

Developing Your Strengths

A hand is shown breaking through a stack of concrete blocks. The blocks are arranged in a vertical column, and the hand is positioned to the left, with fingers gripping the side of the stack. The blocks are shattering, with many small pieces of concrete flying off, creating a cloud of dust and debris. The background is dark, making the light-colored concrete and the hand stand out.

Mary Kelly, PhD Commander, US Navy (ret)

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Few, if any, of us are born with all the traits, talents, and skills that we'd like to possess. Some of us wish we were taller or smarter or more musically inclined. ***While many things can't be improved or changed, the good news is that many things can!***

You can improve and become the person you want to be. You can possess the abilities you want to have. ***And you can make all this possible by developing your strengths.***

This book will cover a variety of tools that you can use to regularly be at your current best and, just as importantly, to become the best possible version of yourself.

We'll explore the importance of finding your passions, meditation, goal setting, visualization, positive affirmations, evaluation, and the incredible power of practice.

"There is no passion to be found playing small
in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living."

- Nelson Mandela

Finding Your Passions

You can only reach your ultimate development in those areas in which you have passion. For example, you can never become a truly great golfer if you don't even like to play.

Perhaps you're fortunate enough to already know what you are the most passionate about. Or maybe you feel that you've never had the chance to really consider your aspirations. In that case, take some time now to find your passions.

Your greatest strengths will ultimately be those things that you do, practice and develop the most. It only makes sense to spend all that time on something that you love.

Here is a sure-fire plan to find your passions:

1. **Consider your history.** Looking back, what are the things that you've enjoyed the most? What are some things that you've always wanted to try but never have? What things have you naturally been really good at? Sometimes the answers are inside us, so think about it and see what floats to the surface.

- ➔ If there is something you've always want to do, give it a try and see how much you enjoy it. You don't really know anything if you don't experience it for yourself.

2. **Ask yourself, "Could I see myself doing this regularly over time?"** It might be a blast, but if you only want to do it twice a year, it's not a passion. A passion is something that you want to learn all about and develop a real level of expertise for.

- ➔ That doesn't mean you must have the capacity to become world-class. If you're 60 years old and love tennis, you might not win on the world competitor circuit, but you can certainly spend some time each day playing tennis, if that's what you want to do.

- ➔ It's the activity or subject that you would reach for when you have free time available to you.

3. **Do the following exercise:**

- ➔ Take a blank sheet of paper and write at the top, "*My Passions.*"
- ➔ For the next 30 minutes, at least, write whatever comes to mind. That means if you find yourself thinking, "*This is crazy... I don't want to do this,*" then that is exactly what you write. Just keep writing. A

lot of mental junk will come out and that's okay.

- ➔ When you write something that looks good to you, simply circle it. Keep writing, don't stop until at least 30 minutes have gone by.
- ➔ You'll know it when you hit on the right item.

4. **Keep your options open.** You don't have to decide today what your passions are. The point is to fully investigate and give all the possibilities a fair chance.

5. **Consider if there is a way to make it a career.** Maybe you can make money at your passion. Maybe you can only do it part-time. But consider the possibilities. ***If your work is related to your greatest passion, it's like you'll never have to "work" again!***

Let's look at our tennis example. You could:

- ➔ Give lessons
- ➔ Coach at the high school or college level
- ➔ Work at a health club / racquet club
- ➔ Have a tennis-related website
- ➔ Write a book or articles about tennis
- ➔ Become a reporter on professional tennis
- ➔ Run a tennis camp or training center

- ➔ Start an inner-city tennis program

One way to measure success is by the amount of time you get to spend on those activities that you enjoy the most. Don't settle for spending your free time on television.

Find something that you're passionate about and you'll be in a much better position to develop your strengths and enjoy a wonderful life.

"Passion is energy. Feel the power that comes from focusing on what excites you."

- Oprah Winfrey

Meditation

When you hear the word '*meditation*' do you envision a slender vegetarian sitting on a pillow? You're probably not alone, but meditation is a tool that can be used by everyone. You can consider the pillow to be optional.

