What if we could apply strengths intentionally to our relationships and teams in service of solving problems, creating new and better ways of doing things, and making revolutionary contributions to the human family?
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A few years back, I found myself delivering a strengths Discovery session in Abu Dhabi to the leadership team of a large firm. I was surrounded that day by men from eight different cultures, whose background and experience left them often confused and frustrated in dealing with one another. There was a great deal of conflict and contention among the leadership team, making communication difficult and trust at an all-time low.

In particular, there were two men on the leadership team who lived, metaphorically, on opposite sides of the universe from one another—one man was from Egypt, the other from Palestine. They were very different. Two weeks before our Discovery session, their conflict had escalated to the point of physical altercation, requiring the intervention of local law enforcement.

Both men were trapped, focused so much on their own needs and perspectives that they were unable to see or understand the other. They found themselves in a downward spiral of blame, criticism, and defensiveness, which significantly affected performance and the productivity of the entire office (see Figure 1 below).
The focus of our time together in Discovery that day was to understand how to strategically use strengths to increase results, to close the gaps between people—to reverse the spiral, by focusing individuals on contributing together through strengths (see Figure 2 below). The hypothesis we were operating from that day was very simple:

- Embracing one’s own strengths and weaknesses increases the ability to create complementary relationships with others who are different.
- Understanding how to apply strengths and manage weakness helps us confidently contribute, as well as humbly receive from others whose strengths are different. This reverses the negative, self-focused spiral we are often trapped in.
- Personal and professional results exponentially increase as individuals leverage their strengths and mitigate their weaknesses through their own, and others’, strengths.
The end of our day in Discovery marked an opportunity for each person to declare their most significant learning of the day, as well their commitment for applying the learning. Individuals from the leadership team took turns sharing. Finally, the Egyptian leader spoke. He looked directly at his Palestinian adversary and said to him, “I now understand that you are exactly the strategic partner that I need. I realize our differences are our greatest gifts to one another. I would like to ask your forgiveness for the way I have treated you and disregarded you in the past, and see if you might be willing to start over again.”

The leadership team stood in stunned silence, as they watched the young leader cross the room and offer his hand as a token of friendship, and a gesture of good will. The large Palestinian man took his hand hesitantly, speechless, humbled by the respect and generosity being shown him.

Several other leaders took their turn sharing before the Palestinian was able to speak. When he did, he was almost emotional. His former arrogance was gone, and he was open, looking to create a connection, and build a bridge of understanding. He walked across the learning circle and stood eye-to-eye with the man he had once considered an enemy, and thanked him for his example, his kindness and his willingness to begin again. He committed to him that he would listen better, pay more attention to his unique perspective, and be more aware of the different needs he had. As he extended his hand to seal the deal, the Egyptian surprised everyone by wrapping him up in a spontaneous embrace, and in the Arab tradition, kissed him on the cheek.

Admittedly, it was an awkward moment, in that it was an unfamiliar exchange that had a personal feel to it. This leadership team had never allowed personal feelings into the work place. Yet, work is personal—it is a deeply personal part of the expression of our uniqueness and humanity. It is often where we make our contributions to the broader human family.

This somewhat personal moment cemented for this entire leadership team a whole new way of operating—from strengths, from contribution—which appreciated and valued each individual and their differences. It created a place for all leaders, complete with their strengths and weaknesses, to come to the team, bringing what they had to bring, knowing that the other team members would cover areas where they were less strong. As Peter Drucker taught, their focus shifted to making each person’s strengths maximally effective,

“Your job is to make your strengths more effective and your weaknesses irrelevant.”

～Peter Drucker
and their weaknesses a non-issue. In a nutshell, their heightened understanding opened the door for them to operate more effectively from interdependence.

When you stop to think about it, we are absolutely at our best when we are experiencing interdependence. None of us is capable of solving the problems we face alone. Our own perspective limits us too much. Stephen Covey taught that the problems we face today are problems of interdependence, that we need one another and the unique contributions of others in order to find the answers to the challenges that plague us in our homes, workplaces, and society.

His book, the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, changed the landscape of human interaction, by inviting individuals to look inside themselves at the habits they need in order to effectively operate from interdependence. For years, I taught that curriculum, and worked with individuals and teams to understand the journey of personal maturity that would move them from dependence, through independence, and finally, toward living from interdependence.

