

# “Living Someone Else’s Life”

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In February, I got to meet one of my favorite authors. Marcus Buckingham was speaking in Atlanta, and I was fortunate enough to connect with him for a few moments backstage, thanks to my friends Brad Scholle and Kevin Small. Marcus is the bestselling author of *First Break All the Rules*, and *Now Discover Your Strengths*. His latest book is entitled, *The One Thing You Need to Know*. He is a remarkable communicator whose message is revolutionary. Let me summarize what he spoke about that morning.

## Someone Else's Life

Marcus put his finger on a terrifying reality that day. It explains why so few people flourish in their work. He suggested that most people are living out someone else’s life badly. They never thrive because they try to follow a pattern laid out by someone else; they never realize what they’re really supposed to do, and they never go where they’re really supposed to go. They’ve simply followed the direction and the strengths of someone else they admire.

The Gallup organization sought to find out why so few Americans love their jobs. Knowing that no job is perfect, they asked American workers if they feel they get to play to their strengths in their daily work at least 75% of the time. In other words, every job has a few components that aren’t energizing. Gallup simply defined an ideal job as one that allows a person to play to their strengths ¾ of the time. What they discovered was pitiful. Only 17% of Americans feel they get to play to their strengths at work.

Let me ask you a question. Do you get to play to your strengths most of the time in your work? If you lead a team, what would your team members say about their work? Is everyone living out their strengths, or are they living someone else’s life...badly?

Many schools and businesses today have bought into the “strengths model” for job assignments. Unfortunately, we fail to practice what we preach. Even in academic institutions, we strive to produce well rounded individuals who spend more time fixing their flaws than zeroing in on their strengths. I do believe in a liberal arts education. I do believe students should study the humanities and understand critical thinking. But I meet tens of thousands of college students each year who change their major multiple times and still graduate clueless as to what they want to do with their life. Their life song is U2’s: “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For.” They don’t know where their major contribution in life will be. So they copy someone else. Why? We haven’t done a good job helping next generation leaders identify their strengths.

This is not only true in our country, but around the world. The Gallup organization asked managers a simple question: To be successful, should employees work on their strengths or fix their weaknesses? As a manager where do you focus their time? Managers were asked this question in four industrialized nations: the U.S., England, China and Japan. Here’s what managers in each nation actually do:

1. United States – Only 41% focused on strengths
2. England – Only 38% focused on strengths.
3. China – Only 24% focused on strengths.
4. Japan – Only 24 % focused on strengths.

### **It Just Sounds Strange**

For some reason it just sounds strange to say: *Work on your strengths.* We feel more comfortable and natural saying: *Work on our weaknesses.* After all, we want well-rounded people...don't we? So, we try to shore up what's wrong. To understand health, we study disease. To understand marriage, we study divorce. We naturally focus on what's wrong. The truth is, outstanding schools, churches and businesses do just the opposite. Great ones seem to possess two ingredients:

1. They have great managers or leaders
2. Those managers focus on linking talent with goals

Good leaders concentrate on the strengths of each person on their team. They find out what's unique about a person and capitalize on it. They help others thrive in the area of their strengths and they manage around their weaknesses. They don't necessary try to "fix the flaws." They recognize people will always have weaknesses—and they keep them from work that involves their weakness. They figure: why de-energize a team member that way? These leaders define their job with one phrase: "I turn talent into performance." They see themselves as catalysts for strengths.

### **What Prevents Us From Working Toward Our Strength?**

Have you ever stopped to answer the question: why don't we manage this way? Why do we seek such perfection, such balance when it comes to performance? To be sure, one reason is we confuse weaknesses in our character with weaknesses in our gifts. No doubt, all of us should fix our character weaknesses. But that's not what we are taking about here. Our discussion revolves around identifying the one or two primary areas of talent, knowledge and skill—and placing people in that "sweet spot." This doesn't lead to arrogance. It leads to authenticity. The fact is, Marcus Buckingham identified three MYTHS and three TRUTHS that explain this dilemma we face:

MYTH	TRUTH
1. As you grow, you will change.	1. As you grow, you become more and more of who you already are.
2. You'll learn the most in the area of your weaknesses.	2. You'll grow the least in your weak areas, and every gain will be hard won.
3. Great teams are full of well-rounded people. Team members put aside their own strengths and desires.	3. Great teams are well-rounded by allowing team members to play to their strengths and become interdependent on each other.

You will make your greatest contribution in life by focusing on your God-given strength. Your greatest task as a leader will be helping your team members identify and capitalize on theirs. May God spare you from spending so much time shoring up weaknesses, that you become average at everything. The last thing you want is a bunch of people trying to live someone else's life...badly.

Tim