



# Hidden Strengths

Unleashing the  
Leadership Skills  
You Already Have

Thuy and Milo Sindell



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*To Ava;*

*an old soul in a child's body, whose charm and  
wisdom enlighten us every day.*

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# Introduction

All of us would like to know the secret to great leadership. Well, here's the secret: It depends. It depends on what you are good at, what you are terrible at, and what you decide to leverage—those Hidden Skills that are in the middle.

My name is Thuy (pronounced TWEE) Sindell. I've been an executive coach since the late 1990s, and I am also the president of Skyline Group's Coaching Division. I've worked with hundreds of business leaders over the years, and this is my opportunity to share with you the patterns and themes I've observed and the ways I've supported leaders in their growth. I have a no-nonsense style, so you can expect the information in this book to be direct and to get you quickly on your leadership path.

My name is Milo Sindell. Thuy and I work together, have written four books together, *and* we are happily married. I head Skyline Group's C4X Division, which is our hybrid technology coaching solution, as well as drive the direction and market position of Skyline. I've been consulting since the 1990s as well. I have worked at Intel and Sun Microsystems (now Oracle) and have founded two start-ups, one of which was acquired by another company. I have a passion for helping leaders make an impact on the world. I wrote this book to provide a proven methodology for lifelong learning and professional development to both current and emerging leaders.

We have worked in and for many major corporations—from hi-tech companies to insurance companies and everything in between. We have helped employees to increase their effectiveness in various

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departments and in positions like engineering and sales. Across professions and industries, we have noted certain patterns in human behavior and, more important, consistent processes for identifying and developing the right skills at the right time to get you to your next level. We are talking, of course, about your Hidden Strengths.

Research has shown that effective leaders evolve and grow throughout their careers, whereas failed leaders get stuck in a pattern of overusing their strengths to the point of staleness.<sup>1</sup> Our emphasis on the relationship between constant learning, increasing agility, and long-term leadership is not new. What is new is our system for creating a growth mind-set, identifying learning opportunities, and setting the stage for your ongoing professional evolution as an aspiring or current leader.

Many leaders and aspiring leaders usually concentrate on trying to leverage their Natural Strengths (the top 20 percent of skills) or minimize their Weaknesses (the bottom 10 percent). Our tendency as humans is to focus on the extremes. We boil things down to what we don't do well and try to fix them, or we rest on our laurels by relying too much on our strengths.

Let's use Barbara, a woman we worked with a few years ago, as an example. Barbara believed that if she could only "fix" her weakness of being a poor presenter, she would be a great leader. Great leadership, however, depends on who you are, your environment, and what you are being called upon to achieve. There is no one weakness you need to fix to get there or one formula that works for everyone. Personalized learning is the key. That's why executive coaching is such a fast-growing solution to developing leaders.

What we have found in our executive coaching experience is that the most fertile ground for leadership and professional growth is the 70 percent of skills that fall in the middle of your range. These are your Hidden Strengths; you are not great at them (yet), but you're certainly not failing in those areas either. This is where your Hidden Strengths are hiding out, waiting to be unleashed.

We want to raise people's awareness of their Hidden Strengths. Everyone has them, and everyone can develop them! We know from

experience that constantly identifying and developing your Hidden Strengths are the keys to career and leadership development in today's evolving work environment. In this book, we share this highly effective results-oriented approach to leadership.

Imagine if you stayed locked in the belief that what worked well yesterday will work well today—and tomorrow and the day after that. You would eventually figure out that doing what you always do leads to professional stagnation. Alternately, the Hidden Strengths methodology shows you how to tap into your undeveloped skills for ongoing professional development throughout your career.

The first part of this book introduces the concept of Hidden Strengths and explores the immense potential of this middle range of skills as a source for continued growth. The second part is a guide to assessing and getting familiar with your Hidden Strengths, your Natural Strengths, and your Weaknesses. The final part is a road map for determining which of your Hidden Strengths best supports your goals.

