

# Developing Strengths-based Leadership in Students

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Throughout our lives we become aware of times when we feel confident, in control and out of our depths. Students experience the same range of emotions around their subjects, personal achievements and commitments. Children with recognised talents and gifts will see emphasis on these areas and will often feel they are thriving whilst using these highly advanced skills. As individuals growing into themselves, their skills and a life beyond school, as parents and educators we are responsible for their development as a whole. Their growth within their gifts and other areas that will enable them to utilise these talents in areas beyond school and into the workforce.

In building awareness of personal strengths students are well positioned to lead their lives both privately to support them in their relationships and personal endeavours and publicly within the school and community. This awareness will empower them to share their gifts with others and to interact in a broader range of settings to both stimulate and challenge them in building diverse competencies.

Extensive research in the area of strengths by the likes of Don Clifton and Martin Seligman, informs us of the variety of skills and the benefit of developing a varied skillset to respond to life's demands. For our gifted students, this will mean recognising the value of alternate or on occasions opposing skills to share, inspire, challenge and communicate with others throughout our days. Relevant to the school sector, this assists students in relating to peers with understanding, motivating others to reach for their personal best, to create the unknown and to achieve on a range of levels. Working within schools from Kindergarten to year 12 and beyond, across all school sectors, the worth of such focus is evident to achieve positive self-esteem, high confidence and capacity to improve as an individual in all spheres of life.

Researchers have long profiled, assessed and analysed individual traits, abilities and personalities. In assessing strengths, we are looking deeply into how we achieve what we have attained and so how we have utilised our talents to reach giftedness, alongside the thought that we need to develop additional competencies to be viewed as a leader, utilising skills and contributing through our talents. Clifton StrengthsFinder® recognises four domains of leadership, they say these are the four core competencies of great leaders. In working with school and business executives, we see evidence of the requirements of these preferred approaches. To follow is an overview of each of the four areas identifies in relation to students and their natural ability to lead.

## Executing



Motivated by the satisfaction of outcomes, our 'executing' strengths lead us to achieve tangible outcomes often with high work ethic and energy. Leaders with the drive to "do" often achieve more than others in less time, thriving on the activity and busyness of their role, business or team. Students with strong executing talents will often independently make things happen, plan or design to create change and enjoy the hands-on nature of a project or task. These students frequently achieve high academic outcomes through traditional application to their work and studies with ease.

## Influencing



Energised by the ability to 'impact' others, reaching out to new or known contacts to create effect, they are confident and able to see the value they offer. Leaders with established influencing strengths are often seen as competent, trustworthy and able to appear 'in control' in times of change and uncertainty. Visibility is frequently important to these students and so they thrive in public speaking, debating or performing to large groups. Generating visible impact, these students often enjoy the areas of creative, visual and performing arts, as well as sports and physical challenges.

## Relationship Building



Needing interaction with others, those with 'relationship building' strengths are incredibly savvy at working with others, bringing out the best in those around them and understanding the subtleties of human emotions. Leaders with high relational strengths have very loyal teams who are positioned for success and feel connected and important. Students with people oriented strengths are often highly emotive, able to engage and motivate a broad group of students in a gentle manner, respecting their unique differences. These students do not seek the recognition or attention of influencers and often come to their own in team or traditional leadership situations within schools.

## Strategic Thinking



Needing time and focus for thought, 'strategic thinkers' have an ability to imagine, design, innovate and create what has not been before. They are adept at identifying the 'big picture' and potential obstacles and issues that may be faced. Often fairly private people, strategic leaders will enjoy time by themselves where they can allow their thoughts to flow and reimagine the future. Students with these strengths will often enjoy the stimulation of science or maths due to the mental stretch they face within these subjects.

Whilst these four domains appear to work in isolation, to truly lead others and ourselves we need to recognise the need for all aspects and thought processes. For example, where is the value in having the strategic capacity to redesign a mobile app without the capacity to persuade others to buy it. Alternatively, how can individuals obtain a job with exceptional skills in collaborating with people but never maintaining the focus to attain outcomes. In an agile world responding to immediate challenges and commercial demands, the need to balance results and interactions is what takes us from school to the workplace. From a student to a leader.

It has been well documented and is evident within global leadership communities that emotional intelligence is a key attribute to leadership success. Emotional intelligence competencies embrace the need to:

- 'Understand' how others feel and their emotional response
- 'Regulate' our behaviours to create a positive and/or common ground for interaction

Understanding how to 'engage socially' with others of diverse styles

Adapt to 'motivate others' and ourselves through time of challenge and success

Be 'empathetic' to others, understanding how they feel and how to respond to this

Looking at the correlation of our strengths to characteristics of emotionally intelligent leaders we can see features that will be more naturally developed versus those that may need focus to achieve positive outcomes. The best leaders are those who continue to focus on how to improve their responses, behaviours and understanding of themselves and others.

Consider the following situations:

Design of the new iPhone

Creation of an original theatrical production

Leading multinational organisation

Reflecting on each of these situations, a diverse range of talents are required to achieve a measurable outcome. It is unlikely that many people will naturally possess and exhibit all the talents required to complete the thinking, people skills, physical configuration and persuasion or sale of the end product. As such the ability to understand individual talents and the need for other complimentary talents is essential in all. These are the leadership skills we can build into our school experience to supplement and support students in their transition to life in independent studies and the workplace.

Evolving this self-awareness and capacity to work with others to build strength is essential to future success. Imagine your students utilising their gifts within your school to benefit others in the school or greater community. Providing opportunities for self-fulfilment as well as those to reach others to create positive change will enable greater personal development of emotional intelligence and strengths capacity. The opportunity for students to not only be innovative with their gifts but also to understand how this quality can add value or benefit to others in the wider community. In understanding this value, students are then required to cooperate within the school and/or network outside of the school area providing chance to assess how individuals speak, learn, work, understand and engage with each other. Recognising how to be an active part of a discussion or working group outside of the curriculum and how to enjoy being with a diverse group of persons working towards a common goal. Finally, to influence others to be part of the project or to contribute to it, facing the blocks and hindrances that arise, offers students capacity to develop public leadership, presenting to others, responding to questions, promoting something tangible and how it makes a constructive contribution to the local, national or global community.

These projects or circumstances are where students reach beyond their natural capacity and develop the skills required by leaders both at and beyond school. The experience also offers professional expertise to share at subsequent interviews or on applications demonstrating detailed personal development, team contribution, influence and achievement driven by the individual. The chance to work with little to achieve a lot through collegial practice and clear planning with a focused outcome. Students able to share these stories are seen in the workplace as more in-tune with the business mindset and more able to adapt to the flexible demands of the customer centric workplace that they will be faced with.

### Bibliography

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