



# Leadership Tips and Tools

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Warton Willie, Shubenacadie Sam, and Punxsutawney Phil recently made their predictions. The events of February 2 reminded me of the popular movie “Groundhog Day” starring Bill Murray. In the movie, Bill Murray wakes up each morning destined to repeat the same day — “Groundhog Day” — over and over again. Murray keeps reliving the same events, with the same people, and the same outcomes day after day.

Like Bill Murray in “Groundhog Day” many of us will relive the same events, with the same people, with the same outcomes over and over in our work as post-secondary leaders. Sometimes it feels like we are stuck in a metaphorical “Groundhog Day.”

Eventually Murray finds the key to a “new and better day” by changing his behavior. We, too, can find a better day for ourselves, teams, departments, and colleges by taking a look at our leadership. We can awake to a new day by creating change through leadership.

## Creating Change Through Leadership

**58 Minutes!** Too often we are fixated on correcting weaknesses. It is our responsibility to “fix” problems and to “get” staff to perform at their highest level. We repeat the same pattern over-and-over during appraisal processes. In a one hour evaluation, we spend 58 minutes on a staff member’s shortcomings and weaknesses and 2 minutes on their strengths and accomplishments. Research tells us that we get more of what we focus on. If we focus on weaknesses, is that what we will get? Current research gives us the key to better performance. That key is to spend MORE time focusing on strengths and achievements. Don’t ignore issues that need correcting, but use the power of strengths as leverage for correcting the performance issues.

**Strengths Development Versus Weakness Detection!** Although we each possess a unique complement of strengths and weaknesses, our greatest room for growth lies in our areas of strengths. The most up-to-date research finds two reasons to believe this — one biological, one emotional. The biological answer reveals that we will, in fact, learn and grow the most in our areas of strengths. Genetic differences cause our mind to become wired with a unique network of synaptic connections, which creates distinct patterns of thought. As we continue to learn throughout adulthood, we will learn the most in those areas where we already know the most.

The emotional answer states that we will, in fact, feel most energized and challenged when working in our strengths. We are more likely to be resilient, persistent, self-confident, and effective in those areas where we have developed some mastery, and we will transfer these powerful feelings to new challenges. As leaders we can find the answers to growth and development by focusing on strengths.

**Be a Talent Scout!** Exceptional performance occurs when leaders nurture talent. The most successful leaders build on the talents of their colleagues, faculty, staff, and students by giving others opportunities to apply their gifts in roles that suit and stretch those talents. This results in an explosion of strengths for individuals and the team. We all demonstrate more and more strengths as we make the most of our innate patterns of thought, feeling, and behaviors. Leaders who understand talent breathe life into others by recognizing talents, helping others build their talents into strengths, and celebrating the process.

**How do you Woo (Win Over Others)?** We have been introduced to *Now, Discover Your Strengths* by Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton. We are excited to know we have talents. Many have completed the Gallup organization's StrengthsFinder™ survey. We might even be able to list our talents.

Finding our talents is short-lived, however, if we stop there. Knowing our talents also means we have a responsibility for using those talents as gifts— and strengths. Knowing the talents of our colleagues and staff requires us to capitalize on those talents and strengths for students, team, department, and college. How does knowing that you possess great talents within the Woo (Winning Over Others) theme help you become more successful in interactions with colleagues? Do Command talents help you become a more effective leader? How do Restorative talents help you solve problems?

If we can't capitalize on talents and strengths, are we destined to be like Bill Murray in "Groundhog Day"? We know what is going on, but seem to be powerless to do anything about it.

**Three Strategies!** Translating knowledge into new behavior may be the hardest part of the strengths-based revolution. As leaders, we need to learn to turn strengths — our own and those of others — into measurable gains for our students, teams, departments, and college. Try these three strategies:

