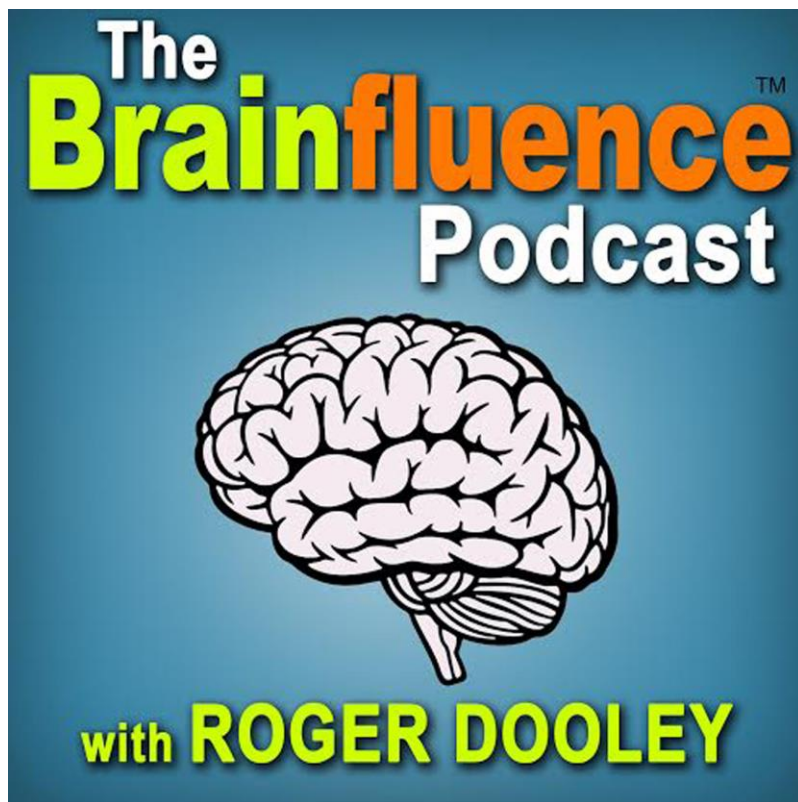


Ep #67: Forget Your Weaknesses, Find Your Hidden Strengths with Thuy Sindell



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Roger Dooley

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Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley, author, speaker and educator on neuromarketing and the psychology of persuasion. Every week, we talk with thought leaders that will help you improve your influence with factual evidence and concrete research. Introducing your host, Roger Dooley.

Roger Dooley: Welcome to *The Brainfluence Podcast*. This is Roger Dooley, and this week's guest has an interesting message for all of our listeners who want to better at what they do, and who doesn't want that? She's going to explain why the traditional advice of relying on your top strengths and trying to fix your weaknesses is actually wrong. She's an Executive Coach who has founded two software companies and has co-authored four books. She's currently President of Skyline Group's Coaching Division, and her latest book is *Hidden Strengths: Unleashing the Crucial Leadership Skills You Already Have*. Welcome to the show, Thuy Sindell.

Thuy Sindell: Thank you, Roger. Great to be here.

Roger Dooley: Great. I've spent years in both large and small businesses, Thuy, and one thing that I found just about everybody in the organization dreads is the performance review. Managers hate to do them. It's always kind of awkward and uncomfortable. Employees tend to dislike them too, because

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naturally there's always some areas that are flagged for improvement, and who agrees with those, right? One of the things that just about all of these evaluation processes include is identifying strengths and weaknesses. Usually, a manager will pick out the top couple of things that an employee is good at and highlight those and commend them perhaps, and then also there's the obligatory area for improvement or areas for improvement where there always has to be a weak point that's discovered.

This seems pretty logical on its face, but your premise is that this is the wrong approach. Not that identifying those strengths and weaknesses is bad, but that that's only a very small part of the whole story.

