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Book Review

Teach with your Strengths: Authors: Liesveld, Rosanne and Miller, Jo Ann with Robinson, Jennifer ISBN: 1-59562-006-0 Format: Hardcover Pub. Date: 2005 Publisher: : Gallup Press Pages: 203 Cost: \$24.95 (List) Available: Amazon at as low as \$16.47 (new) \$9.42 (used) - \$9.99 at eBay(TM) Subtitle: How Great Teachers Inspire their Students The Books' Topics: Myths of Teaching Ability

Profiles of Innate Strengths

Flexibility and Unorthodox Behaviors of Great Teachers

Putting your Talents to Work

Managing and Working Around your Weaknesses The central themes of this book are: Talents (and weaknesses) are innate, and it is more productive to focus upon maximizing strengths than in minimizing weaknesses

Research methods for assessing strengths and talents are only useful if we study people with strengths and talents

Characteristics of greatness tend to cross job categories, making great people in all fields more similar to talented people in other fields than they are to mediocre people in the same field

Keywords: Strengths

Talents

Innate Abilities

Weaknesses

Myths about Great Teachers

Strength Finder Research Main Idea: Talents and skills seem to be innate, and it is more effective to focus upon developing these than to remediate weaknesses

Great teachers break the stereotypes about teaching because they are flexible and because they do what is necessary to teach their students.

Great teachers are unconventional, and are often not recognized for their abilities because they do the right thing at the right time. They don't necessarily do the things prescribed by common wisdom…the things prescribed by lowest-common-denominator of insight and talent that controls the job site. Quotes: "All great teachers are alike in a key way--they use their natural talents to the utmost, whether they are aware of it or not. What's more, great teachers don't waste time on their weaknesses if those weaknesses don't interfere with their teaching, although they do manage weaknesses if they must. When good teachers understand their talents, then build on those talents to create strengths, they become even better with students." (p. - 11)

"Fixing your weaknesses simply doesn't work; at best, if you work really hard with great devotion, you can become mediocre in those areas. In the meantime, because attempts to fix weaknesses distract attention and effort from what you naturally do well, you squander the opportunity to be great." (p. - 12)

"The first thing about great teachers is that they are in the best way, unorthodox. Great teachers' methods and intuitions are different. They don't operate like other teachers, and they don't believe everything that they are told. They work by instinct more than they even know, having worked out the strategies and approaches that succeed for them in reaching different students." (p. - 15)

"Great teachers know that a lot of what they've learned about teachings is tremendously useful, but some of it isn't, and they can tell the difference. The distinction is important. Operating from poor assumptions about education and students' behavior can undermine learning, poison spirits, and encourage students to tune out, sometimes permanently. In fact, interviews with educators have uncovered two essential feelings common to great teachers: One is love--love of students, learning and teaching. The other, which is no surprise, is exasperation with educational nonsense--conventional wisdom about teaching that is, in fact, misinformation." (p. - 16 & 17)

"Students are not prisoners or employees. Teachers with little talent for the job assume that they're working with a captive audience that must follow orders, but they're wrong…Students are essentially volunteers, and great teachers know that students must be emotionally engaged to learn effectively." (p. - 17 & 18)

"Young people that are not engaged won't work hard, which is why they are labeled as lazy." (p. - 18)

"Great teachers know that it's harder to reach some students than others. But they know, instinctively, that it's possible to engage almost any young person." (p. - 18)

"Great teachers use their students' needs, interests, and curiosities and turn them toward the curricula--'captivating them, not entertaining them,' " (p. - 19)

"Teaching demands talents for teaching--natural abilities that require cultivation and hard work to master. Assuming that anyone can teach breeds mediocrity, just as surely as thinking that anyone can be a doctor, architect, or police officer would foster unremarkable performance in those professions." (p. - 20)

"The not-so-good teachers spend their careers trying to do something at which they won't ever excel, that never gets easier, and that is increasingly less rewarding. And the exceptional teachers are often forced to compromise what they know is right to fit in with the pack. What's more, the outstanding teachers rarely get the recognition they deserve, and

they are pressured to assume models that aren't meant for them--models that lead to mediocrity." (p. - 20)

"Thinking that teaching requires no more innate ability than driving a car or making toast leads to mediocre educational standards." (p. - 20)

"Experience doesn't translate into exceptional job performance in teaching, or in any other field." (p. - 21)

"Meta-analysis, the mathematical and statistical study of the combined results of several studies, has uncovered the five-year fade-out effect. That is, someone who has been teaching for six years has all the benefits of experience, as they relate to job performance, that a 30-year teaching veteran possesses…It's the people with the personality traits for the job that keep getting better, year after year. Some teachers have the right personality traits--and some don't, no matter how long they've been in the classroom. That's why some veterans of education are so helpful to young teachers and students and some aren't." (p. - 21)

"Unfortunately, many teachers never realize that experience and talent are two different things. The fact is, young people don't respond to seniority or post-graduate degrees. They respond to teachers who have passion for their work. And people that don't have talent for teaching soon lose whatever passion they had." (p. - 22)

"The measures of teacher quality that are used by most public school system to screen candidates and determine compensation--certification, experience, and education level--have been well researched, but there is little definitive empirical evidence that these characteristics, defined in general terms, are associate with higher student achievement." (p. - 22)

"So educator experience has less influence on students than simple good teaching. The masters of science degree that half of all teacher have earned are less important to students than they are to the people that hold them." (p. - 23)

"Many great teachers find the image of the hardened disciplinarian disturbing, if not distressing. The get-tough approach suggests that students lie in wait, like half-starved pumas, for a moment of pedagogical weakness, then leap out and ravage any hope of learning--and teachers had better keep beating the kids back into the tall weeds or lose authority forever." (p. - 23)