Yet, as I coached individuals and led FranklinCovey programs, it seemed that time and time again, I was observing individuals experiencing their journey toward interdependence more like a pinball machine, rather than a linear experience, as they bounced between moments of dependence (reliance on others rather than self), independence (reliance on self, not others), and interdependence (creating effective results through collaboration). The principles rang true, but the practices were difficult—particularly the practices necessary for interdependence.

Somewhere along the way, I began to take a closer look at strengths, and became a student of Martin Seligman, Don Clifton, Marcus Buckingham, and Alex Linley, to name a few. I studied DiSC, Eneagram, Realise 2, StrengthsFinder 2.0, Myers-Briggs and every other strengths assessment tool and strengths book I could get my hands on.
I began using strengths in my executive coaching and in my leadership courses, and began to look differently at strengths as an untapped tool that had the potential to provide answers, not just to employee engagement, to performance and productivity, as had already been so well documented. I began to see its potential for being the missing link that could open the door to helping individuals get out of the pinball machine experience of moving toward interdependence. I saw it as a tool for creating strong, collaborative relationships, based on mutual trust and understanding—which would then lead to remarkable business results.

I watched my clients as they gained confidence and clarity about their strengths—both their contributions, as well as the needs their strengths presented—and saw them experience remarkable personal transformation. They were more willing to take personal ownership for their own emotions, their responses, and find ways to confidently position themselves to meet their own needs and solve their own problems. In a nutshell, they became more responsible for themselves and less reactive. They were honoring Covey’s Habit 1, Be Proactive, which he taught is the foundation of effective interdependence.

I was not surprised to discover that other habits of effectiveness became easier as well. For example, understanding their strengths’ contributions helped them to more clearly envision the future, plan with greater care, and position themselves to offer their gifts and seek the strengths of others to arrive together at meaningful goals. They could more clearly see who they wanted to be, what they had to offer, and were more confident in moving toward their personal vision.

They were also better able to discriminate between urgent and important, and seemed to understand better what to say yes to, and where they could make their highest return on investment contributions. They were wiser and more courageous about saying no to things that distracted them from having their most meaningful impact on the teams they were part of.

What I noticed was that understanding strengths dramatically improved individuals’ ability to govern themselves with quiet confidence, with less tendency toward reactivity, and with a more certain commitment to leverage their strengths in a meaningful way to make a difference in others’ lives. It also increased their ability to engage effectively with others.
For example, many of the persistent relationship problems in my clients’ lives began to disappear, and communication and teamwork dramatically improved through the strategic application of strengths. I saw people really understand thinking win-win differently, and listening more deeply to others, as they used the concept of the strengths lens (see Chapter 2) as a tool to help them understand, interpret, and respond to others’ communication. It was then that they could really see what it meant to create synergy, and how understanding strengths could increase one’s ability to live the habits that create effectiveness.

It was not uncommon to see engagement scores increase by 40-55% after strengths Discovery and the follow-up learning laboratory, or to see communication, teamwork, and productivity scores climb by 25-40%. Sometimes, in fact, we would see clients increase the amount of time spent playing to strengths by as much as 95-100%, as they more clearly saw their strengths and weaknesses, and understood how to leverage their strengths. They were significantly applying their strengths more effectively than ever before, and getting results that were positive and self-reinforcing.

I began to see strengths as a Rosetta Stone, a translator, in navigating differences, in understanding oneself and others in service of designing and living from interdependence. It led me to ask questions I had never considered before. What if strengths could help us see ourselves and others differently, so we could work strategically together to accomplish significant ends?

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1As measured by the Strategic Performance Audit—a Strengths Strategy® pre/post measurement tool which evaluates changes in strengths use, productivity, performance, teamwork/communication, and engagement.
differently, so we could work strategically together to accomplish significant ends? How might understanding strengths help us see and mitigate weakness without fear? What if we could apply strengths intentionally to our relationships and teams in service of solving problems, creating new and better ways of doing things, and making revolutionary contributions to the human family? How could we use strengths to increase our time in interdependence, and live from a deeper place of maturity and effectiveness?

This book shares the answers to these questions, and others—it is based on twenty years of research, study, interviews, and observations of human behavior. It takes into account the views of every major author who has written about strengths, as well as those who have challenged the strengths-based approach. It holds the Organizational Development perspective, yet also reflects the strategic application of strengths in the personal lives of individuals. You will notice, though, that many of the stories come from our experiences inside of companies, schools, government and non-profit agencies, and seem to suggest more of an organizational, rather than a personal feel. It is important, however, to note that the principles taught here have been used with couples, and in individual coaching around personal growth every bit as much as they have been used to create leadership and organizational growth.