Thuy Sindell: Yes. It's a very small sliver, for sure. You're right, it is necessary to understand what our strengths are and where our weaknesses lie, and performance reviews are great times to revisit that, but you'll notice that everyone's response is always the same, which is, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know." This is feedback we've been given our entire career, "These are your strengths, these are your weaknesses," and we all say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." "Yeah, yeah, yeah" to me is one of those things where people think, "Oh, I know I should do that," which means they don't and won't, and so

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focusing on just your strengths or weaknesses alone is not great for developing yourself as a person and as a leader. It's great for performance review situations, but beyond that, the goal of performance reviews is to try to get people to get better the next time around, and to get better the next time around doesn't mean you keep focusing on the weaknesses that you're just bad at and you'll never get better at.

It's definitely a flawed approach, and we have an opportunity to really shift the conversation and leave people going out of those performance review conversations with a level of optimism that they can do it. That's not to suggest you don't acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses. Rather, the remaining part of the conversation about "What should we be focused on in this next half or in this next year?" should be around your hidden strengths, and how do you bring that to life?

Roger Dooley: Before we get too much farther, I should interject, too, that I sent this down the direction of employee performance reviews, but really this process can be a self-evaluation process too, where an individual may be trying to develop themselves as opposed to participate in company-based efforts. I know a lot of our listeners are entrepreneurs or are not part of a big hierarchy with a formal review

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process, and some of these same concepts will apply for that situation, too.

Thuy Sindell: Oh, absolutely. In fact, the book was written for leaders, but here's how we define leaders. Leaders can be people who manage others, manage an organization, but they can also be individual contributors who are trying to do things differently, are proactive in the way that they see themselves and their career and the ideas that they bring to the table. A leader is anyone who aspires for more.

Roger Dooley: You say it's not a good idea to focus on weaknesses, but how do you deal with those things? Because often, whether it's an individual or an employee in a large organization, improving those weaknesses can be pretty important to their survival or success.

Thuy Sindell: Exactly. We're not suggesting that you completely ignore your weaknesses. You have to fix them, and fix them quickly, and then where you want to spend your energy and efforts is in developing your hidden strengths. Let me speak a little bit more broadly. If you're in a role that is highlighting your weaknesses in a way that is just going to compromise your performance, you're probably not in the right role. When we look to your strengths, the question is, how are you playing to

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your strengths? Because it's Maslow's hierarchy of needs. We have to make sure that those basic needs are met. If you are playing to your strengths, that means your weaknesses are not going to be that daunting. That said, we all have weaknesses, and the way to put a Band-Aid around weaknesses is to look around your team and your organization and ask, "Okay, so who on my team is better at this than me, and how am I hiring for that?"

We hear time and time again that the smartest leaders are the ones who hire people who are smarter than they are at certain things. If you're doing that, you will cover up your weaknesses by ensuring that someone else on your team is there to pick up on some of those. The best way and the quickest way to fix a weakness is to hire for it and delegate that particular job or role to someone on your team who's much better at it.

Roger Dooley: That makes a lot of sense. Perhaps an alternative if you happen to be an individual in a company trying to improve your situation is if you identify an area that you're weak in and you just don't see it as easily fixable, even perhaps talking to your boss about a little change in assignment or transfer responsibility or something like that. I know I some years back had an individual who was a brilliant technical guy, just very, very good

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at what he did. Not only was he skilled technically, but he was a very self-motivated learner, so he was just constantly on top of everything new going on. Very valuable in that respect, but did not really do well with people all the time. His job required client contact, and if things got a little bit stressful, he could snap, and then we got client complaints.

In an ideal situation ... We did not have a back room. I suppose the one solution for that is, "Okay, this person's a backroom person who can run things behind the scene and not have to interface with customers." Really, that's the sort of thing that you would I guess try and do, because changing personality has got to be one of the tougher tasks out there. In other words, if there's one weakness that could be improved with maybe some education or a few weeks of training or something like that, that'd be great, but trying to correct basic personality things is not impossible, everybody's capable of change, but that's a little bit more intractable of a problem.

