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CliftonStrengths® and Team Experiences

Coaching Companion Guide



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How to Use This Guide

Team strengths coaching begins with individual awareness and expands to team understanding and shared practice. Coaches help individuals recognize their talents, help teams understand how people's talents shape different perspectives and turn those insights into habits that strengthen day-to-day teamwork.

Use each section to:

- connect a report finding to a coaching practice
- identify behaviors and patterns to explore
- select questions for team conversations

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1 Coaching Teams in a Changing Workplace

RESEARCH INSIGHT

Teams are becoming more distributed and more complex. Hybrid work, matrixed team structures, organizational change and increased use of AI can make roles, expectations and working agreements less clear.

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT



Average U.S. team size has grown by **nearly 50%** since 2013.

What a Coach Should Notice

Consider whether the team's working agreements still reflect how the work gets done.

Things to Listen For

- uncertainty about roles and decision-making authority
- competing priorities across teams
- inconsistent expectations across locations
- unclear expectations about AI use
- signals of limited connection among people who infrequently work together

Coaching Questions

- What has changed about how this team works?
- Where have roles or expectations become less clear?
- Which decisions require alignment across the team?
- In what situations are team members relying on different assumptions?
- What do team members need from one another to work well across locations, projects or leaders?

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COACHING STRATEGY

Identify one current work challenge before discussing individual strengths. Then explore how different talents can improve clarity, coordination and partnership around that challenge.

CONSIDERATION

Do not assume that a strengths activity will solve a structural problem. Teams often need clarity about ownership, priorities or decision-making authority before strengths discussions can make a measurable difference.

PRACTICE ACTIVITY

Update the Team's Working Agreements

Use this activity to help the team turn discussion into clear agreements they can put into practice immediately.

Ask the team to complete three statements:

- We work best together when ...
- We lose clarity when ...
- Going forward, we will ...

End by establishing one well-defined agreement about roles, communication, decision-making or follow-through.

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2 Strengths Awareness as the Foundation for Teamwork

RESEARCH INSIGHT

The mix of strengths on a team matters less than whether team members know, value and rely on one another's strengths. Strengths awareness gives teams a common language for recognizing one another's contributions and working together more effectively.

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

In one study of team-level data on strengths, engagement and performance, Gallup found that strengths awareness had twice the influence on a team's performance as the composition of strengths within that team did.

What a Coach Should Notice

Observe whether strengths conversations stay at the individual level or extend to the team.

Things to Listen For

- people describing only their own talents
- limited knowledge of teammates' contributions
- strengths language used as a label instead of an explanation
- recurring dependence on a few contributors
- valuable talents the team rarely recognizes

Coaching Questions

- How well do team members understand one another's strengths?
- Which contributions receive the most attention?
- Which contributions are less visible?
- When does the team use differences well?
- Whose strengths could be used more intentionally?
- What does each person need teammates to understand about how they contribute?

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COACHING STRATEGY

Move the conversation from "What are my strengths?" to "How do our strengths work together?" Ground the discussion in real work examples so team members connect talent themes to observable contributions.

CONSIDERATION

Avoid treating the CliftonStrengths Team Grid as the conclusion. Knowing which themes appear on the team does not reveal how people use them, where important contributions are missing or how team members experience the work.

PRACTICE ACTIVITY

Contribution Exchange

Invite team members to make one another's contributions more visible by reflecting on which strengths they already value and which ones they want to rely on more often.

Pair team members and ask each person to complete these statements about their partner:

- I see you at your best when ...
- One contribution I rely on from you is ...
- One strength I'd like to rely on more often is ...

Then ask each pair to identify one upcoming opportunity to apply their insights together.

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3 Different Strengths Create Different Team Experiences

RESEARCH INSIGHT

People who lead with different CliftonStrengths domains may notice and value different aspects of their team experiences.

What a Coach Should Notice

Listen for moments when team members describe the same situation from different perspectives.

Things People May Pay Closer Attention To

- deadlines, ownership and completion
- influence, energy and momentum
- trust, inclusion and recognition
- ideas, possibilities and future direction

Coaching Questions

- What do you notice first in this situation?
- What does effective teamwork look like from your perspective?
- What might someone else on the team notice that you don't?
- Which perspectives are most visible during team discussions?
- Which perspectives receive less attention?
- How do different viewpoints help the team make better decisions?