Thousands of individuals, teams, and organizations over the years, have been with us on this journey of discovering how to strategically apply strengths in real time to real-life needs. It answers the “so what” question that many individuals have asked as they held a strengths assessment report in their hands. So what, if I am an Inspirer, according to the DISC assessment, or an Achiever according to StrengthsFinder 2.0? So what if Zest is one of my Signature Strengths, or I am a Time Optimizer, according to Realise 2? If I can’t see how to make these strengths operable in my life, to create positive change, then a strengths assessment doesn’t serve me too well. If I can’t understand how to translate strengths into my work, or human interactions, into creating positive powerful interdependence, then what is the point?

That is the point of this book,

uncovering the strategic strengths solution—leveraging strengths intentionally, as a tool to create great results by moving us toward increased effectiveness and interdependence. Just as our friends in Abu Dhabi discovered, you might very well find here the very tools you have been looking for to more fully apply strengths to your life, your relationships, and your teams.
Imagine for a moment that you are standing in the middle of the Mall of America, one of the biggest malls in the United States. It is like a city within a city, three stories high, 4.2 million square feet, and hundreds of stores spread across nearly five miles of storefront space. The mall is a tad overwhelming to navigate. You are lost, and have no idea which way to go, and so you find yourself looking for something which will reveal your location, and point you toward your destination.

You are delighted when you find the Mall Map, and discover a big yellow arrow, blinking like a neon light, which says loudly, “You Are Here!” Relief floods over you, as you can see exactly where you are relative to where you want to be.

The Strategic Interdependence Model (shown in phases over the next few pages) is like a Mall Map, reflecting the different places you might find yourself. In moments of frustration, when you may feel a little out of touch with where you really want to be, you can reference it to see where you are, and how to get to the destination you most desire.

Let’s take a look at the first cut of the Strategic Interdependence Model and the possible places you might find yourself inhabiting:

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“The ultimate self-fulfillment is interdependence—and it is richest when it contributes to the fulfillment of others.” ~ Doug Peck, former Fortune 50 VP
Everyone wants to live at Interdependence, where the message is I serve us, so we can serve others. The focus here is on contributing together to make a difference somehow in the world. Here, we find individuals elevating others, both sharing strengths and drawing out contributions of others, recognizing needs, and being patient with the differences that emerge. There is a place for everyone at Interdependence, where all strengths are seen and valued, differences are respected, and there is curiosity about other perspectives. When you are here you are open, humble, confident, and aware of yourself and others. Trust is high, communication is fluid, and individuals operate from comfortable transparency. We are our most effective and efficient selves when we are living from Interdependence.

However, many of us find that we tend to inhabit the other places a little more frequently—even though we desire to be at Interdependence. Our society does not necessarily teach and support Interdependence very well, and it is often difficult to create.

Sometimes you might find yourself spending time at Dependence—the message here being, “you serve me.” When you are here, you find yourself waiting for someone else to see your potential, give you a chance to shine, and meet your unique needs. When others don’t seem to see your contribution or understand your needs, you feel a little frustrated and wonder what is wrong with them.

Other times, you may find yourself tired of waiting for someone else to make a place for your strengths to make a contribution, or your needs to be met, and you may set up temporary residence at Independence, where the message is “I serve me.” Independence is not a bad place, but it is a lonely one. It is like an island in a sea—and sometimes the sea is a sea of humanity, of co-workers, family, friends who are moving about you, in and out of your life. You may notice that you are never really finding the rhythm of deeper connection with them. Others’ needs or contributions are mostly irrelevant here, and the focus is on getting your work done, giving your best shot, making sure your own needs are met. You may even steamroll inadvertently over others, in an attempt to ensure that your own perspective wins out, and you get what is important to you.

There is a place for everyone at Interdependence, where all strengths are seen and valued, differences are respected, and there is curiosity about other perspectives.
Somewhere along the way, you may realize that the victimization of Dependence and the siloism of Independence is not where you get your best results. Most of us recognize the need for teamwork—however, our world has not necessarily conditioned us to work effectively with others, and so many of us aren’t quite sure how to create the deep interdependence we long for. Instead, we may find ourselves creating a faux interdependence, known as Codependence, the message being “I serve you, SO that you will serve me.”