The truth is meditation can be done every waking moment. Sitting on a pillow in a peaceful, quiet, low-light situation is like meditating with training wheels – it's meditation under ideal circumstances.

By learning to meditate when it's easiest, it will be possible to meditate on a loud, smelly, subway while you're angry with your spouse and stressed about work.

While there are all kinds of meditation, we're going to use it for two purposes:

1. **Meditate to stay focused.** You might have heard of the idea of 'mindfulness'. This is simply the idea of staying focused on what is in front of you. So, if you're washing the dishes, you're only thinking about washing the dishes. If you're playing tennis, you're only thinking about playing tennis.

➡ Try this test. Find a quiet place where you can be alone. Simply sit there and breathe. Now count every exhalation. See how high you can get before you start thinking about something else. If you can't make it to 100, you have some work to do. Most people can't reach 10 at first, so don't feel bad.

➡ ***Staying focused has many benefits.*** First, you can't be your best at anything if you're thinking about other things. Your mind can only

think about one thing at a time. Now, it can move back and forth rapidly between several things, but can only focus on one thing at a time. You'll never develop your strengths fully without focus.

- ➔ It becomes difficult to be stressed if you are *only* thinking about the present moment. ***Stress and anxiety come from reliving unpleasant memories or imagining unpleasant things that haven't happened yet.*** Stay in the moment, and the mental relaxation is there for the taking.
- ➔ You get to live your life. If you're living in the past or the future, you're not living your life. ***Life can only be lived at this very moment.*** Everything else is just imaginary.
- ➔ You get more done in your everyday life. When you're fully absorbed with the task at hand, you are more efficient and get more accomplished.

2. **To deal with fear and anxiety.** It is our fears and resistance that stop us from achieving great things. It's very difficult to fail if you have a purpose and continue towards it until it is accomplished. Remember, it is ***our doubts and fears that stop us from trying.***

- ➔ When you know what you should do, but can't get yourself to do it, focus on the issue. Close your eyes and really think about it. Try to

be dispassionate about it and notice the thoughts, feelings, and body sensations that arise. Continue doing this until you feel nothing. If you examine any feeling long enough, it disappears.

- ➔ It might take more than one meditation session. You can't just think about it for 2 minutes. You already do that and it doesn't work. Stop seeking shortcuts! Spend 30 to 60 minutes examining it.

Focus and meditation are incredible tools and perhaps two of the most important skills that a person can learn. ***They are skills that anyone can learn to do them well.*** The key is to start where you are and keep improving.

Before you know it, you'll have the focus of a Zen monk and ***developing your other strengths will come easily to you.***

"If we know the divine art of concentration,
if we know the divine art of meditation,
if we know the divine art of contemplation,
easily and consciously we can unite the inner world
and the outer world."

- Sri Chinmoy

Goal Setting

Goals can be used to accomplish certain tasks, like winning your local tennis tournament. But ***goals can also be directed toward developing a certain skill. Think about what would be most meaningful to you and develop a goal around that.***

To have the best chance to accomplish anything, having a goal is a huge advantage. Without the intention of accomplishing something specific, there's really no telling where you might end up. ***Have a specific destination in mind and you can determine the course of your life.***

To be the most effective, a goal needs the following components:

1. **A specific time frame.** If you don't have a deadline, when will it ever get done? Most of us are already great at procrastinating. A goal without a deadline is not a goal.
 - ➔ Limit your goals to no more than 8 weeks. It's difficult to stay focused for longer than 8 weeks. Big goals that require more time will have to be broken down into multiple goals, or steps, that can each be achieved in a short time frame.
 - ➔ Be specific. Set a specific date for your deadline.

2. **It is measurable.** There should be no doubt in your mind whether or not you've accomplished your goal. *"Be happy"* is tough to measure. But, *"be as happy as I was on vacation last year, at least 90% of the time ..."* is more measurable.

➡ Some things are easy to measure: money, weight, calories, and more. Others are a little trickier. Be creative! If you can't measure it, you can't really know whether you were successful or not.

3. **It is specific.** *"Lose weight"* is not specific. *"Lose 15 lbs"* is a little better. Lose 15 lbs in 8 weeks by doing XYZ is perfect. If you're too vague then you'll get less than great results. You need a specific target if you want to do your best.