One last thing: *Hidden Strengths* is a book for leaders and aspiring leaders—basically, anybody who is motivated to learn more about themselves and how they can grow in their careers. We see leadership as a mentality. It involves being proactive about how you present yourself to the world whether you're an individual contributor, a middle-level manager, or a CEO. We work with leaders at *all* levels of an organization.

When leadership is a state of mind, you prime yourself to grow and succeed, no matter your level or position. In other words, leadership development is professional development. And at each stage of your career, identifying and developing your Hidden Strengths are the means to unleashing the crucial leadership skills you already have. There's a gold mine of opportunity in the middle!

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## About Hidden Strengths

**P**art 1 provides an overview of the Hidden Strengths methodology and why we believe it is a powerful way to optimize your continued leadership development. We explore the assumptions around the development of skills and set the groundwork for how you can transform Hidden Strengths into Learned Strengths at the top of your skill set.

## What Are Hidden Strengths?

**W**hen we are faced with a new challenge—playing a new game, building a new relationship, or getting a promotion—we usually rely on what we consider our strengths. And why not? Shouldn't what has worked for us in the past work in the future?

On the other end of the spectrum, however, we tend to get mired in futile attempts to fix things and improve skills. Our glaring shortcomings become the most obvious targets for improvement. Why is it so easy to focus on the extremes—our strengths and weaknesses—and overlook the gold that lies in the middle? This book is about what lies between what you are already great at and what you are inherently just not good at doing: your Hidden Strengths. These underdeveloped skills are your richest resources for growth.

In our experience working with hundreds of leaders, we have identified twenty-eight skills that are necessary to achieve professional success (see Chapter 3). What we have also found is that for each person, these twenty-eight skills fall into three buckets: Natural Strengths, Weaknesses, and Hidden Strengths (Figure 1).

1. Natural Strengths (the top 20 percent): the abilities you default to because they come easily
2. Weaknesses (the bottom 10 percent): the things you are simply not good at and will probably never be good at
3. Hidden Strengths (the middle 70 percent): the things you neither excel nor fail at

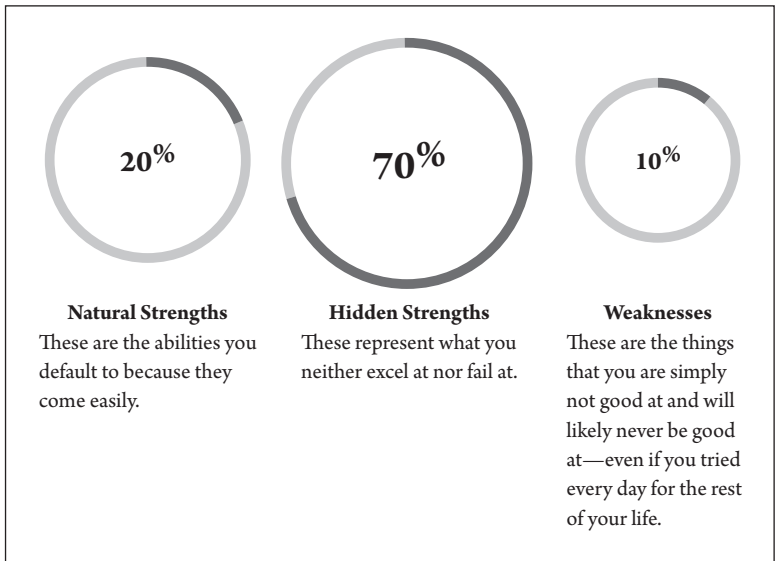


Figure 1. The Three Buckets of Skills

Despite being the largest pool, the skills in the middle are often overlooked by people who are too busy relying on their strengths or working on improving their weaknesses; that’s why we call them “hidden.” In reality, with focus and practice, Hidden Strengths are your most powerful tool for ongoing professional development. To succeed in a dynamic world, people must continuously strive to increase their abilities throughout their lifetimes.