Codependence is a transactional place, where niceties are swapped, with informal price tags attached. There is an expectation of reciprocity, and while the outward focus can appear very idealistic, the inward intention is actually somewhat manipulative. Here, we are meeting the needs of others in exchange for their meeting our needs. In our work places and personal lives, codependence can also appear as a place of collusion around mutual negative feelings. Individuals living from here are creating a tribe for themselves, to satisfy their need for belonging—although the kind of collaboration that occurs here is often destructive and hurtful to the larger group.

**Toxic Triangle**

If you look closely at the lower triangle, you will discover that the three corners there have something in common. All of them—Dependence, Independence, and Codependence—are focused on me. There is a deep concern for my needs, my perspective being heard, my contribution being significant to others. The lower triangle is a self-preoccupied place, and it can be a trap to us, to our ability to create outstanding results.

This triangle is what I have come to call the Toxic Triangle [see Figure 2]. It is characterized by four key behaviors that serve as important feedback mechanisms to let you know when you are there, just like the arrow on the Mall Map at the Mall of America. Consider these behaviors, and check yourself to see if they are true for you:
1. Blaming/Criticism can occur either inwardly toward oneself or outwardly toward others. It may be spoken, or may occur as a thought.

2. Defensiveness often takes place in connection with the other behaviors. There is a feeling that accompanies it that we, alone, are right. We are closed, and unappreciative of other ideas or perspectives.

3. Stonewalling can take many faces. It may look like the silent treatment, or avoiding another at all costs. It may show up as inauthentic politeness, where we circle one another and never speak openly about what is happening. Here we are working hard to build walls that keep us safe.

4. Contempt often looks like sarcasm, name-calling, or may take the face of bullying. There is a feeling of dislike or deep disregard that accompanies contempt, as if the other person is beneath us.¹

Most of us have spent time in the Toxic Triangle. In fact, many individuals have set up permanent residence there, and seem unable to find a different way to be in relationship with others. As if pulled by an invisible gravity, we may be sucked downward, unable to escape its grasp. We might go around and around, unsure of how to get out, experiencing frustrating results that don’t get us where we want to be.

Just as the leaders from Abu Dhabi experienced (as described in the Introduction), when we are in the Toxic Triangle, contention is high, trust is low. Communication is strained and difficult. Performance and productivity suffer. Engagement in our work and in our life is low. We feel disempowered, trapped, frustrated, and often unsure of how to get out. We may find ourselves looking for a Mall Map, a compass, something, anything, to help us get unstuck—so we can find a more effective way of being that allows for interdependence to be part of the equation.

Confident Vulnerability

When we are stuck we often feel mired, overwhelmed by the gap that exists between where we are and where we want to be. The truth is, however, that most of us have experienced interdependence at some point in our lives—even if it was momentary. This means that the answer to getting unstuck is already somehow inside of us. It may even be a very short walk to getting to interdependence. We know—or we knew at one point how to be in interdependence with others. In that situation where we had success with interdependence, we had confidence in who we were, what we had to bring, and how we could contribute to make a difference. We were also comfortable enough to rely on others around us, to cover our backs, to help us where we were less strong—we were willing to be vulnerable.

Now, if you dislike the word vulnerability, or the idea that accompanies it, join the troops! That word is scary. Yet it is a surprising distinguishing factor of those who thrive, those who live at sustained interdependence.

Brene Brown spent nearly 10 years looking for the discriminating factors that separated those who thrived in creating strong, effective, sustained relationships (interdependence!), and those who repeatedly failed. After thousands of interviews, and pages and pages of data were reviewed, she reported finding only one significant variable that occurred in every situation: vulnerability.²

When one takes a close look at vulnerability, what it means, and what it needs in order to be of service, there is an interesting observation. Vulnerability, by itself, can actually look an awful lot like Dependence. It has the connotation of appearing needy, demanding, insecure, weak, powerless, or uncertain. We find ourselves experiencing a deep aversion to these things, thus avoiding vulnerability altogether, or the appearance of vulnerability.

But what if vulnerability were paired with confidence?

Over the years, as I have worked with thousands of individuals and organizations, an interesting discovery emerged. The strongest leaders were not just vulnerable—they were confidently vulnerable. They understood who they were, what they could contribute, and how they could make a difference in others’ lives. They also understood what they were not, what they needed, and they strategically leveraged their own and others’ strengths to mitigate their weakness. This gave them the confidence to be vulnerable, to be open to others and allow them the chance to shine.

