

Strengths-Based Leadership: great leaders, teams, and why people follow,
Tom Rath and Barry Conchie (Gallup Press, 2008)

I have benefited enormously from the insights in earlier 'Strengthsfinder' books (*Now, discover your strengths*, and *Strengthsfinder 2.0*), so I was eager to read this one – even more so as it is more specifically focused on the subject of leadership.

The book begins by pointing to three key findings from recent research conducted by Gallup:

1. The most effective leaders are always investing in strengths
2. The most effective leaders surround themselves with the right people and then maximise their team; and
3. The most effective leaders understand their followers' needs.

I was struck by a story of one leader who tried to be a composite of all the leaders he most admired, forgetting that one person cannot be all these things. Whether we lead in a professional, business or church context, we can be slow to learn this. We say that we no longer expect a vicar to be omniscient, but often there is a frighteningly long list of expectations, imposed by others or oneself. Much better to identify one's own strengths, and then as this book suggests, find others with complementary strengths to join the team.

After the introductory section which explains the research behind Strengthsfinder, the second part sets out how the 34 strengths can be placed in four domains of leadership (executing, influencing, relationship building, strategic thinking), and there are four stories which illustrate each of these domains. For a British reader, the stories from the corporate and voluntary world in the USA may be the most alien parts of the book, but they do serve to show what the strengths look like in action.

I was particularly interested in the section on why people follow leaders. The conclusions come from a Gallup study conducted in 2005-08, and the top key words that emerged were surprising: trust, compassion, stability and hope. And as someone totally committed to developing leaders, I was struck by a comment quoted more than once in the book: 'unless you can, on command, write down a list of the people you have developed, you may just be in a leadership position by accident.' This is an encouragement to leaders to make leadership development a priority, and to expect leaders at every level of an organisation to do the same. The authors cite Martin Luther King, and conclude this section: 'Perhaps the ultimate test of a leader is not what you are able to do in the here and now – but instead what continues to grow long after you're gone.'

As in previous Strengthsfinder books, much of the book is given over to an exploration of the 34 themes. The results of the online assessment tool not only show how one's top five strengths fit into the four domains of leadership, but also how a person with these strengths can meet the four basic needs of those who look to you for leadership.

Some readers will have read previous Strengthsfinder books but others won't, so for the former there is inevitably some duplication of the basic principles. But I found much new material of interest, both new insights into my own leadership strengths, and into teamwork and 'followership'.

Highly recommended for all leaders who want to maximise their strengths and grow as a leader. And despite being written by two men, the book assumes that leaders can be men or women, and uses examples of both.