### Why Hidden Strengths?

The subject of strengths in both popular and business culture has been a positive force helping raise the bar on personal and professional development. In *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, the book that ostensibly started the strengths movement, Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton<sup>2</sup> define a *strength* as a combination of the following:

1. Your talents (natural traits or propensities)
2. The knowledge required (both content/classroom-related and experiential)
3. The skills (or steps) you need to actually do it

When these three components—talents, knowledge, and skills—come together naturally, we call it a Natural Strength (Figure 2). What is the likelihood of this occurring? The answer is about 20 percent—as in your top 20 percent of skills.

Understanding what you are naturally good at is very valuable in finding the right job or career path. The more overlap there is between what you are required to do and what you are inherently good at, the easier your life will be. Conversely, finding yourself in situations where you are forced to rely on your Weaknesses—meaning you have no talents, knowledge, or skills—will make it much more difficult to be successful in your chosen profession. From a job security and personal well-being standpoint, you should not be in a role that requires you to rely solely on your Weaknesses.

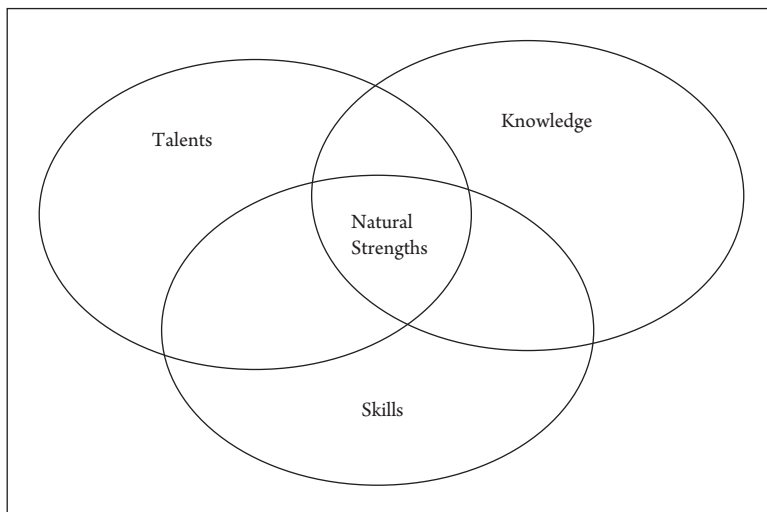


Figure 2. Natural Strengths

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Understanding your Natural Strengths and Weaknesses is most relevant for determining job fit. Awareness of these two extremes sets the parameters that allow you to find your place in the work world. Where Hidden Strengths come into play is in the ongoing evolution of your career. For the vast majority of us, the skills we are hired for or are naturally good at in a given role will not be the skills we will need to progress. So how do we remain agile and ensure continued professional development? The answer here is by developing the rich pool of Hidden Strengths in our middle 70 percent.

Developing Hidden Strengths is fairly straightforward. Anybody can do it! First, it requires identifying which of your skills fall in the middle 70 percent range. You can find a Hidden Strengths Self-Assessment to help you with this first step at [HiddenStrengths.com](http://HiddenStrengths.com). Second, you must identify which of your Hidden Strengths you want to focus on (there will be many to choose from!), depending on your professional goals. Third, with practice and focus, you can begin to develop those Hidden Strengths and move them from the middle 70 percent to the top of your skill set.

Take this example: Jenny is an individual contributor in the Finance Department. She has a natural talent for *Influencing Others*, but she has never had the opportunity to use it. To unleash this Hidden Strength, she needs the knowledge and skills to reveal it. But what if her boss never gives her the opportunity to lead? Because she is not familiar with the existence of this Hidden Strength, she may never ask for leadership responsibility. Resulting in a lost opportunity to grow into a leadership role.