² See Brene Brown’s Ted Talk at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCvmsMzlF7o
Ironically, their confident vulnerability, their willingness to contribute what they had to bring, and declare where they were not as strong, and ask for help, gave others room to contribute their strengths and built up the confidence of others. As others around them became more confident in their own contribution, those same individuals also found the courage to be vulnerable, to share both their strengths and their weakness, and to rely on others to help them be more effective. Thus, confident vulnerability produced confident vulnerability, and accelerated the journey toward interdependence.

Consider this:

When Confidence is high and Vulnerability is low there is a tendency toward Independence—silolism, even sometimes arrogance. There is an unwillingness to see and hear others’ perspectives, or to consider one’s one blind spots.

The strongest leaders were not just vulnerable—they were confidently vulnerable. They understood who they were, what they could contribute, and how they could make a difference in others’ lives. They also understood what they were not, what they needed, and they strategically leveraged their own and others’ strengths to mitigate their weakness.”

If Vulnerability is high and Confidence is low, this can place us at Dependence, leaving us needy, exposed, insecure, struggling, and uncertain.

If both Confidence and Vulnerability are low, this often leads individuals to the transactional experiences associated with Codependence, and they feel stuck in an association which is not very satisfying.

If, however, individuals are able to be both Confident and Vulnerable—they know what they are, they know what they’re not—they are then able to operate from Interdependence [see Figure 3].

**Figure 3**
Paul Blomquist lives and breathes confident vulnerability. He is among the sharpest leaders I have ever met. He is articulate and inspiring, and his devoted employees would do anything for him, because they believe in him and in the vision he so passionately invites others to be part of. He is a man of deep integrity, and he would quickly give the shirt off his back for an employee, a customer, or a stranger he has just met.

Last year, Paul managed to break every record on the books in the 46 years that his two Ford dealerships have been in business. Sales tripled in one of the dealerships and rose by 20% in the other. Employee engagement soared and morale dramatically improved. He turned the heads of his peers and leaders at Ford corporate headquarters when his customer satisfaction scores climbed into the top 5% of all similar-sized dealerships, at slightly over 96%. Everyone wondered how he did it.

I had been working for two years with Paul and his employees at the time, and asked him what his turning point was. I, too, was curious about what it was the started this unprecedented and explosive growth. He did not hesitate for even a moment with his reply. With absolute clarity he declared:

“The turning point in my growth was the moment I realized that if I publicly shared my strengths with my employees, I was also admitting my weaknesses, since no one can effectively be strong everywhere. It was then that I came to terms with the fact that I could not be everything as a leader. I realized that if I would allow my employees’ strengths to help me where I am weak, together we could be strong and achieve more than we had ever achieved before.”

Confident vulnerability—the paradox of Paul’s remarkable leadership. Paul holds strengths with humility in one hand, and weaknesses in the other—he knows, understands, and accepts both. He is unafraid of both his strength and power, and his lack of it. Paul is not ashamed by the presence of weakness. He has simply learned to accept and own that it is part of the gift of his humanity.
Owning that truth, humbly recognizing and claiming his weaknesses along with his strengths, allowed him to stop hiding his weaknesses, and focus his best energies where he could have the biggest impact. When he began to teach his leadership team and employees to stop fearing their weaknesses, embrace their strengths, and the strengths of their peers to compliment them, they together, began to create a legacy of success that exceeded even their expectations.

The Power of Owning Both Strengths and Weaknesses

There is a deep maturity in coming to understand and own both our strengths and our weaknesses. Indeed, it is a necessary part of our journey toward interdependence. When we are no longer afraid of the presence of weakness in our life, we can offer our strengths with greater confidence. We are also liberated to find strategies to mitigate the effect of weakness and its debilitating impact upon us and others around us. We find ourselves being increasingly gentle with ourselves, and more open to others, less judgmental of weakness.

That compassion empowers others to release their fear of weakness, and opens the door for them to more fully recognize the presence of strengths and how strengths might be leveraged to mitigate weakness—both for individuals, as well as in relationships and teams. In short, it moves us, and others, toward interdependence.