Coaching Tip

Help team members separate what they observe from the meaning they assign to it. Invite several perspectives before the group decides what a situation means or how to respond.

Domains describe broad patterns of contribution. Do not let the team use them to predict behavior or place people into fixed categories. Individual theme combinations, experience and context shape how each person contributes.

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PRACTICE ACTIVITY

Four Perspectives

Once the team has explored different viewpoints, use this activity to help members experience how multiple perspectives strengthen decisions.

Choose a current team challenge. Ask team members to consider it through four contribution lenses:

- What needs to be completed or clarified?
- Who needs to be heard or moved to action?
- Which relationship needs should the team consider?
- What information, options or future consequences deserve more attention?

Use the responses to develop a more complete view of the challenge before discussing possible actions.

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4 Best and Worst Team Experiences

RESEARCH INSIGHT

People in Gallup's study on team experiences identified their best teams as having trust and respect, collaboration, and meaningful work. Their worst team experiences reflected breakdowns in trust, collaboration, recognition, leadership and communication rather than isolated failures to achieve their goals.

What a Coach Should Notice

Pay attention to whether the team talks only about results or also examines how people work together to achieve them.

Things to Listen For

- indications of strained relationships, despite positive results
- contributions that go unrecognized
- low trust hidden behind process complaints
- repeated communication problems
- meaningful work that is not clearly connected to team roles

Coaching Questions

- What made this team's best results possible?
- When has the team collaborated at its best?
- In which situations do people feel that their contributions matter?
- Which behaviors have created trust?
- Which behaviors have weakened trust or respect?
- Which behaviors are worth preserving as the team's workload or pressure increases?

Coaching Tip

Use previous team experiences as evidence. Ask team members to identify the behaviors that contributed to a positive experience. Then decide which of those behaviors should become part of the team's regular practice.

Teams sometimes describe relationship challenges as process problems because processes feel easier to discuss than behaviors. Explore what interactions are happening between people, not just what processes are happening in the team's workflow.

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PRACTICE ACTIVITY

Best-Team Replay

Build on the conversation by helping the team identify the behaviors they want to carry forward into everyday work.

Ask each team member to recall a positive team experience and identify:

- one behavior that built trust
- one behavior that strengthened collaboration
- one behavior that made contributions feel meaningful

Recognize the behaviors that appear most often. Then work with the team to turn them into shared commitments.

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5 Team Cohesion

RESEARCH INSIGHT

Team cohesion depends on a few basic conditions: whether people have clear expectations, feel a sense of belonging, regularly reflect on how to improve and have reliable partnerships. Broad statements such as "communication is bad" often point to a breakdown in one or more of these areas.

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

Only 25% of U.S. employees strongly agree their team takes time to reflect on and discuss how they can make things better.

What a Coach Should Notice

Listen for team challenges and the underlying areas that create friction within the team. For example:

EXPECTATIONS	BELONGING
• unclear ownership • duplicated work • inconsistent standards	• some voices dominate • others withdraw • some people feel outside the core group
REFLECTION	**RELIABLE PARTNERSHIPS**
• repeated mistakes • little time to learn • discussion stays tactical	• inconsistent follow-through • missed handoffs • different standards of commitment

Coaching Questions

- Under what circumstances does this team challenge appear most often?
- Which area of cohesion is under the most strain?
- Where are expectations unclear?
- Who may not feel fully included?
- What does the team need to pause and learn from?
- When do commitments become unclear between people?
- What one behavior would help improve this area over the next 30 days?

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Coaching Tip

Work through one issue at a time.

1) Name the presenting challenge.
2) Identify where friction occurs.
3) Determine which cohesion area is most affected.
4) Define one observable behavior that would improve the situation.

Resist the temptation to solve every issue at once. Teams are more likely to build lasting habits when they focus on one visible behavior at a time.

PRACTICE ACTIVITY

Cohesion Check

Use this activity to identify where the team is strongest and where one focused improvement could have the greatest impact.

Ask team members to rate each area from 1 to 5:

- expectations
- belonging
- reflection
- reliable partnerships

Choose one area for discussion. Then define one item for the team to improve on and what improvement would look like in observable behaviors.

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6 Teamwork or Collaboration?