Here's another case to consider: Reese, a middle manager in a paper factory, is intent on moving up the career ladder. At the moment, his Natural Strengths seem to be well aligned with his job, but he is ambitiously focused on what comes next. He takes the Hidden Strengths assessment and discovers that *Influencing Others* is one of his Hidden Strengths. He sees how this skill would be helpful if he were to be promoted to regional manager, so he takes the time to learn about it and practices developing it. Unfortunately, influencing

others doesn't come naturally to him—it's not a talent—but with time and experience, he develops the knowledge and skills to be quite influential. *Influencing Others* becomes a Learned Strength for him, and by practicing on the job, he has proven to his boss that he's ready for more leadership responsibility.

Unlike Natural Strengths, identifying and transforming your Hidden Strengths into Learned Strengths are actions you control and drive. You decide how to evolve, grow, and change to meet the demands of the world around you. We look at this as not only empowering but exciting! Even if the stars don't align and endow you with all the right Natural Strengths, you can still become a leader and top performer in your chosen field. The first critical step is an awareness of your Hidden Strengths.

### The Risk of Focusing on Weaknesses

The problem with focusing on weaknesses is that it takes a tremendous amount of effort to move the needle to a point where you can demonstrate improvement. Using economic terms, the investment in resources (i.e., time, dollars, and energy) and opportunity costs (i.e., not focusing on other skill development opportunities that yield higher returns quicker), result in a negative return. We suggest a bandage approach for managing your Weaknesses: avoid or delegate them if you can, or learn to do them adequately if you must, knowing full well you might never be great at it.

Your environment often dictates that you build certain skills, even if you are terrible at them and there is no hope that you will ever excel. For example, if you are a CEO of a publicly traded company and you are horrible at giving presentations, you don't have the luxury of delegating this kind of responsibility. In this case, you will have to learn to speak publicly with a minimum level of competence.

You should invest the necessary time and energy to become proficient, but you shouldn't try to turn your weaknesses into strengths. In some cases, this will never happen, so just accept it and move on.

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Spend only as much time and effort on it as you need to so you can focus on other, more fruitful endeavors.

One of our clients, Nicolas, was a great organizer and manager of very complex projects and problems. He knew where to get the right people and resources and how to organize them to get the job done. *Planning and Organizing* and *Leading Implementation* were the Natural Strengths that he consistently depended on. Nicolas was tasked with building a world-class team. His manager wanted the most experienced industry leaders in product management to *want* to work for him. The problem was that people perceived Nicolas as an execution machine who lacked vision and was too focused on results. He often alienated others along the way.

The challenge for Nicolas was to evolve from a leader who was known for getting things done whether or not his team felt good about it to a leader who was more inclusive. He also needed to be more of a product visionary and to communicate his strategic thinking more effectively.

Nicolas's lowest score was on *Inspirational Vision*; he couldn't see more than two years out. He also lacked technical expertise because he was not an engineer, and he didn't have the strong connection to the industry that his manager and peers did. He would need to spend a lot of time and energy honing his technical skills and building a stronger network of thought leaders to get marginally better at these skills. It didn't make any sense to focus on them. We encouraged Nicolas to let go of trying to develop his weakest skills and instead work on three of his Hidden Strengths that could be more rapidly learned and applied: *Leading Others*, *Verbal Communication*, and *Strategic Thinking*.

Within a few weeks of focusing on *Leading Others*, Nicolas strengthened his ability to recruit top-notch people. At first, Nicolas did not want to hire people whom he perceived as more talented or skilled than he was; he was afraid it would highlight his own shortcomings. Once he got over that fear, however, he was able to make much more effective hiring decisions. Nicolas took the time to thor-

oroughly screen prospective new hires. He carefully onboarded and integrated them to ensure they became productive quickly. He developed processes to help them hone their skills to fit the needs of the organization. Finally, he provided ongoing feedback, mentoring, and coaching. Over time, with his help, these employees became valuable contributors to the company.