Most of us, from our early experiences, were taught a lesson that has come to permeate our world so completely, that we never pause to question the verity of it: strengths are good, and weaknesses—of course, they are not so good. In fact, we would eagerly agree that weaknesses are bad. We are embarrassed by them. We would prefer to hide them and find ourselves frustrated, or even shamed, by the presence of them in our lives. It is easy to draw a connection between the idea that weaknesses are bad or wrong, and therefore there is something bad or wrong with us because we have weaknesses.

This very judgment, and the fear behind it, is a significant contributor to ineffectiveness, taking us out of our deepest strength, and interfering with our ability to step more fully into the powerful untapped potential that lies within us. This fear-of-weakness mindset can consume a lot of unconscious mental effort that is used to keep the protective barriers in place in an attempt to keep our weaknesses hidden, undiscovered by others—energy that could be used so much more effectively in the release of our strengths to benefit our own and others’ lives.
What if it is our view of strengths and weaknesses that creates the bigger problem—not necessarily the presence of either strengths or weaknesses? What if we could see strengths and weaknesses differently? How might that impact our ability to be effective? How might understanding and embracing strengths and weaknesses allow us to strategically manage weaknesses better and open ourselves up for interdependence with others?

Weakness Does Not Make You Bad—It Makes You Human

I have asked hundreds of people over the past decade this question: Why do strengths exist? I have heard countless different answers, although these are the most common: Strengths exist to make us happy. Strengths provide us tools to navigate our lives. Strengths are there to give us confidence and make us feel good about ourselves. Strengths exist to help us solve our problems.

I love these answers—and it seems that most of those answers come from the place of Independence. These answers are all about me/mine, which is not a bad thing, since strengths do serve us. However, I wonder how might we answer differently from Interdependence?

On occasion I will hear an uncommon answer, reflecting just such an Interdependence bend, which explains both the value of strengths and the value of weaknesses, if you think deeply enough about it. It is simply this: Strengths exist so we can make a difference in others’ lives.

Consider this for a moment. What if our strengths, in addition to being tools to help us survive and be successful, are about increasing our capacity for positive influence to others? How might that inform how we see weakness?

If strengths exist so we can make a difference to others, what if weaknesses exist so others can make a difference in our life? What if both are gifts which serve us? What if both strengths and weaknesses contribute to interdependence in their own way?

This is a novel thought.

Without weakness there would be little need for interdependence. There would be less of a reason to seek intimacy with others. We would really need no one. There would be no instinctive seeking out of opposite gifts to complement and offset our own, because we would be it all.
If you stop to think about it, the presence of strengths and weaknesses do not make you good or bad necessarily—they make you human. Weaknesses aren’t bad, if one chooses to be humble about them, and find strategies to manage them. Strengths don’t make you necessarily good—in fact, if you don’t understand your strengths, and their impact, you may find yourself overplaying them, which can produce some very bad results. Strengths and weaknesses are an inherent part of our existence. How we see them and respond to them determines in part the degree to which we mature in this life, and our ability to make the one-of-a-kind difference that can only be made by each of us.

The Checks and Balances of Strengths and Weaknesses

As we consider the journey towards deeper effectiveness and interdependence, strengths as well as weaknesses (as much as we may not like them), each have a role to play. Weaknesses can’t be ignored, nor does it serve if we focus myopically on them. Neither can we focus on strengths alone and pretend that weaknesses don’t exist. These approaches are ineffective. When we embrace the idea that strengths give us the gift of being able to contribute meaningfully to others and our weaknesses provide the same opportunity for others to contribute to us, we stop trying to hide what we are and what we are not. We begin to recognize that both strengths and weaknesses are a function of interdependence—and paradoxically, both serve to create interdependence.

Imagine the image of Lady Justice, standing atop a local U.S. courthouse. She holds a scale—one side of the scale representing justice, and the other side fairness and truth. There is a checks-and-balances system inherent in her role: justice not trumping truth/fairness, nor truth/fairness trumping justice.