1. **Accept! Help team members accept and value the talents they have.** Many people aren't satisfied with their own talents. Instead, they yearn for -- or worse, envy -- the talents of others. When they do this, they waste time trying to emulate other people's gifts while ignoring their own natural abilities. To offset this disappointing and demoralizing behavior, the best leaders help others explore, develop, and apply their unique talents. We need to avoid personal, professional, and cultural biases that frame particular talents as more valued than others. Instead we need to honor and respect the diversity of talents in ourselves and others.
2. **Value! Inspire team members to recognize each other's talents.** Exemplary leaders help others understand how their varied talents can help achieve individual, team, department, and college goals. We develop our talents most effectively through relationships with other people and through significant performance challenges in the area of our talents. The more we recognize and celebrate our coworkers' talents, the more they encourage each other to use talents and build strengths. As leaders we must "model the way" by publicly recognizing and valuing the diverse talents of others.
3. **Connect! Get individuals to connect their talents to crucial outcomes. This is the pivotal aspect of building strengths.** Helping others understand how to use their natural patterns -- their unique ways of thinking, feeling, and acting -- encourages them to achieve exceptional results and increases productivity. This is how the best leaders create high-performing, talent-driven teams. When our roles are aligned with our talents we can do more work in less time with a greater degree of proficiency. We are yearning for our talents to be discovered and unleashed. The best leaders know how to spot talents, turn them into strengths, and build multi-talented strengths-based teams. The more we orchestrate individual and team tasks and challenges in areas of strengths the more we use talents and build strengths to achieve performance goals.

**WE, not Me!** We know that leadership is a team effort. Does our language reflect this knowledge? After reviewing thousands of Personal-Best Experiences, Kouzes and Posner developed a simple test to detect whether someone was on the road to becoming an exemplary leader. That test is the frequency of the use of the word **we**.

Interpersonal relationship literature confirms that the language of “we,” “let’s,” and “our” is the language of integrated empowered relationships. “We have a good thing going,” “Let’s work on this together,” “Our team,” and “Our department,” is the language of relationships. We create change through leadership when our language reflects our attitudes, values, and beliefs.

**The Ultimate Empowerment Tool!** In his recent book *Leading Through Questions!* Michael Marquardt convinces us that questions are the “ultimate empowerment tool” for the leader. The better we become at asking effective questions and listening for the answers, the more consistently “we and the people with whom we work can accomplish mutually satisfying objectives, be empowered, reduce resistance, and create a willingness to pursue innovative change.” When we ask questions of others and invite them to search for answers with us, we are not just sharing information, we are sharing responsibility. Asking rather than telling -- questions rather than answers -- a questioning culture is a culture in which responsibility is shared.

*“The greatest compliment that was ever paid me  
was when someone asked me what I thought,  
and attended to my answer.”*

--Henry David Thoreau

**Fill the Pool!** We each enter conversations with a reservoir of past experiences, opinions, feelings, theories, and expectations about ourselves, others involved in the conversation, and the topic at hand. This unique combination of experiences, thoughts and feelings makes up our personal pool of meaning. This pool informs us and propels our every action. When we enter into conversations with others, we don’t share the same pool. Our opinions differ. We believe different things. We have different histories.

Leaders who create a “new day” through leadership become skilled at dialogue. They fill the Pool of Shared Meaning by inviting dialogue on shared themes, ideas, values. In a sense, they **prime** the pump to fill the Pool of Shared Meaning. They lead the way by going first and inviting others to follow. They make it **safe** for others to add their meaning to the **shared** pool.

Exemplary leaders create a safe place for ideas that may, at first glance, appear controversial, wrong, or at odds with their own beliefs. They may not agree with every idea, yet, they do their best to ensure that all ideas find their way safely into the open. The Pool of Shared Meaning is the birthplace of synergy. Not only does the Pool of Shared Meaning help individuals and teams connect in meaningful ways, it helps them make better choices and decisions and in the end helps everyone accept responsibility for shared decisions and act willingly on them. The time leaders spend up front establishing a shared pool of meaning is more than paid for by faster, more committed action later on.

**Stop Bumping Your Head!** A leader and friend at Okanagan College, Kelowna, British Columbia, recently offered one of his favorite stories. The story is a reminder that we don’t have to keep doing things the way we have always done them. We must be mindful of creating change through leadership so that we will not be destined to continually repeat previous patterns. We can rethink and change our attitudes, habits, and behaviors to create a new day through leadership.

*“Here is Edward Bear coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way...if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it!”*

-- A. A. Milne, the opening paragraph of *Winnie-the-Pooh*