Thuy Sindell: Yeah. Sometimes it may be asking for too much. If you're bad at details, you're not going to get great at details no matter how hard you try. You're going to have to fix it and do at least the bare minimum to get by, but to invest more time in that area is not going to yield the kind of results and the ROI that we are all looking for. Yeah, absolutely. I'm in

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agreement with you. The other thing that I do also want to share is that we've seen a lot of very introverted CEOs get really, really good at presentation skills, and that's because while they may lack the natural trait to be out in front of people and to be comfortable, because they have developed the skills, so like you said, the classroom training, and they have had so many speaking engagements and experienced learning from them and the knowledge and wisdom that builds from there, they get really darn good. They overcome the fact that they're missing a trait.

Those are instances where we want to look at, "Okay, is this possible to move beyond this, or is this person so severely introverted and so severely incapable that it's actually a weakness?" That's where we want to pay close attention to asking the question, "Is this a weakness, or is this actually a hidden strength that they just didn't try out?" Because you have a very brain science approach to things, Roger, a way for us to look at it is sometimes what happens is we have one bad experience of presenting, and we think, "Oh, I'm just absolutely horrible." Guess what? You didn't practice, you didn't get any coaching, you didn't get any feedback or tips and things like that. From a prefrontal cortex, we make the decision that we're just really bad at this, and so we stick to, "No, I will never do that again, I'm just really bad,"

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and actually that's not true. Actually, you can get really good at it, but you've made up your mind that this is not something that is a strength, which is not the case at all.

Roger Dooley: In your book, Thuy, you enumerate twenty-eight different strengths. We're not going to go through all those, but how do you come up with that list and how would you broadly categorize them?

Thuy Sindell: Great question. When we developed the list of the twenty-eight competencies, we looked at a number of various competencies out there. There's been lots of research done over the years. Every organization has their fifty, has their thirty. In our case, we have our twenty-eight. By the way, when an organization has fifty, they tend to overlap. Instead of leaving integrity in one place, it will say "integrity and trust." That's how you get to fifty, as an example. In our particular case, they are divided into four different categories around myself and how I show up in the world. Am I operating with a level of integrity? Do I have resilience? Do I have executive presence? Leading others, which is about "How do I lead my team and others that I need to collaborate with?" It's partnering, it's team work, it's collaboration, it's listening.

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Then, the third area is around how I lead the organization. This is more about your ideas, like strategic thinking, entrepreneurship in terms of taking risk. Are you being an inspirational visionary? Then, finally, we have the category of leading implementation, which is "How do I actually lead others to get it done? How am I delegating? How am I monitoring performance? How am I being thorough?" Those are examples of the four categories and the twenty-eight competencies that fall into each of those.

Roger Dooley: One of your other basic premises is that people tend to be strong in a few areas, maybe have a weakness or two. You've got a sort of twenty-seventy-ten rule, right?

Thuy Sindell: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Roger Dooley: I guess you can always divide folks up in that manner, but did you find that those numbers were, from the work that you've done, popping out at you, or is this just a simple shorthand for trying to say, "Okay, this is what you're best at, this is what you're not good at, and here's everything else"?

Thuy Sindell: Yeah. We have found that that typically plays out in organizations with leaders. There are times where I find, and this is really, really rare, but there are some amazing leaders that I've had the opportunity to work with where they had pretty

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much I would say eighty percent strengths and like twenty percent hidden strengths, and no weaknesses, nothing in the red whatsoever. When we compare them to the ...

Roger Dooley: Yes, Thuy. I did your self-assessment thing, and that's pretty much how I came out on that, amazingly enough.

Thuy Sindell: See, that's the beauty of the self-assessment. That's your version of it.

Roger Dooley: Right, that's my version of it.

Thuy Sindell: Exactly.

Roger Dooley: Sorry about that, I didn't mean to interrupt.

Thuy Sindell: It's fine. One of the things we recommend is, obviously the book comes with the self-assessment, which is a free online version, but what we also have is the full three-sixty version of the tool, which will give you a more accurate picture of how others experience you across various different groups, from your managers to your peers to cross-functional peers and direct reports. That gives a better snapshot than just the self-assessment, because the self-assessment is your version.