Now imagine that you are Lady Justice—only the scale you hold in your hands is not a balance between justice and truth, it is a scale with strengths on one side and weaknesses on the other. In one hand you hold your strengths, with all their magnificence, their potential for making significant contribution to others. Notice the confidence and peace you feel in knowing what you are and what you have to bring. In the other hand, you hold your weaknesses, the things you are not so good at, the blind spots that get in your way of effectiveness. Notice that the awareness of them has the potential for helping you to remain humble, open to others, ever conscious that you don’t have all the answers.
Your weaknesses provide a critical check-and-balances system to you so that you don’t become so over-confident in your strengths that you become arrogant, focused myopically on yourself and your own perspective. They help you to hold your strengths and viewpoints with awareness of what you lack and the necessity of allowing others to serve and help you. Likewise, your strengths serve as a check-and-balance, so that you don’t become trapped in your own inadequacy, buried deeply in comparison with others, and the feeling that you have little or nothing to contribute. They provide a toolkit for you to use to solve problems, and give you a place to make a meaningful difference, as you use them to contribute and help others.

As you become increasingly aware that everyone around you also holds the same scale, you begin to recognize that there is nothing to hide. You don’t have to judge someone for not being good at what you are good at, or fear that someone might discover that you are not good at everything. No one is! Your acceptance of this reality and your understanding of your own strengths and weaknesses allows you to strategically design interdependent relationships, which maximize your own and others’ strengths, and mitigates the weaknesses of those involved. The more aware and comfortable you are with both your strengths and your weaknesses, the more you can confidently allow others to make significant contributions to you. The energy that you may have spent previously, either trying to be everything, or trying to hide what you can’t do, is replaced by a very strategic positioning of yourself and others to maximize the collective strengths available and minimize the effect of weaknesses.

As we consider the necessity of balancing the confidence of knowing and sharing our strengths with the vulnerability of understanding and appropriately revealing our weaknesses, it seems important to reflect that dichotomy in the journey of moving toward interdependence. Getting out of the Toxic Triangle requires Confidence in our strengths (which takes us out of Dependence), balanced very carefully with the Vulnerability of knowing and communicating our weaknesses (which keeps us from the siloism of Independence). [See Figure 4].
Creating Confident Vulnerability

Stepping out of the Toxic Triangle and moving forward and upward is a journey. It does not happen in a single leap. It requires seeing new things, through new eyes, and doing things differently, with an intent that is outward focused, on contribution, on us/others, rather than me/mine.

Let’s consider what it might take. In order for growth to occur, there are three phases that characterize the journey: Discover, Develop, and Actualize—each of them increasingly expanding one’s capacity for both confidence, as well as vulnerability (see Figure 5).

![Figure 5](image)

Discover is the foundational phase. It is here that individuals build their confidence through increasing their understanding of the language of strengths, and how strengths inform both their contributions and their needs. They build their capacity for vulnerability by becoming aware of, and increasingly comfortable with, their weaknesses—both those weaknesses that are the flip side of their strengths (which come from over-use of strengths), as well as those which are areas of non-strength.
The phase of Develop builds on the awareness gained through understanding and embracing strengths and weaknesses. It expands confidence by deepening clarity and commitment to offering your unique value proposition: those things that you are able to bring better than most other people. It also helps you clarify how your strengths can be developed to maximize your contribution to the team, in alignment with individual, team, and organizational goals. Your capacity for vulnerability is deepened at this phase as you begin to create strategies to leverage your own, and others’ strengths, in order to mitigate your weaknesses. You find yourself springboarding from the confidence gained in clearly defining your unique contribution, into a fierce determination to move outside your comfort zone in offering your strengths and looking for help in mitigating your weaknesses.

The phase of Actualize requires that you take everything you have learned about yourself, your strengths and weaknesses, contributions and needs, your unique value proposition, and strategies for mitigating weakness, and bring all those things into intentional relationship design. This implies having agreed upon norms, strategies for blending your strengths in complementary ways with others, and understanding how to recognize and respond appropriately to needs that are different from your own. Here, you are able to strategically design complementary interdependent relationships—with intention. Your
capacity for vulnerability is enhanced as you become adept at modeling transparency, naming, without judgment, what you are seeing and experiencing, where you are strong, and where you struggle, and where you may see others contributing and needing support. You become comfortable making requests and using relationship design to resolve differences comfortably and efficiently.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Expanding Confidence</th>
<th>Expanding Vulnerability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DISCOVER</td>
<td>Seeing strengths—understand their contributions and needs</td>
<td>Embracing weaknesses—the patterns of over-use and under-use of strengths; areas of non-talent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEVELOP</td>
<td>Committing to contribute—intentional implementation of strengths to create purposeful impact; accelerating growth through increased time in the A+ Strengths Zone</td>
<td>Leveraging strengths for growth—strategic use of broader spectrum of strengths to mitigate weakness, problem solve, and increase performance/energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACTUALIZE</td>
<td>Designing complimentary alliances—render weaknesses irrelevant through creation of intentional interdependence with others</td>
<td>Modeling transparency—skills, systems, and norms necessary to sustain effective interdependence through strengths</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The balance of this book will take us through an in-depth discovery of each of these phases, and how both confidence and vulnerability is built through the strategic application and understanding of strengths and weaknesses. Part 1 will explore Discover in detail, and will review the principles of Seeing Strengths and Embracing Weakness. Part 2 will focus on Develop, and what is required in order to more effectually Commit to Contribute, and Leverage Strengths for Growth. Part 3 will take us into the Design of Complementary Relationships, and the less-comfortable territory of Modeling Transparency. Finally, Part 4 will offer some tools, tips, and resources for making all of these things simple and actionable for those who are eager to operate more deeply from interdependence.
Chapter Summary

