

Strengths Based Learning & Leadership

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Two of my Strengths (Rath, 2007) fit well with the Learning competency. Rath (2007) suggests people who work from their Strengths are “six times as likely to be engaged in their jobs” and it is clear to me that my current work environment is supporting me as I work from my Strengths. The two learning related strengths are Learning and Input. Learners love to learn and thrive under constant change. Those with the Input Strength are inquisitive and collect things, such as information. In this reflection I will share how I continue to use these strengths to be a leader in the world of K12 videoconferencing.

Learner Strength

Learners enjoy the process of learning, are energized by a steady journey towards competence, and are excited by the growing confidence of a skill mastered. Learners are motivated by learning new things, not necessarily by being an expert or striving for some credential. Learners are not satisfied unless they are learning something new (Rath, 2007). These descriptions fit me very well. I enjoy conquering a new technical skill, learning new strategies and tools to share with teachers. The process of learning is exciting to me.

Rath (2007) provides suggestions or action steps for Learners to maximize their Strength. Many of them are already in place in my work. I already have a role that requires technical competence and enjoy acquiring and maintaining that competence. As an instructional technology consultant, I must constantly learn new technologies, new

versions of software, new tools, so that I can share with teachers how best to use these tools within the curriculum. I am already a “catalyst for change” within a “consulting role” (p. 135). I am willing to soak up new learning and share it with others, which can “spur them on to action” (p. 135). Because I have the opportunity for constant learning, I am “more productive and loyal” (p. 135). I love my job and constantly look for new ways to better support my schools. My organization has paid for much learning, including conferences, workshops, guest speakers, and training sessions that provided me the opportunity for continued learning. I am already in a career with “constantly changing technologies” and I truly am “energized by the challenge of keeping up” (p. 135). Rath (2007) suggests that Learners discover how they learn best and seek opportunities in that area. One idea is learning by teaching, and I have many opportunities to learn so that I can share with others. In fact, I wonder sometimes if a person has really learned if they haven’t created or done something with the knowledge to benefit others. Learners also need to work beside an expert who pushes them to learn more (Rath & Conchie, 2008). In my work, I have a tight circle of fellow lead facilitators for the Jazzing Up Your Curriculum with Videoconferencing Workshop. All of us are leaders in the videoconferencing field and are creative, innovative, and learning. We push each other to learn more, to improve our practice, to incorporate new tools, to grow our competence. This network is very important to my learning and growth.

My Learner strength can still be improved. Rath (2007) suggests that Learners keep track of learning and celebrate the progress. While I do create goals and celebrate completing them, I do not specifically keep track of learner. I could increase and continue steady learning in the future if I continue the patterns that I’ve developed in the

Leadership program of reading and reflecting on my learning publicly via my blog.

Another suggestion is to honor the desire to learn. I have been able to do this by continuing my learning in the Leadership program and need to be intentional about continuing learning afterwards. Taking advantage of teacher certification requirements and courses offered by my workplace in other education areas will improve my learning and provide additional connections between current learning theory and educational technology. A final suggestion is to schedule time to learn. During the Leadership program I have created this habit, and I clearly need to continue. Time to read articles, books, and blogs on educational topics will continue to broaden my horizons.

In a more recent publication, Rath and Conchie (2008) suggest ways to lead with the Learner strength. The suggestions fit into four categories: Building trust, showing compassion, providing stability, and creating hope. Learners build trust by admitting that they are still learning. This is not a problem for me, as I am continually publicly learning “out loud” on my videoconferencing blog. Learners also build trust by “respecting knowledge that is superior” (p. 199). As an expert and referent leader (French & Raven, 1959), I do not “feel the need to be more ‘advanced’” than my followers in every area. Leadership is shared and collaborative. However, I know I could improve in listening to others and expressing “appreciate of what others know and are capable of knowing.” Since all five of my strengths lie in the Executing and Strategic Thinking areas, relationships are not a strong point (p. 24). Thus focusing my Learning strength to listen and learn from others would improve my leadership.

Learners also lead by showing compassion. Rath and Conchie (2008) recommend that Learner leaders should invite others to learn alongside them. “Co-learning creates

mutual vulnerability and discovery” (p. 199). My collaborative nature is drawn to this suggestion to deliberately invite others to learn with me. In one instance, I co-learned about networking and videoconferencing with colleagues from around the state. I didn’t realize how gratifying that was until reflecting now on co-learning. Conferences are another place to co-learn, and I will be more intentional about inviting others to learn with me. Learner leaders also appreciate and celebrate others’ learning. I celebrate the learning of participants in my workshops, and encourage my local videoconference coordinators as they grow and learn. I could improve by being more deliberate about the celebration.

Learner leaders provide stability by “investing in another person’s growth (Rath & Conchie, 2008, p. 200). Investing in another person shows an expectation of a long term relationship and committing to them. “It has been argued that leaders are not evaluated based on the number of followers they lead, but instead on the number of new leaders they develop” (Wheatley, 1999) quoted by (Gibson et al., 2000). I invest in the learning of my videoconference coordinators, as well as my videoconferencing colleagues around the world. Even if I hardly know them, I usually take time to answer questions patiently and suggest sources of learning. I value them as potential partners for videoconference collaborations in the future. Looking back over the last five years, I can see how this stability and investment in others has benefited the educational videoconferencing field.

Finally, Learner leaders create hope by igniting enthusiasm for learning and rewarding others for learning (Rath & Conchie, 2008). I think I create enthusiasm for learning within my county by inspiring teachers and videoconference coordinators with

the possibilities and benefits they could provide to their students. This motivates them to learn how to use videoconferencing in new and creative ways to bring engaging learning opportunities to their students. When people's learning needs are met, they are more productive, engaged and loyal (Rath & Conchie, 2008). While I am not directly responsible for my videoconference coordinators, I have seen some of them become more productive and engaged when they are constantly learning and supported through the learning process. I can improve this by measuring whether learning needs are being met, providing rewards and measurable progress in achieving learning. I need to consider further what form this might take in the services I offer my schools.