Nicolas also focused on growing and leveraging his *Strategic Thinking* and *Verbal Communication* to counterbalance his lack of *Inspirational Vision*. He learned how to reframe his projects and decisions as if they were a chess game. If he thought of the end goal one year from now as the equivalent of check and checkmate, he could identify the moves he needed to make now and in the future with an eye to the resources he had at hand. His deployment of these Hidden Strengths along with his Natural Strength of *Planning and Organizing* made it possible for Nicolas to give his team and coworkers the opportunity to be involved, feel included, and understand his procedures.

We have also worked with many great leaders who were the opposite of Nicolas. They were excellent at getting people fired up and excited about their visions. They naturally defaulted to rallying employees around what was possible. However, they were horrible at presenting details, planning, and organizing the work that needed to be done to realize the vision. They rightly ignored developing their weaknesses and instead delegated the planning and details to the managers who reported to them (who were much more analytical) and to their assistants (who were much more organized). To better bridge the gap between *Inspirational Vision* and *Effectiveness*, they built their Hidden Strengths of *Teamwork and Collaboration* and *Partnering and Relationship Building*, focusing their time and attention on developing the strategic relationships that were necessary to get the job done.

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## The Risk of Overrelying on Strengths

The problem with relying on our Natural Strengths is that it can lead to *stagnation*. We all unconsciously default to the skills that come easily to us, but always relying on a particular set of skills—even if you’re great at them—is not enough to stay on top. It is a potential dead end. Your agility in evolving your abilities to meet an ever-changing environment will be the hallmark and foundation of your success.

If agility leads to success in today’s business environment, then rigidity and overreliance on current strengths must be avoided at all costs. It would be so much easier if we could just stick with what we do well today for the rest of our lives. But research shows us that to be effective, leaders must constantly adapt to their changing environments. Those who don’t adapt eventually see their strengths turn into weaknesses through overuse.<sup>3</sup> In fact, leaders who lack the insight, ability, and willingness to evolve will find that their environment provides the most damning feedback in the form of career stagnation or ejection from their roles.

James was one of our executive coaching clients. He wasn’t great at listening, but he wasn’t terrible at it either. He found that focusing on this skill set was a waste of his time because he knew exactly what it meant to display *Listening* skills, such as making eye contact, checking for understanding, and paraphrasing for clarity. We pointed out to him that although he knew the skills, he didn’t demonstrate them most of the time. He only did it when the stakes were high or when there was a senior leader in the room, but not with his peers and direct reports.

James’s story is an example of how we often “pooh-pooh” the obvious things that hold us back from being even more amazing: our Hidden Strengths. He was faced with the decision to develop his *Listening* skills or risk not getting promoted because people didn’t like to work with him. Unfortunately, however, this knowledge failed to translate into behavior, and it continued to undermine his effectiveness with his peers. Why would James sabotage his career instead of developing a skill he could easily turn into a Learned Strength?

Consider another example: Bill was a manager in a large manufacturing company. His work often involved managing complex projects, and he became adept at assembling and leading teams. His *Assertiveness* and technical know-how were his strongest leadership attributes. At his level in the organization, he was considered trustworthy. Not surprisingly, senior management swiftly spotted his talent. He was moved to headquarters for a job rotation that would be good preparation for further career advancement.

Unfortunately, things started to unravel when Bill was at headquarters. Naturally, he relied on his current strengths, but the head office was political, and Bill soon found that his straight talk hit many wrong notes. He received feedback that he didn't seem to fully understand the nuances and complexities of situations and was encouraged to develop better skills for *Organizational Awareness*. Bill tried to curb his directness, but he was never able to adopt his superiors' politically savvy behaviors. He struggled with his values and never came around to accepting that the politics were what they were. Instead, he shunned them with his forthrightness in public forums.

