

NFCA INSTRUCTIONAL CORNER

What Would Happen If We Truly Focused on What Was Right With Our Team? – Part I

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This is the first in a two-part series. Look for the conclusion in the April issue of FD.

What would happen if we truly focused on what was right with our team?

This very concept was the foundation for the lifework of Dr. Donald Clifton, former CEO of the Gallup Organization. He spent his entire professional vocation studying what individuals do exceedingly well. Dr. Clifton was a pioneer in bringing to light and celebrating the innate gifts within people. The notion of identifying individual talent, or as some would say “giftedness,” brings up an intriguing question: How often do we take time and intentionally recognize what our athletes, and our teams, do “right?”

A primary goal in coaching is to help athletes reach their full potential and achieve optimal athletic performance; this goes far beyond enhancing physical ability. In an effort to study top achievers and determine what contributes to their success, the Gallup Organization conducted more than two million in-depth interviews with people from varying walks of life. Across nearly every profession, vocation, and field, there was one consistent theme: top achievers attain success through use of their most naturally powerful talents (Clifton & Anderson, 2002). In order to reach any level of success, one must apply his or her abilities to the effort. However, the “best of the best” are able to achieve success by applying their innate strengths, and doing so in roles that utilize those talents.

The Clifton StrengthsFinder Inventory

After 30 years of research, the Gallup Organization developed an inventory designed to identify an individual’s natural talents. The Clifton StrengthsFinder Inventory (CSF) was created in 2000, and has since been used by more than 7 million people worldwide in efforts to focus on identifying and capitalizing on individual talent. The 30-minute online inventory allows individuals the opportunity to discover their “Top Five Signature Themes of Talent” from 34 potential themes. Many colleges and universities are beginning to use the CSF in faculty development programs, freshman seminars, academic advising, and other venues. Students are thriving! Research has shown that many benefits arise when college students learn their talents and develop them into

strengths. Specifically, colleges that have introduced the strengths-based perspective have reported “statistically significant increases in student retention and academic performance, as well as increases in students’ academic engagement and self-efficacy, self-confidence, optimism, direction, hope, altruism, and sense of meaning and purpose” (Schreiner, 2006, p. 3).

The “Harvard Experience”

For two consecutive years, The Harvard University softball team had coaches and team members take the CSF prior to the start of their competitive season. In addition to taking the inventory, the team participated in a comprehensive training, which further developed the team’s understanding of their CSF results. Head coach Jenny Allard shares, “Our StrengthsFinder experience was very valuable. As a coach I feel I have an insight into how my players orient themselves in the world. This will help my communication and understanding of each athlete and help establish a great working group. I found it very validating for members of our team. I could see players really light up when they identified with their strengths.” After surveying team members from Harvard who have taken the CSF, results were gathered and analyzed. Implications for coaches as well as student-athletes are highlighted.

Overall findings

Harvard softball’s reported experiences with the CSF and team training outline many powerful results that support the use of these tools within athletic teams. In fact, all 20 respondents indicated that they found value in both the CSF and the team training. The Harvard team reported benefitting from both aspects of their experience; however, there was a significant difference in the ratings that these tools received. While 70 percent of participants found the team training *very/extremely valuable*, 50 percent found taking the CSF (inventory only) *very/extremely valuable*. This noteworthy difference suggests that while both tools provided value to team members, the cohesive team training was a significant aspect of the overall success of the CSF experience.

The power of the CSF and team training manifest in two distinct areas: individual benefit, and overall team benefit. Individually, 85 percent of participants concluded that it was personally beneficial to discover their innate strengths and have them affirmed by their coaches and teammates. On the team level, 95 percent of par-

ticipants felt that knowing one another’s strengths impacted the relationships on the team. This suggests that introducing a strengths-based language among teammates is an effective way to create deeper relationships among team members.

Individual Benefits

It is essential for any coach to recognize that each individual athlete possesses unique talents and strengths. First, it is crucial for coaches to take time to assess their athletes individually and find out what makes them tick. The strengths-based philosophy can be a platform to do that effectively. This concept could be an asset to coaches as they learn to modify goals and conversations with their athletes accordingly.

In regards to the Harvard experience, a close examination of the team’s responses can identify several themes that were consistently cited as benefits of the CSF and the team training. When reporting on the individual value of these two tools, players indicated that knowing their strengths led to increases in confidence and feelings of validation as members of the team. Players also shared that discovering their innate talent allowed them to use their individual strengths more deliberately within the team framework. Finally, participants were able to extend the use of their strengths and apply them to areas of life outside athletics.

Increased confidence

For the Harvard softball team, the CSF and team training allowed each individual player to begin to focus on their strengths. When asked about the personal benefits of the strengths-based approach, many players responded that a core benefit of their experience was an *increase in confidence*. “I think knowing my own strengths helped boost my own confidence,” one player explains. “It was great to think about myself in terms of what I am good at.” This focus on individual strengths, coupled with the affirmation of those strengths by teammates and coaches, carried players’ confidence one step further to arouse *feelings of validation*. A key component of the team training involves an “Affirmation of Strengths” activity, during which players and coaches talk openly about the ways that the strengths of teammates are beneficial to the team and crucial to team success. The affirmation activity grants players the opportunity to hear how their strengths are not only recognized, but also appreciated, by their teammates; “I had an idea of my personality, but I never knew

my specific traits. And I certainly never knew that my teammates saw those traits in me, and that they valued them. I felt validated, and I have felt the same way ever since that first meeting.”

Deliberate utilization of strengths

After taking the CSF and experiencing the team training, players not only reported feeling more confident and validated, but also began to *deliberately use their strengths* throughout the season. Once each player realized that her teammates had been noticing the ways she naturally used her strengths, that player felt the ability (or even responsibility) to use those strengths more intentionally in the future; “I realized that what I was unintentionally doing was actually both helpful and appreciated, so I kept doing it, but with more fervor.” Having their strengths brought to light and affirmed by their teammates ensured that players would more consciously focus on using their strengths in the future. The discussion of strengths also caused players to take ownership of their individual strengths, particularly those unique to the team profile. Many players report that after the CSF and team training, they would deliberately “step in where [they] knew [their strengths] would be needed.”

References: Clifton, D. & Anderson, E. (2002). StrengthsQuest: Discover and develop your strengths in academics, career, and beyond. The Gallup Organization: Washington, D.C. Schreiner, L. A. (2006). A technical report on the Clifton StrengthsFinder with college students. Retrieved February 23, 2008, from <https://www.strengthsquest.com/Content/?CI=25195>.

In the past four years, a number of sport teams have begun using the concept of “discovering one’s strengths” in order to create a more efficient team. The idea of using a strengths-based philosophy with athletic teams initially evolved through a doctoral dissertation, which was based on researching elite female softball players and their perceptions of the CSF. The findings from this dissertation have since evolved into a framework for creating the Forza Institute, LLC. The Forza Institute has worked with teams of all competitive levels using the CSF as a tool for maximizing individual potential and increasing overall team chemistry. As of 2012, the Forza Institute has worked with a variety of teams that include: Washington, Arizona, Notre Dame, Cal State Fullerton, San Diego State, UC Davis, Pacific, and others.