"Punishment kills learning, and punishment eventually corrodes teachers.…Young people are thirsty for a caring adult. If you exhibit that you care about your students, they'll come to you. You'll have to peel them off you like Velcro." (p. - 24)

"Great teachers don't set high expectations. This might some as a surprise. Rather, great teacher set the right expectations for each student. Talented teachers have an innate sense of what those expectations should be." (p. - 25)

"The problem with high expectations is that they can be mistaken for impossible standards, even by educators, and especially by students. Rather than inspiring student to greatness and encouraging them to achieve, those impossible expectations doom students to failure." (p. - 26)

"Low expectations are just as damaging. In some cases, low expectations are thought to boost self-esteem because they provide successes. But after the first couple of successes, even young people recognize hollow victories when they see them. Low expectations suggest, however subtly, that students aren't capable of doing better." (p. - 26)

"That's why I hate 'teaching to the test,' says one teacher. It doesn't give kids any incentive to gain more than minimal competencies." (p. - 26)

"Teachers have been burned before. Sometimes they find themselves just finishing the (mandated) implementation of one 'brilliant' method when the next one comes along. Veteran educators have seen such curricula and methods come and go, some lingering, some dismissed as soon as they arrive." (p. - 29)

"The reason that great teaches think that 'magic method' is nonsense is because they know that every student is different and learns differently. Fortunately, human brains are similar enough that education doesn't have to be reinvented for each child, but no single method can accommodate the difference in the aggregate and yet speak to the differences in every individual." (p. - 29 & 30)

"Great teachers respect and admire students for the work that they do. They became teachers for the young people but stay for the learners. Even the best teaches, however, know that no one can like every student all the time." (p. - 31)

"One of the telltale signs of a great teacher is his or her inclinations at these times [conflict between theory and best practice -- Classroom Toolkit note added -- not in the original] to do, for the right reasons, what conventional wisdom says is wrong." (p. - 33)

"A great teacher has the ability to establish basic standards and develop boundaries that make it possible to deal with many students in a learning environment while adapting to the needs of those students. The inconsistency of great teachers is a product of flexibility." (p. - 34)

"On average, teachers spend \$443 of their own money each year on classroom materials--\$470 in large schools. Putting a dollar value on what is obviously emotional engagement may seem crass, but it illustrate an important point: Teachers care enough about the quality of their students' education to invest, in some cases, half a paycheck a year in materials." (p. - 34 & 35)

"The best methods of measuring student achievement, however, are less clear. Should society use national, statewide, or local standardized tests? Non-standardized tests written by individual teachers, boards of education, outside experts? Essay tests, no tests, criterion-referenced tests from kindergarten to 12th grade? The No Child Left Behind Act settled the question of whether testing would occur, and states now have in place some form of standards and testing for grades 3-8." (p. - 39 & 40)

"People think that totally dissimilar job roles are, well, totally dissimilar. But the truth is that there is a deep similarity

among high performers in every job category. An incredibly effective teacher has more in common with an incredibly effective aeronautics engineer than with an ineffective teacher. " (p. - 45)

"Conventional wisdom says that studying the worst performers will show us what not to do, and by doing the opposite, we'll figure out what we ought to do. Low performers will teach us what make high performers so successful. Nonsense. Studying low performers mostly teaches you about low performers. The truth is that studying the best is much more revealing and productive than studying the worst." (p. - 46)

"Most people have been taught that they can do anything that they set their minds to. This is particularly true in American society, where one of the predominant myths is that people can be if they just work hard enough." (p. - 47 & 48)

"The idea that people should work very hard to do things they aren't naturally good at for the sake of being well-rounded is a mistake. Everyone has a unique set of talents that are tremendously powerful and the potential basis for strengths. When you're busily trying to fix as lesser talent--a weakness--you're ignoring your far more effective talents, perhaps even ignoring some fully developed strengths. " (p. - 53)

"Ultimately, however, fixing weaknesses is impossible. Weaknesses are your brain's rough roads and overgrown paths, and trying to make them useful usually isn't worth the effort, especially when an eight-lane superhighway is a few neurons away. Working on weaknesses means that you keep doing, with dogged and pained determination, what you don't--and can't--do well. " (p. - 53)

"In a way, your weaknesses are like your greatest talents: They're innate and you can't get rid of them. The best thing to do is manage them or work around them. " (p. - 54)Issues Addressed by the Book:Improving teaching is the focus of this book. And, our students deserve nothing less. However, the road to improving education is fraught with the mine fields of mediocre teachers, and the common wisdom of choosing, training and rewarding teachers does not work.The Book's Shortcomings:This book strikes too close to home for many in the teaching profession, and therefore, will not gain enough traction to reform the inertial and gridlock that the status quo holds on the educational environment.

The book also makes no recommendation about how to rid education of the marginal performers that are trapped in the system, or, now to attract top talent with recognition and more money when certification, advanced degrees and experience prove not to be the crucial variables that make teachers great.Comments:This is a code on the inside cover of this book that allows you to access an online test to narrow down a picture of your strengths.

Unfortunately, the library book that I used for this review didn't have the number, so I am not able to review the test.

There were a number of strength patterns listed in the book, but without access to the test, you have to guess at your personal attributes for greatness.

Buy the book if you are interested.Summary: Teachers must read the first section of this book because the author's real-world data dispels many of the myths of what makes great teachers.

If you want to see past the "tunnel vision" that your professional course of study left you with, read Section One of this book. Rating (Four Point scale):Useful - 4

Applicable - 4

Relevant - 4

Innovative - 3

Original - 3

Interesting - 4

Overall Rating - 3.7