➡ For example, if you want to develop your public speaking ability, a good goal might be to give 5 presentations over the next month. Or it might be to participate in a public speaking training program.

➡ Maybe your goal is to spend 5 hours a week practicing your skills.

To set yourself up for success at developing your strengths, set specific and achievable goals for what you would like to accomplish.

“Crystallize your goals. Make a plan for achieving them and set yourself a deadline. Then, with supreme confidence, determination and disregard for obstacles and other people’s criticisms carry out your plan.”

- Paul J. Meyer

► FORMAT

A good general format to follow is something similar to this:

“On or before [date], I will have done what is necessary to [be able to drive a golf ball in the fairway a distance of at least 250 yards, at least 80% of the time].”

Notice that the above goal has a deadline and specific and measurable criteria.

► DAILY ROUTINE

Our lives are the result of our habits. If you have a good daily routine regarding your goals, you’ll be more successful and will develop your strengths more quickly.

Incorporate these strategies into your daily routine for the best success:

1. Visualize achieving your goals before you get out of bed.

Visualization will be covered in detail in the next section. Visualize yourself having just achieved your goal. Notice how you feel. If you feel anything other than 100% positive and excited, figure out why. If limiting beliefs are stopping you, then work on changing those self-imposed limits.

2. Read and re-write your goal each day. This will help you keep your goal in mind. Have you ever set a goal, done well for a few days, and then totally forgotten about it? That won't happen if you remind yourself every day. ***Put a reminder on your desk, bathroom mirror, or any other place that will work for you.***

3. Visualize again at bedtime.

4. Track your progress. Evaluating your progress will be covered later. You have to give your brain some feedback so you can keep moving forward.

These 4 simple things will only take a few minutes each day and dramatically improve your odds of success. Don't be fooled by their

simplicity. Success comes from doing the right things consistently; that's much more important than doing anything spectacular.

"A winner is someone who recognizes his God-given talents, works his tail off to develop them into skills, and uses these skills to accomplish his goals."

- Larry Bird

Visualization

We all visualize various things throughout the day. As an exercise, try to remember something without visualizing it. You likely can't! Why?

Our brains work in pictures. That's just how it works.

That's why visualization is a very powerful tool when used properly. It's also very powerful when used improperly, except that the results are negative.

“Visualization is daydreaming with a purpose.”

- **Bo Bennett**

There are several keys to visualizing anything effectively:

1. **Your vision must be believable.** You can't visualize yourself playing in the NBA or making a billion dollars if that is far off for you. Your visualizations should be related to your goal, and your goal should be reasonable (but a stretch) for you.
2. **Your vision must be realistic.** Don't visualize having the body of a 24-year-old Greek god if you're 87 years old. Avoid visualizing having \$100,000 on your kitchen table if it would really be in your bank account. ***Believability is about scale and realism is about practicality.***
3. **Visualize consistently.** Twice a day, at a minimum, will best help you succeed. First thing in the morning and last thing at night works well. It gets your mind in a positive place as you start your day and before you fall asleep.
4. **It takes time.** It will take some time to be effective. It's like gaining or losing weight. You can't gain or lose 10 lbs in a day, but the change

over time can be impressive. Stay with it.

5. **Work on the big picture.** Instead of visualizing only improving your strengths and abilities, visualize yourself as the type of person that would have those strengths and abilities. You need to see and be comfortable with the whole package, not just a piece of it.

➔ As an example, if you were interested in being in excellent shape, you shouldn't just visualize your great body. You should also visualize being the type of person that eats well, exercises daily, and places a high value on these types of behaviors.

➔ Someone interested in improving their financial strength would visualize all the behaviors associated with that end-result: things like spending money wisely, earning more income, investing wisely, and paying bills on time.

6. **Be as vivid as possible. *Experience your vision with as much sensory detail as possible.*** Don't just 'see' it – think about what you would also hear, smell, and feel. The more complete the experience, the more you will get out of it.

