

# Five Clues to Talent: A Guide to Real-Life Strengths Conversations

It doesn't matter if you're stuffing a carry-on into an overhead compartment or stirring a fizzy drink at a cocktail party. In less than 10 minutes, you can bet on one question flying your way: "So, what do you do?"

All too often we reply with a general description of our career. And while we may have the best intentions, we miss out on an opportunity to focus on what makes each of us unique, to spotlight talent and to help others do the same.

The best way to help people focus on strengths may be to simply change the question. Why don't we ask, "What do you love to do?"

Don Clifton highlighted questions that help direct people to talent in his 1992 book *Soar with Your Strengths*. Today these "Clues to Talent" are a staple of strengths education. Let's also consider them a framework for strengths-based conversations. The obligation we have to those we lead, serve, and love is to help reveal to them their strengths, and these clues help us get there.

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## Five Clues to Talent

**Yearning:** Clifton calls yearnings "part of the wisdom of the body." Think of this as the pull or attraction to one activity rather than another. A leader might learn of the yearnings of her team by asking, "What do you know you can do well, but haven't yet done?" or, "If you had an entire week of your calendar open up and couldn't work on previous commitments, what would you spend your time doing?"

**Satisfaction:** It is rare to find pleasure in places we don't also find strength. It is important for us to pay attention to individualized intrinsic motivation, the activities or opportunities that we genuinely enjoy. To help learn what gives others satisfaction, a coach may ask, "What sorts of activities do you finish and think, 'I can't wait to do that again?'" or, "What are you doing (at work or at play) when you're truly enjoying yourself?"

**Rapid Learning:** Our third clue to talent deals with the way we are naturally wired to learn. Some patterns are so ingrained in our DNA that they open pathways of understanding we wouldn't otherwise experience. To shed light on these pathways, consider asking about a person's learning. "What have you done well that you didn't need explained?" or, "What activities do you execute naturally, but struggle to break down into steps for others?"

**Glimpses of Excellence:** We are not alone on this planet, and neither are our strengths. Thankfully, others may offer clues to our own talent in the ways they recognize us. Success is a compilation of moments, and it takes a trained eye to notice these moments in everyday life. Listen to these experts, be they coaches, teachers, or children. Help others weave a story from these moments by asking, "What have other people told you you're great at doing?" or, "In your previous experience, what were you known for doing well?"

**Total Performance Excellence:** The Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls it "Flow," and describes the optimal state of intrinsic motivation. Don't worry; getting people to talk about this does not take heavy textbooks. Simply inquire about times when all the pieces fell together. Do this by asking, "What are you doing when time seems to disappear?"

In a recent Gallup poll, half of Americans reported not using their strengths every day. Whether you're a manager, colleague, coach, parent, or passenger on a plane, every single interaction is an opportunity to help others excel. It all starts by changing the conversation.