship she fostered with APWA during her tenure as Administrator.

During the meeting, President Verkest talked about the impact projected transportation funding shortfalls will have on public works. He offered APWA's assistance and expertise to address transportation needs and reconfirmed APWA's commitment to working with USDOT to promote partnerships among all levels of government to sustain infrastructure and performance.

President Verkest and Secretary Peters also discussed the work of the National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Commission, authorized by SAFETEA-LU to analyze future transportation needs and recommend funding solutions. President Verkest pledged APWA's assistance to Secretary Peters, who serves as chair of the Commission.

Secretary Peters was nominated by President Bush on September 5, 2006 and confirmed by the U.S. Senate on September 30, 2006. She has spent a career spanning more than 20 years working on transportation issues in the public and private sectors, including the Federal Highway Administration and the Arizona Department of Transportation. As Secretary of Transportation, Peters leads an



**APWA leadership met with U.S. Transportation Secretary Mary Peters on January 10, 2007. From left to right are: Executive Director Peter King, Past President Bob Freudenthal, President Bill Verkest, Transportation Secretary Mary Peters, President-Elect Larry Frevert and Director-at-Large, Transportation John Okamoto.**

agency with almost 60,000 employees and a \$61.6 billion budget that oversees air, maritime and surface transportation missions.

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