Input Strength

People with the Input strength are inquisitive and collect things such as information because it is interesting. Those with Input collect things that might be valuable later and may prove useful (Rath, 2007). The Input strength is very evident in my digital life. I don't throw away files or email; everything is filed away and organized for future reference. I archive knowledge on my websites; it hurts me when a favorite website is taken down because it is "old" knowledge. I like to call myself a digital packrat; I keep and collect information. I "hate wasting knowledge or accumulated knowledge" (p. 126). I coordinate videoconference for our schools, and to use videoconferencing well it is important to know who you can connect to. I like to say that I "collect people", as I have an email folder for each state and country where I know someone who is videoconferencing. This makes it easy for me to find partners when my schools want to connect to a specific location.

Rath (2007) provides suggestions for capitalizing on the Input strength. One suggestion is to find a job where new information needs to be acquired daily, such as teaching or research. Instructional technology is an area where information is constantly changing, and I am motivated and inspired by the search for new information. This suggestion also explains why I am now hooked on research and my mind is brimming with ideas for future research (see Competency Reflection 4). Another suggestion is to create a system for storing and locating information. I have several tools for this. My email program is neatly organized with folders for many categories, and I can easily search and sort to find what I need. I use my videoconferencing blog to collect and archive information about videoconferencing. The blog is searchable and the tags and categories make it easy to find information. I also use GoogleDocs to keep information about my schools and our videoconferencing program. All of my files are searchable by the title and the text within the document, so information is easily located. Technology assists me with storing and locating information.

Several of Rath's (2007) suggestions relate to sharing information collected instead of just storing it. He suggests being aware of "individuals and groups that can benefit from your knowledge, and be intentional about sharing with them" (p. 127). My videoconferencing blog and my twitter feed allow me to share information with a wide audience of global videoconferencing colleagues. In addition, I often think of specific people when I find information and email them a link or file related to their interest. Rath (2007) suggests that by following the Input talents, one could become an expert in their field. This has definitely happened to me with my videoconferencing blog. When I started blogging in 2005, no one was blogging about videoconferencing. Within a year, I

had about 100 readers, and that has continued to grow. Because of my blog and the resources that I share, I receive requests to speak at conferences. Rath (2007) also suggests that those with the Input strength should “make a point of identifying the facts and data that would be most valuable to others and use this information to their advantage” (p. 127). I almost obsessively share and volunteer information to others when it seems that the information meets a need. I also actively seek information about my field of videoconferencing, by subscribing to alerts, RSS feeds, and using other technology tools to find the latest information. I am also very willing to answer questions via email, and often receive questions from people around the world. I then keep their contact information so that when my schools want to videoconference with that region, I already have a contact to begin the planning.

Rath’s (2007) suggestions show that there is room for improvement in using my Input strength. One suggestion was evident in the Learner strength as well, and that is to “schedule time to read books and articles that stimulate you” (p. 127). While during the Leadership Program I have been reading books and articles regularly, I did not have this habit previously. Educational technology reading often stacks up in my inbox. My reading tended towards quick online skimming. However, my new reading habits from the Leadership program need to continue in order to capitalize on my Input and Learner strengths and to continue my leadership role in the K12 videoconferencing world.

The new book on strengths-based leadership (Rath & Conchie, 2008) focuses on using each strength to build trust, show compassion, provide stability, and create hope. Those with the Input strength should build trust by making sure that the information is current and accurate, checking multiple sources, and helping others distinguish between

fact and opinion. These are important considerations for my videoconferencing blog, and suggest a journalist's view of knowledge. In addition, these ideas fit well with the tentative nature of research that I have learned; and will temper the ways that I report and critique studies on my blog.

Another facet of leadership is to show compassion. With Input, showing compassion can include answering questions, research issues, and using the Input talents to connect with and assist others. The Input strength can be used not just to share information and interests with others, but also to start friendships with those of mutual interests (Rath & Conchie, 2008). As mentioned before, the relationships are challenging for my task-orientation, and this suggestion will open my eyes to the friendship and collegial relationship potential in others.

Providing stability is critical to leadership (Rath & Conchie, 2008) and those with the Input strength can provide stability with well-researched decisions. Sharing the documentation and the research efforts assures others that the decision is sound. Currently I think that I tend to jump to conclusions without sharing the full reasoning and research behind my decisions and recommendations. This could be an outcome of my top strength which is Strategic. I am not always able to articulate well how I reached my conclusion or recommendation. I can improve my leadership with Input by collecting and organizing more systematically the information that leads to my strategic planning.

Finally, creating hope is an essential task of a leader (Rath & Conchie, 2008). A leader with the Input strength creates hope by sharing information with those who can benefit from it. A leader with the Input strength creates hope by discussing the written thoughts and ideas of others. I consider my blog, twitter, and my comments on others'

blogs as a way to “learn publicly” about best practice in educational technology. This public learning inspires others to learn and to also share their learning. The vision collectively created inspires hope in the possibilities we can bring to students via educational technology tools.

Conclusion

The Leadership program has taught me new habits of reading, research, and reflection. While the intensity of my learning will diminish after I complete my studies, the habits will continue. My appetite for reading has increased to stomach and digest heavier, meatier reading. My eye for reading is more critical of research, facts, opinions, and the foundations of new knowledge. My understanding of the research process informs my reading and the questions for future investigation. The powerful learning that occurs during reflecting writing has changed my writing, blogging, and journaling. These new habits, coupled with my Learner and Input strengths position me to continue to improve my leadership in educational technology.

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