RESEARCH INSIGHT

Teams need both teamwork and collaboration, but not at the same time or for the same purpose. Teamwork depends on clear ownership, defined roles and coordinated execution. Collaboration supports shared thinking, diverse perspectives and joint problem-solving.

What a Coach Should Notice

Pay attention to whether the team's approach matches the work it needs to accomplish.

TEAMWORK	COLLABORATION
• clear ownership • defined roles • coordinated execution • efficient delivery	• shared thinking • multiple perspectives • joint problem-solving • better decisions

THE TEAM MAY NEED MORE TEAMWORK WHEN YOU SEE:	THE TEAM MAY NEED MORE COLLABORATION WHEN YOU SEE:
• missed deadlines • duplicated work • weak handoffs • confusion about ownership	• small groups of people making decisions • missing perspectives • low commitment • discussions that end before ideas have been fully explored

Coaching Questions

- What kind of work is the team trying to accomplish?
- Does this situation require clear coordination or shared thinking?
- Where would more structure help?
- Where would more participation improve the outcome?
- At what point should collaboration give way to execution?
- How will the team know when it is time to change modes?

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Coaching Tip

Help the team decide how it needs to work before deciding what it needs to do.

Clarify whether team members should be gathering perspectives, making decisions, assigning responsibilities or carrying out a plan. Naming the mode early helps prevent confusion later.

More collaboration is not always the answer. Additional discussion can create uncertainty when ownership and responsibilities are already clear.

PRACTICE ACTIVITY

Map the Work

Apply the distinction between teamwork and collaboration by mapping a real process the team uses together.

Choose one recurring process and divide it into stages.

For each stage, ask:

- Does this require teamwork or collaboration?
- Who needs to participate?
- Who owns the decision?
- What needs to be clear before the team moves forward?

After mapping the process, discuss where the team currently shifts from collaboration to execution and whether that transition is working well.

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7 CliftonStrengths as Translation

RESEARCH INSIGHT

CliftonStrengths gives teams a shared language for interpreting behavior and working through tension. While the type of conflict people experience does not differ substantially by dominant CliftonStrengths domain, strengths can influence what people notice, how they interpret behavior and how they choose to respond.

What a Coach Should Notice

Listen for judgments that may reflect incomplete interpretations rather than observable behaviors.

Examples of Judgments

- "They're controlling."
- "They don't care."
- "They're slowing us down."
- "They push too hard."
- "They overcomplicate everything."
- "They're too soft."

These statements often describe a conclusion rather than an observation.

Coaching Questions

- What behavior are you observing?
- What assumptions have you attached to that behavior?
- Which CliftonStrengths theme might help explain your perception?
- What contribution may be underneath the behavior?
- Regardless of intent, what effect is the behavior having?
- What does the other person need to understand?
- What agreement would help these strengths work together more effectively?

THREE STEPS FOR COACHING THROUGH CONFLICT

Guide the conversation through three steps:

1) Describe the behavior without judgment.
2) Explore the possible strengths-based intent.
3) Agree on how the behavior can contribute more effectively.

Remember, CliftonStrengths should help explain behavior, not excuse it. Positive intent does not eliminate the need to address a negative effect.

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PRACTICE ACTIVITY

Reframe the Story

Give team members an opportunity to practice replacing assumptions with curiosity before discussing possible solutions.

Ask team members to complete this sequence:

- The behavior I notice is ...
- The story I've been telling myself is ...
- A possible strengths-based explanation is ...
- What I need from this person is ...

After everyone has reflected, discuss what the team learned and identify one working agreement that would improve future interactions.

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8 One Expectation, Different Strengths Pathways

RESEARCH INSIGHT

Teams do not need everyone to contribute in the same way; rather, they need a shared understanding of the team's desired outcome and how each person can help achieve it.

What a Coach Should Notice

Discern when the team defines a good contribution too narrowly.

Effective follow-through can look different from one person to another while still supporting the same team expectation.

Examples of Follow-Through

- defining actions, owners and deadlines
- reinforcing priorities and commitment
- maintaining trust and alignment
- anticipating obstacles and improving next steps

Coaching Questions

- What shared outcome does the team need?
- How is success usually defined here?
- Which types of contribution receive the most recognition?
- How might each person support the same outcome in a different way?
- Which valuable contributions receive too little attention?