The key learning points from this chapter are:

• There are four possible places we find ourselves operating from, with the first three being focused on self/me, and the last being focused on us/others:
  ◦ Dependence—waiting for others to meet our needs or make us shine
  ◦ Independence—taking care of oneself and work/being mostly oblivious to others’ needs or potential contributions
  ◦ Codependence—collusion with other like-minded people who validate us; taking care of others so others will take care of us
  ◦ Interdependence—deeply serving the relationship and others, which includes awareness of others’ contributions/needs, adjusting one’s style to effectively complement others, staying focused on the bigger purpose for which we are collaborating, being willing to have open, authentic conversations with others.

• We can tell which place we are operating from by the results we are getting. When we are focused on the first three places—self/me (Toxic Triangle), we will experience:
  ◦ Blame/criticism toward self/others
  ◦ Defensiveness—feeling right, territorial, protective of our view (not open)
  ◦ Stonewalling—avoiding others or procrastinating self-evaluation/change, faux politeness
  ◦ Contempt—name calling, sarcasm, bullying toward self or others

• In order to escape the Toxic Triangle, we need Confident Vulnerability—knowing what we are, and knowing what we are not. Confident Vulnerability is necessary for interdependence, as it clarifies where we can contribute to others, and where others can complement us and contribute to us.

• Strengths exist so we can make a difference in others’ lives; weaknesses exist so others can make a difference in our lives. Both are necessary for interdependence. Awareness of our strengths gives us the courage to offer them in order to positively impact others. An awareness of our weaknesses helps us stay humble enough to be open to others’ perspectives and contributions.
“DeAnna connects deeply with her audience. It felt like she was speaking directly to me.”

DeAnna Murphy—MS, SPC II

President, Strengths Strategy® | 18 years training/coaching
BS, MS, SPC—II, FranklinCovey certified trainer, CTI Leadership Certified, Clifton Strengths School—Certificate in Strengths-Based Education; Gallup Strengths Performance Coach II

DeAnna Murphy is the founder and President of Strengths Strategy®, and an enthusiastic strengths strategist. She inspires and activates individuals to uncover their unique giftedness, and to leverage their strengths to overcome weaknesses, interdependently solve problems, and contribute to the world in powerful ways.

Over the past eighteen years of providing leadership training and coaching, DeAnna has developed a stalwart reputation for being a driver of engagement, productivity, and individual/team performance, leveraging strengths-use as her power-tool. She connects personally with each individual, and takes genuine interest and delight in their growth and discovery process.

She has advanced degrees and certifications from Brigham Young University (MS Psychology), the Coaches Training Institute, FranklinCovey, and the Gallup organization (certified Strengths Performance Coach and Certified Strengths Educator). DeAnna served on the Strengths Advisory Panel for Gallup, and is currently part of Gallup’s Coach Advisory Council, helping to shape the future of strengths coaching. She is also actively researching and writing this book.

Strengths
Individualization—Connectedness—Maximizer—Developer—Learner—Achiever

What clients have to say about DeAnna:

“DeAnna is a genius — she is masterful in her understanding of the 34 strengths. She led me through strengths discovery in a way that was enlightening, engaging and downright fun.”

“DeAnna has such knowledge and passion for this work. She creates a non-threatening environment which really made me think. She is able to get everyone involved without creating discomfort.”

“DeAnna’s motivational and engaging style helped me be more willing to explore strengths and weaknesses in my life, and be open to a different way of seeing things.”