7. **Use any spare moments.** We all have moments throughout the day when we're not doing much. Maybe you're waiting in the doctor's office

or for a meeting to start. Whenever you have a couple of minutes, put them to use.

- ➡ Anytime your mind is wandering off to something other than what you're actually doing, you could be visualizing (or being mindful)!

“Enter every activity without giving mental recognition to the possibility of defeat.

Concentrate on your strengths, instead of your weaknesses...
on your powers, instead of your problems.”

- Paul J. Meyer

► HOW TO VISUALIZE

Now that you have the dos and don'ts, here is a simple process to effectively incorporate visualization into your life:

1. **Find a good place.** Depending on your ability to concentrate, you need an appropriate location. Quiet is good. Minimal visual distractions are

good. The bathroom or stairwell can be a good place at work, if you don't have an office. At home, any quiet spot out of the way of the kids and spouse works well.

2. **Take a few deep, slow breaths. *Slow breathing calms the mind.*** It's the one part of your physiology over which you have a high level of control. Count your breaths, if that helps you to focus.
3. **Imagine.** It's no different than any other time you daydream, except now you're choosing the topic of your daydream. Imagine yourself achieving your goal and demonstrating the strength you wish to develop. Remember to include a lot of detail. Really get into it and keep the experience 100% positive.
4. **Keep track of any negative feelings.** Write down any potential issues. For example, if you're visualizing yourself making an 'elevator speech' and notice that you're uncomfortable having other people around, make a note of it. Perhaps you will need to set a goal to resolve this issue or do some other work on it.
 - ➡ ***A big part of achieving your goal is removing the obstacles.*** These negative items are your mental obstacles.

Visualization is a way to convince your subconscious that you've already done something that you haven't. Beliefs that don't support your visualization will start to fade away. New beliefs will begin to develop.

Visualize daily and you'll change your life.

"If I had one wish for my children,
it would be that each of them would reach for goals
that have meaning for them as individuals."

- Lillian Gordy Carter

Positive Affirmations

Visualization is a great tool, but it's not the only tool. The other half of the puzzle is managing self-talk. We all say things to ourselves, constantly. One way to minimize self-talk is to be mindful and focus on the task at hand. But anytime there is self-talk, it should be positive.

These techniques will help you use affirmations to your best advantage:

1. **Make a list of all the things you say to yourself that are negative and do not support your goal.**

➡ Don't record the neutral stuff. Things like, *"I need to fill up my gas tank"* are inconsequential. On the other hand, *"I need to fill up my gas tank... how can I be such an idiot to not fill it up the night before"* is worth writing down.

2. **Re-write your list.** Take all the negative things and re-write them into a positive version. For example: *"I can't speak in front of 100 people"* might become, *"I can easily speak in front of 100 people or more."*

➡ Again, remove the obstacles to your success. If you want to develop your strengths, it's much easier if you remove the obstacles.

3. **Monitor yourself 24/7.** If you're awake or dreaming, monitor your self-talk. Anytime you observe negative self-talk, replace it with something positive and repeat it to yourself several times.

➡ Be vigilant. It's important to catch the negative stuff as soon as possible. It will take some practice, but it won't be long before you can catch yourself in the first couple of seconds. With enough practice, negative self-talk will be a thing of the past.

4. **Create a separate list.** Make a list of positive affirmations that would be useful to believe. Consider what someone would believe to accomplish whatever it is you're trying to do.
5. **Read through that list daily.** Each day, read through your list. Read it to yourself. Read it aloud. You might even re-write the ones that are the most significant. Expose yourself to them regularly. You could even record them so you can listen to them as well.

Affirmations have been around a long time for a reason: they work!

“Develop success from failures.
Discouragement and failure are two of the
surest stepping-stones to success.”

- Dale Carnegie

Evaluation

Imagine trying to lose weight, but never having the opportunity to weigh yourself or see yourself. How would you know if your diet and exercise

program was working? No matter what you're trying to accomplish, ***it's important to measure your progress in some way.***

That also means you need to measure yourself before you start. If a method of measurement isn't obvious, invent one. Maybe you need to tame your nervousness during presentations. You could develop a 1-10 scale or wear a heart-rate monitor. There is always a way – figure one out that works for you.

