Strengths Finder

Looking at the StrengthsFinder themes before I took the assessment, I was fairly confident about some items that would show up. My personality has some pretty strong traits, so I knew that certain themes would manifest themselves in my assessment. My Myers-Briggs personality type is INTJ, pretty consistently across a few takings of the test, and that is consistent with what I found in the StrengthsFinder themes. As many people who’ve taken this assessment have remarked, I’m impressed at how accurately the tool reflects my view of my strengths.

My top five strengths were: Learner, Achiever, Analytical, Relator and Responsibility. I was not at all surprised to find Learner, Analytical and Responsibility (anyone who knows me would find those strengths easy to recognize). Achiever was not a real surprise, although I’m not sure I would have picked that out initially as a top five. Among strengths that describe social or relational aptitudes, Relator is probably the best fit for me, but going into the assessment I would probably have guessed that no relational strengths would crack the top five.

That Learner is a strength is no surprise to me. I love learning new things, and really cannot stop myself from doing so. Even in situations where I’m doing something I’m not particularly interested in doing, I usually find myself drawn in, trying to figure out how the system works or trying to understand it better. Several of the ideas for action reflect the position I am already in (i.e. a role that requires technical competence; a role that uses changing technology; being in a consulting role). Some of the ideas for action skirt around an issue I’ve already become aware of: Because I cannot keep myself from learning new things, if opportunities to learn in my field are not available I will wander off in other directions learning new things. While it may not necessarily be bad to learn things in diverse fields, the issue is that there are so few opportunities to learn new things in physics and astronomy at Concordia that I find myself losing interest and excitement in my primary teaching areas. I need to be aware of my tendency to immerse myself in learning new things, and make sure that I make time and take the effort to direct that learning toward the areas that I teach and that I love.
The Achiever trait descriptors do match the way I think about myself and the tendencies I see in myself. I initially thought the strength referred to being goal oriented and success oriented, but the descriptors are more along the lines of being focused, to working hard and pushing myself. All of these things describe me, whether at work or play. Several of the descriptors in this section I thought matched me particularly well: I investigate situations; I can be friendly and talkative when necessary, but value quiet time; I yearn to produce tangible results. These fit me to a tee, and when combined with the Learner strength point to why I am continually and almost obsessively learning new things. It is also fortunate that the action items for this strength describe my current career: I can work as hard as I want and measure my own productivity; I have built in timetables in the form of the academic semester, so I know when I am “done”; I do not need much motivation from others. Of course, this strength, combined with the Concordia culture that “encourages” people to take on more and more responsibility means that I can get overburdened. I need to learn to delegate and I especially need to learn to say “No”.

The only surprise to me about Analytical is that it is not number one on the list of strengths. The parts of the theme description that talk about investigating things till I understand them, that I enjoy instructing people, and that I collect information and look at it from a variety of angles describes me, as it does nearly anyone in higher education, especially in the sciences. I think the reason that Analytical was not higher on the list is because of a part of my personality that also makes me an Astronomer. While I am analytical and look to the component parts of a situation, I am also good at moving through the scale of a thing, from detail to big picture. This strength is necessary to an astronomer, who will talk about sub-atomic particles, and in the next breath talk about superclusters of galaxies that span a large part of the universe. Recently I’ve found that same strength useful in writing the institutional assessment for the Higher Learning Commission, where a huge amount of detail needs to be put into context of the big picture of institution. The action items for this strength again describe my current situation very accurately in many ways. One action item suggestion that I should work on is to partner with an Activator who will move me through my analysis into action. I find that it is easier and more satisfying to simply extend my analysis than to actually come to a decision, so I am often painfully slow in coming to conclusions and moving to action.
I am not really a people person, and I’m not really comfortable in social situations, so I was surprised to find that any of my strengths related to relationships. But Relator is consistent with my introverted personality. It is also consistent with my profession, where I can do most of my work alone or in small groups. Several action items for this theme are things that I really can and should work on. I do need to take more time to interact with my friends, and to socialize with my colleagues outside of work. I like the idea that I deliberately get to know as much as possible about others so that I can be more comfortable and trusting around them. This is not easy for me, but it makes sense and is something I can work on.

The Responsibility strength is one that seems to reflect my values as much as my personality, but it is definitely a deep part of myself. I often wish I could be as irresponsible and inconsiderate as the people who always seem to be driving around me. When this strength is combined with Achiever, it means that I tend to be a workaholic. The action items for this strength are consistent with this thought. I need to learn to say no, and I need to learn to delegate and allow others to share responsibility. I found the most insightful action item to be that I need to consider whether I am really the person who should be shouldering every particular responsibility – just because I feel responsible and feel like I can do a project does not mean that I should do it, or that I would be the best person for it.

In thinking more about these strengths, I notice that they could easily describe probably 90% of the physicists and astronomers I’ve known, and probably the majority of scientists in general. I suspect that nearly everyone in my department would have almost exactly the same strengths. The nature of science, and the demands of a Ph.D. program in science, ensures that mostly Learners, Achievers, and Analytical people will be successful, and most science-oriented people tend toward introversion and the Relator strength. Responsibility is not a necessary requirement to be a scientist, but certainly most of the science faculty at Concordia share that strength. The fact that most of the people in my department share many of the same strengths is both an opportunity and a challenge. It means that I can understand my nearest colleagues, how they think and why they behave the way they do, so that I can relate to them and motivate them. On the other hand, having such a homogeneous set of strengths in the department
means that we need to be intentional in seeking out other voices and perspectives when we are working on projects. Of course, the Relator (introverted) trait we mostly share makes this difficult for us as a group, so it is something that I need to keep continually in mind and work to make a priority as I work together with my colleagues.