Roger Dooley: Right. Yeah, that was something I wanted to get to, is that there is a way of getting feedback on it

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too, because I actually didn't come out quite that good. I tried to be as honest as possible, but it's very difficult sometimes to judge yourself. Even if you're being one hundred percent honest, other people may still perceive you in a different way. You may think you're really good at listening to people, and they may think that you're terrible at it, that you're not paying any attention to them at all. That's good to know. Once you go through this assessment process and you've got these rankings of different characteristics, whether it's emotional control or assertiveness, entrepreneurship, and so on, how do you decide what to work on?

Because I know I looked at my chart, and I've got a broad distribution of stuff, like some at the top that I'm very strong in, and then a few at the bottom that came out not so good, and then there's this sliding scale in the middle. Which ones, if I said, "Okay, well, if I'm good on these top ones here," what should I focus on developing? How would I choose those skills that I should probably focus on developing?

Thuy Sindell: That's a great question. What we recommend, and we certainly talk about this in the book, is first looking at what are your goals for the year or for the next twelve months in terms of what you want to achieve in your business, what you want to

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achieve in your line of work, and then working backwards from there. Let's say I'm in sales. If my goal is to be able to hit my numbers by the end of the year, not just for next quarter but for the remaining half of the year, then I may look at, "Okay, so what are the skills that are going to help me get there?" I need to probably have more external awareness, which is understanding the larger markets in terms of trends, where things are headed. I may choose that skill as something that happens to fall in the middle.

I may find, as you said earlier, maybe my listening is not so great, and I have something that I want to share instead of really listening to the customer and having a more consultative sales experience to be able to offer up my expertise. You may decide, "I need to pay attention to that, listening, and the external awareness," and you may decide to go with those two as things that might be helpful for you. It's very personal in terms of which ones make the most sense. Roger, here's the best part that we have found, which is that because some of these competencies are connected, they're correlated, what ends up happening is sometimes a weakness that you quickly fix but you don't directly spend a lot of time on developing, may actually get pulled up when you end up focusing on building a hidden strength.

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What do I mean by that? When you go to focus on a hidden strength, it will naturally start to correct for some of the weaknesses. In the book I gave an example of somebody who had really atrocious emotional control, and that was at the very bottom. While we didn't directly address the emotional control, certainly we tried to put a lot of Band-Aids in, like noticing, "Okay, what are the triggers for when you lose it? What does it look like? How can you recover from that? How can you apologize to people?" all of that good stuff. But at the end of the day, what we actually spend time was in helping to coach and mentor his team so that he didn't end up getting so upset and completely losing it. That naturally started to pull up his emotional control scores from his three-sixty.

Roger Dooley: That makes a lot of sense. The little survey that I did very, very quickly without paying too much attention to it, just wanted to go through it and see what it was like ... For instance, somewhere one that I had kind of in the middle was team work and collaboration. If I felt that was something that was really required in the coming year, that would probably also affect things like my listening competency, which was actually a little bit lower on that. Some of the others relate to that, a customer focus. It seems like if you really focus on one of them and improve it, then it'll pull some of these others along as well.

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Thuy Sindell: You got it, Roger, and that's a great example that you just shared. Absolutely.

Roger Dooley: Thuy, you and your husband run your company together, right?

Thuy Sindell: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Roger Dooley: Is that correct? Yeah. How long have you been doing that and how has that worked out? Has that required any particular strengths or competencies to make that happen and still be successful?

Thuy Sindell: Yes, it certainly does. I do want to also indicate that we have a third partner in the firm as well. With respect to how it all works, I'm happy to disclose. For myself, you mentioned team work and collaboration, that's something that I'm working on as a hidden strength, as well as inspirational vision. Currently, where there's a nice compliment is my husband is quite the visionary, and so I've been able to rely on him in fulfilling that part of the role, but for myself, I want to get better at being an inspirational visionary. I want to be putting my ideas out there in terms of what's possible for the future. That's something that I'm working on. Also, because we are running at a million miles a minute, it is hard to slow down to say, "Okay, let's bring the team together, let's talk about what we should be doing to solve for x, y, and z."