► THE DAILY EVALUATION PROCESS

Perform this process at the end of each day:

1. **List your successes and failures.** What did you do today to progress toward your goal? What did you fail to do? What did you do that was a step in the wrong direction? How was your self-talk? Your visualizations? Meditation? Consider everything.
2. **Congratulate yourself on your successes.** Be proud of yourself. A little momentum and encouragement can go a long way.
3. **Address your failures.** Why did each failure item appear on your list of failures? What can you do to do better tomorrow? Come up with a solution to each item. ***Tomorrow you can use the solutions and re-***

evaluate yourself again.

4. **Measure your progress toward your goal.** This might not be practical to do on a daily basis for all goals, but you should be measuring your progress on a regular basis.
5. **Adjust your approach.** If you're not making adequate progress toward your goal, try changing your approach. If it's not possible to meet your goal by the deadline, go ahead and change your endpoint date to correspond with your new plan.

Can you see how difficult it is to fail if you use all the tools up to this point? If you have a goal, reinforce it daily, use the tools (meditation, visualization, affirmations), and evaluate your thoughts, behavior, and progress... you will continue to move forward toward your goal!

Now let's look at practice.

"One man cannot practice many arts with success."

- Plato

Practice, Practice, Practice

Practice is king. In fact, if you take a look at the book, ***Outliers: The Story of Success***, you'll see that practice is just about the only thing that matters.

The book examines a wide variety of experts in their respective professions, even musicians, a field that the average person considers to be largely dependent on a certain amount of innate talent.

What was found was that the only reliable predictor of success was the number of hours that the individual practiced. No one reached the highest levels without 10,000 hours of practice, and no one that practiced 10,000 hours failed to reach the highest levels.

You might be asking:

"If practice is the only thing that matters, then what was the point of the rest of this book?"

A fair question. The bulk of the book is to give you a process and the tools to allow yourself to practice regularly and enthusiastically.

You are now equipped to:

- ➔ Find your passion.
- ➔ Set goals effectively.
- ➔ Use meditation, visualization, and positive affirmations to stay motivated and find/eliminate the negative mental garbage that gets in the way.
- ➔ Evaluate your progress and make adjustments.

All of these steps will make it easier to practice your craft frequently and to progress as quickly as possible.

Now let's look at some practice strategies:

1. **Practice as frequently as possible.** As they say, repetition is the mother of skill. Five times a week is better than two. Twice a day is better than once. Obviously, physically strenuous things can't be done daily, but with planning, you might be able to do them more frequently than you are currently.
2. **Have a plan.** There is a huge difference between practicing haphazardly and having a plan in place. Know what you're trying to

accomplish before you even get started. It doesn't matter whether you're shooting a basketball, making cold calls, or learning something new; have a plan.

3. **Practice the right things.** We tend to like to practice the things we're good at, but we need to practice the important things we're *not* good at. Be sure your time is being spent in the wisest manner possible.
4. **Evaluate after each session.** What went well? What did not go well? What do you need to work on next? Should you change your approach?

The most important thing to remember is that the more you practice the better you will become. If you want to fully develop any strength, you must practice – *a lot*. But be sure to practice with a purpose and have a plan.

“In theory there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice there is.”

- Yogi Berra

Conclusion

Developing a strength is really all about practicing it as much as possible.

By finding something that you're truly passionate about, you'll find it much easier to put forth the effort.

In truth, you can create a strength from a weakness by spending enough time on it... all it takes is practice. Being passionate makes practice a lot more fun.

A goal provides a target. You can't choose where you want to end up without a target. Reviewing it daily keeps the target fresh in your mind and prioritizes it.

Meditation is a wonderful tool to learn to focus and to minimize the stress and distractions in your life. If you can control your thoughts and focus, you can control your behavior.

Visualization gives the experience of already being proficient at something. It also provides a means to detect emotional resistance to achieving your goal. Positive affirmations help to develop new, positive thought patterns and to eliminate the negative.

All that's left is to practice and continuously evaluate your progress. Find your passion and develop your strengths! You'll be glad you did!