



The Fallacy of the American Dream

No, I'm not talking about home ownership or winning the lottery. I'm talking about our national presumption that you can be anything you want to be, as long as you work hard enough.

When I first joined my local mountain rescue team in 2003, I wanted to be a good rescuer. That meant, in my mind, that I would need to develop well-rounded technical skills for field missions. For years, I tried to bend my mind and body around skills that didn't play to my strengths. I spent seven days in a Rigging for Rescue class, struggling to understand the physics behind load strengths and safety ratios, only to forget how to tie a basic bowline knot a week later. I spent three days in Swiftwater Rescue Technician class, nearly drowning myself in the process of towing one of my teammates to shore. I spent another three days in a snow science class, learning how to assess quality and energy in snowpack for avalanche forecasting purposes, and ended up so baffled that I was convinced I should stay in my house all winter.

It took about four years for me to finally find my niche on the team. It didn't happen until I ran for a position on the board of directors, a position that was responsible for the human resources and public relations functions of the team. Suddenly, I went from vague discomfort with my role to complete engagement and enthusiasm. I couldn't stand to miss a mission or a training event. I reveled in bringing new members into the group and talking to them about our team culture. I wrote rescue stories for the local newspaper and organized public events for backcountry safety education. I edited the team's newsletter and developed new communication programs for internal information sharing. Search and rescue became the most enjoyable, exciting, worthwhile thing in my life.

It wasn't until I read the Gallup organization's excellent work around strength-based organizations that I fully understood why this was to be. We continue to hold the belief in this country that you can be anything you want to be. The logical conclusion of this belief, for some people, is that you must identify and do battle with your weaknesses, rather than capitalize on your strengths. Our work teams often make this mistake, looking to "fix" team member's

deficiencies rather than create synergies by filling those deficiencies through another member of the team.

That's why identifying the skill sets, knowledge, personality traits, and talents of each team member is a critical piece of teambuilding. Only when we truly understand how each team member is different, what different strengths they bring to the team, can we create synergy.

One of the discoveries, for me, of reading Gallup's work came from their definition of "strengths" or "talents". We tend to think a talent is something big, something rare, like athletic ability or being a mathematical genius. But Gallup defines it as a "habit of thinking, feeling or behaving". By that definition, we all have multiple talents. We just need to discover what they are. For example, the online Strengths Finder 2.0 survey I completed identified one of my strengths as "input". People with a talent for input, according to the survey, "have a craving to know more", and "like to collect and archive all kinds of information." That's the kind of thing you want to know about your teammates; I'm the logical person to assign the reading and research to on our next project, right? Another of my talents was identified as "achiever", which means someone who "takes great satisfaction from being busy and productive." That explains why, on any team I've ever been on, I tend to be the one who keeps us moving forward when something is about to stall us.

Knowing this kind of information about your teammates is just as important as knowing who has the best report-writing skills or knows the most about analyzing market trends. A team is defined as a group of people who are mutually dependent on one another to achieve a common goal. It follows that true synergy will be gained only through a thorough understanding of the strengths or talents of every team member, and how they fit together in pursuit of the team's mission.

And to think I almost drowned myself trying to figure that out.