Coaching Tip

Start with one shared expectation. Then invite each team member to describe how their talents support it. End by clarifying what successful performance requires from everyone, regardless of strengths.

Different pathways do not mean different standards. People may contribute in different ways, but shared commitments still require clear ownership and accountability.

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PRACTICE ACTIVITY

Strengths Pathway Map

Use this activity to help the team recognize how different CliftonStrengths themes can support the same shared expectation.

Choose one expectation, such as:

- improve decision quality
- strengthen accountability
- improve follow-through
- increase participation

Create four columns.

EXECUTING	INFLUENCING	RELATIONSHIP BUILDING	STRATEGIC THINKING
How might this domain contribute?	How might this domain contribute?	How might this domain contribute?	How might this domain contribute?

Then ask each person to identify:

- one contribution they naturally make
- one contribution they need from someone else

Example

Expectation: Follow through better after meetings.

Domain	EXECUTING	INFLUENCING	RELATIONSHIP BUILDING	STRATEGIC THINKING
Natural contribution	Clarifies actions and deadlines	Reinforces priorities and commitment	Maintains trust and alignment	Anticipates obstacles and improves next steps

One of the most valuable coaching moments is helping a team recognize that different CliftonStrengths domains can support the same expectation in different ways.

The goal is not identical behavior.

The goal is shared outcomes achieved through complementary contributions.

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9 The Team Leader's Role

RESEARCH INSIGHT

Across CliftonStrengths domains, people describe effective managers in remarkably similar ways. They offer support, build trust, provide autonomy, show empathy, communicate clearly, lead and inspire their teams, treat people fairly, recognize contributions, and create an environment where individuals can innovate and do their best work.

What a Coach Should Notice

Pay attention to how the team leader creates the conditions that allow team members to use their strengths effectively every day.

Leader Actions

Explore how the leader:

- clarifies expectations
- invites different perspectives
- distributes work fairly
- recognizes individual contributions
- supports autonomy
- addresses breakdowns promptly
- incorporates strengths in everyday conversations

Coaching Questions

- What conditions does the leader create for this team?
- How does the leader respond to different strengths?
- Which contributions receive the most recognition?
- Where does the team need more clarity or autonomy?
- How does the leader encourage challenge or respectful disagreement?
- How can CliftonStrengths become part of everyday work conversations?

Coaching Tip

Include the leader throughout the coaching process. Connect CliftonStrengths to current priorities, team relationships and working agreements instead of treating strengths as a separate initiative.

Sustainable team practices depend on consistent leadership behaviors. When a leader reinforces expectations through everyday actions, the team is far more likely to incorporate those behaviors into its culture.

COACHING NOTE

It is important to coach on both leadership and team behaviors. Teams struggle to establish healthy shared practices when the leader consistently models different expectations.

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PRACTICE ACTIVITY

Leader Habit Plan

End the conversation by helping the leader identify one small, consistent habit that reinforces the team's desired culture.

Ask the leader to select one weekly habit:

- ask one CliftonStrengths-related question during a team meeting
- recognize one specific contribution
- clarify one expectation or decision
- invite a perspective that is often missing
- revisit one team working agreement

Have the leader identify when the habit will occur, how they will practice it consistently and what evidence will show that it is making a difference.

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Closing Reflection for Coaches

Strengths coaching is not about creating perfect teams.

It is about helping people understand themselves, understand one another and work together more intentionally.

As you coach teams, ask yourself:

- What strengths language does this team already share?
- What conversations has this team not yet had?
- Where does this team need greater understanding before better performance is possible?
- How can I help team members see one another through a strengths lens?

The findings in *CliftonStrengths® and Team Experiences: Insights on Trust, Collaboration and Manager Impact* reinforce an important truth: Across CliftonStrengths domains, people generally agree on the best and worst aspects of teams and managers, yet individuals on the same team still notice and value different things about working together. CliftonStrengths helps explain why team members' perceptions differ and gives teams a shared language for understanding one another and doing their best work together.

Gallup research consistently shows that strengths-based development supports stronger engagement, performance and business outcomes.

As a strengths coach, your role is to help the teams you coach develop beyond strengths awareness. You help them translate their understanding of one another into shared expectations, stronger partnerships and everyday practices that improve how they work together. When teams understand how CliftonStrengths shapes their experiences, they are better equipped to build the trust and collaboration that support sustained team success.

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