Bill stayed with the company, but he never advanced in his position. His rigidity prevented him from navigating the politics. He resisted growing his Hidden Strength of *Organizational Awareness*. Although he was good at being direct and making sound technical decisions, he needed to find the time and place when people were more apt to listen. In addition, he had to be mindful of the organizational history of the company and learn how to help others save face. The development of strong *Organizational Awareness* skills would have made Bill more trustworthy at both senior and lower levels of the organization. With that trust, he may have had the opportunity to influence the organization and even shift the politics, but he couldn't embrace adapting his behavior to work within the system.

You have probably met more than one failed leader like Bill in your organization. His story illustrates perfectly how difficult it is for leaders to find a balance between the skills that got them to a certain level and the agility necessary to learn new skills. It is risky to assume

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that the professional skills that got you where you are today will keep you going for the rest of your career. The consequences of stagnation are all around you. Golf courses around the world are full of unevolved leaders who were invited to leave the world of industry.

### **The Reward of Focusing on Hidden Strengths**

As you are probably figuring out by now, the rewards of focusing on Hidden Strengths are continued professional development and career advancement. Knowing your Hidden Strengths is the key to identifying and growing the right skills at the right time for success.

Most leaders start their careers as strong individual contributors who demonstrate proficiency in their area of expertise and are rewarded with more responsibility—namely, management. In most companies, saying “no” to increased responsibility is a career killer, so despite little experience, interest, or demonstrated skills in managing others, strong individual contributors find themselves in positions of leadership. For the most part, these new leaders are able to learn on the fly, use traits they are naturally good at, and effectively survive each successive promotion. But the problem with this model is that sooner or later, even the most adaptable, highly skilled technical leaders reach a point where they can no longer rely solely on their Natural Strengths. Long-term success as a leader requires the ability to learn, adapt, and grow with each new challenge brought on by new promotions, projects, and demands.<sup>4</sup>

Whether or not you choose a formal leadership path, to be successful, you must use different skill sets at different stages of your career. This is an absolute certainty. No matter what your job is, the world around you is dynamic. New challenges will emerge, and adaptation requires developing new skills and drawing from new perspectives. Optimizing the right Hidden Strengths at the right time is what leads to ongoing growth. In our experience, the very foundation of professional and leadership development is constantly identifying

and developing Hidden Strengths. That is what led to Alice's success. Here is her story.

Alice is the founder and CEO of a start-up that has just been recognized as one of the most innovative companies in the country. Throughout her career from software engineer to entrepreneur and CEO, her focus has been on achieving her goals, while at the same time paying attention to those around her.

Early in her career as an engineer, she observed the leaders in her organization, examining their career paths and leadership qualities. She compared them to the employees who remained individual contributors and saw that the most successful individual contributors were the ones who honed their skills. They were naturally good at what they did, and their aspirations centered on becoming the best they could be in their chosen field. Conversely, those who successfully moved into leadership positions embraced the need to adopt a range of skills beyond their technical competencies. They learned to adapt to changing situations as greater responsibilities presented themselves and as new operational challenges emerged.

Alice regularly sought feedback and opportunities from mentors and leaders she respected to determine new skills that needed to be developed. Her evolution from software engineer with the technical skills of problem solving and being detail oriented began with developing a broader range of hidden leadership strengths like *Flexibility* and *Entrepreneurship*. Alice credits her success as a leader to her ability to challenge herself and transform these Hidden Strengths into Learned Strengths.

There is no doubt that our world is getting more complex and interconnected. Everything is evolving to be bigger and faster and to include greater interdependencies. This shift is not likely to slow down. Your ability to adapt to an ever-changing environment is critical. More than anything else, you must be agile

The modern workplace is one where your ideals and aspirations for the perfect job, perfect fit, perfect boss, and perfect culture collide

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with the real challenges of poor leadership, tight resources, compressed deadlines, and the need for you to stretch your professional abilities every day. Identifying and developing your Hidden Strengths involve a realistic you-driven approach to meeting those challenges. It is about proactively developing the necessary knowledge and skills to achieve your goals, taking control of your career, and showing the world you have what it takes to evolve and thrive in today's workplace.