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That is something that, again, it's not that I'm atrocious at either, it's just that I haven't really been focused on it. I've been just running at a million miles a minute. It's nice to know that, "Okay, these are the two things that I'm focused on in terms of making those hidden strengths into a strength."

Roger Dooley: I think inspirational vision is one that is kind of interesting. How would you focus on that? Certain things you can say, "Okay, well, I can go to a seminar, take a course," or something, but how do you improve your inspirational vision?

Thuy Sindell: There's a couple things, the first of which is always being able to ask yourself, "Am I thinking big enough? What about five years from now? Is this still going to be relevant? Is this something that is, frankly, inspiring today to get us to where we want to be five years from now?" There's that exercise of really catching yourself and posing those questions to force yourself to think differently. Then there's visualization. I've had a coach myself, and so one of the things that we wanted to do was ensure that in my office there is expansiveness, that there is, obviously there's window space, but more importantly that there is even just like a picture of the universe, and just surrounding myself with visually more expansive props, if you will, and artifacts so that it's a

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reminder for me as well. Yeah, this is not about going to a class. This is really about practices that you have to implement for yourself.

Roger Dooley: There's some interesting mind hacks, too. I'm not sure how effective they are in the real world, but things like having a picture of Edison's light bulb and things like higher ceilings have all been shown in some research studies to increase creativity. Some fascinating stuff there. I think you bring up a good point, too, in talking about how different members of the leadership team or ownership team can interface. I know I had a business years ago that grew into quite a successful business. My partner in that was an extremely creative guy, and his ideas would fly out of his head like a popcorn machine. Really, I was more of the execution and strategy guy. Between us, it worked extremely well, because I could grab those ideas that worked and we could work on fleshing them out, and then the others I could just shoot them down and say, "Okay, that's interesting, but it's not going to work for us."

By having the different skills as part of the team, and I think we each recognized what each other was good at, we ended up with a really good collaboration and really some successful launches.

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Thuy Sindell: Yeah, exactly. That's how you play off of each other's strengths and how you make up for each other's weaknesses. That's a better use of your time. Then, when it comes to "What are the skills I actually want to develop?" they should be the ones in the middle.

Roger Dooley: Is there anything special do you think, if you're looking at people who are more entrepreneurs or even solopreneurs, in your work do you see anything that they should be emphasizing in this process versus folks who are part of a hierarchical organization?

Thuy Sindell: That's a great question. This is really about "Where do you want your business to be a year from now, five years from now, and what are the skill sets required to get you there?" and then looking at which ones are you going to take on? The thing that's really important is, as you said earlier, Roger, that list of twenty-eight, seventy percent of that twenty-eight is a significant number, so it's taking them in smaller chunks. We recommend two to three skills at a time. I mentioned earlier I'm only focused on two, because it's going to be really helpful in getting better at something instead of spreading yourself thin across ten or fifteen of them. That just doesn't make any sense.

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Roger Dooley: I want to remind our listeners we're talking with Thuy Sindell, co-author of Hidden Strengths: Unleashing the Crucial Leadership Skills You Already Have. Thuy, how can our listeners find your stuff online and connect with you?

Thuy Sindell: Thank you for asking, Roger. Our website is skylineg, as in "group," skylineg.com, and my Twitter handle is ThuySindell.

Roger Dooley: Great. We'll have links to those sites and profiles as well as Thuy's books and any other resources we discussed on the show notes page at rogerdooley.com/podcast. Also there we will have a text version if you prefer to read rather than listen. Thuy, thanks so much for being on the show.

Thuy Sindell: Thank you for having me, Roger.

Roger Dooley: Thank you for joining me for this episode of The Brainfluence Podcast. To continue the discussion and to find your own path to brainy success, please visit us at rogerdooley.com.

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