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Working From Strengths to End Domestic Violence

How Strengths-Based Leadership Is Transforming
California's Domestic Violence Field

Michelle Gislason, CompassPoint Nonprofit Services
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strong field project

to end domestic violence

CompassPoint

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A project of Blue Shield of California Foundation, in collaboration with the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence, CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, Jemmott Rollins Group, and Women's Foundation of California.

CompassPoint Nonprofit Services provides the leadership development component of Blue Shield of California Foundation's Strong Field Project.

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About Strong Field Project

The Strong Field Project was a four-year initiative launched in 2010 by Blue Shield of California Foundation. Its aim: to build a strong, coordinated network of domestic violence service providers in the state.

Conceived at a time when domestic violence organizations across California were facing considerable economic hardship and closing down or cutting staff, the Strong Field Project sought to help the field chart a path to sustainability and innovation in the midst of challenges and uncertainty.

The Strong Field Project adopted a three-pronged approach to achieving these goals:

- Organizational strengths grants to domestic violence organizations to help them build their capacity in areas such as fund development, collaboration and restructuring, communications, technology, and evaluation.
- Networking and knowledge-sharing activities aimed at supporting California's domestic violence agencies to connect with each other and build a stronger field through convenings, trainings, and peer learning.
- The Leadership Development Program, which uses a strengths-based approach to develop the leadership and management skills of selected leaders from California domestic violence organizations.

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About the Authors

Michelle Gislason and Marissa Tirona co-designed, co-launched and co-led the Leadership Development Program of the Strong Field Project. Michelle is a Senior Project Director at CompassPoint Nonprofit Services where, among other things, she continues to lead the design, delivery, and evaluation of the Program. In early 2015, Marissa became the Director of Blue Shield Against Violence at the Blue Shield of California Foundation where she leads the Foundation's programmatic efforts to end domestic violence.

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Here Are My Strengths

W.O.M.A.N., Inc. has been a lifeline for survivors of domestic violence in San Francisco and the larger Bay Area since 1978, offering a 24-hour support line, counseling, legal assistance, and other services. In 2011, the agency's executive director unexpectedly left and W.O.M.A.N., Inc. found itself facing both a leadership vacuum and a fiscal crisis.

As the staff came together to try and find a way out of the crisis, they drew on the tenets of strengths-based leadership (see page 27 for more on the origins of this framework). "We all came in and said here are my strengths and this is what I can offer during this time of transition and crisis," said Jill Zawisza, who was serving as W.O.M.A.N., Inc.'s program director at the time. "The phrase, 'That is not my job,' never came up as everyone stepped in to do their part."

At the time, Zawisza was learning about strengths-based leadership as a participant in a leadership development program funded by Blue Shield of California Foundation for domestic violence service providers across the state.

"I think what Jill brought back from the leadership program was incredibly timely," said W.O.M.A.N., Inc.'s peer services manager, Mary Martinez. "She really was able to bring us together as a team. Even though it was a really hard time, we all supported each other and made sacrifices for the greater good."

Early on in the leadership program, Zawisza learned that **connectedness** was one of her personal strengths. "I like to reach out to others and do my work with the understanding that what one agency or one person does cannot stand alone," she explained.

Appointed to the interim director role for her agency, Zawisza used her connectedness strength to become an ambassador to the community on behalf of the agency. In meetings with the city, foundations, and individual donors, she was the public face of W.O.M.A.N., Inc. and reassured key stakeholders that it was still committed to its mission and would continue providing its vital services.



Image: W.O.M.A.N., Inc.

Connectedness: People with a strength for connectedness have faith in the links between all things and all people. They build bridges between people and events and believe that almost every event has a reason.

Another strength Zawisza relied on during this time was her interest in getting **input** from others. From the start, she knew she wanted to be a different kind of leader than those she had worked with during her career. She had seen directors take a “heroic leadership approach” that relied on the authority of their positional role, leaving them isolated with the weight of responsibility on their shoulders. Zawisza was convinced that shared leadership based on collective decision making was a better way forward, both for her and for the organization.

Input: People strong in the input theme have a craving to know more. Often they like to collect and archive all kinds of information.

Her belief was affirmed as she and the rest of the staff responded to the crisis. “The fact is, we all showed up in the wake of that crisis and I really felt there was a strong team working together with everyone stepping up in their unique way,” Zawisza said. As a result, the city and others continued to fund W.O.M.A.N., Inc., and the organization was able to obtain a bridge loan to pay off some of its debt. There was no disruption in service, and as of June 2014 the agency is completely debt-free.

Across the State of California, hundreds of leaders like Zawisza and her team at W.O.M.A.N., Inc. are working every day to address the problems and the trauma created by domestic violence. Their job—and in many cases, their life mission—is to help survivors and their families find their way to safety and justice. Day in and day out, they lead their agencies to provide emergency shelter, temporary housing, counseling, legal advocacy, and other critical services.

It is a field and a working environment that can produce substantial stress. Leaders, staff, and volunteers often report lurching from crisis to crisis; many experience the vicarious effects of trauma as they work closely with their agencies’ clients to help them cope.

Add to this the daily pressures of running a nonprofit agency—managing staff and volunteers, raising money, and meeting budgets in a tough funding environment—and it’s easy to understand why burnout among agency leaders is a major and continuing problem for the domestic violence field.

But a core of current and emerging leaders is showing it doesn’t have to be this way.

By focusing on personal strengths, both their own and those of their colleagues and clients, they are leading their agencies and the field with a new sense of possibility and purpose. Rather than focusing on problems, deficits, and weaknesses, these domestic violence agency leaders are learning how strengths-based leadership can lead to better performance (and less stress and burnout) for individuals, organizations, and the field.

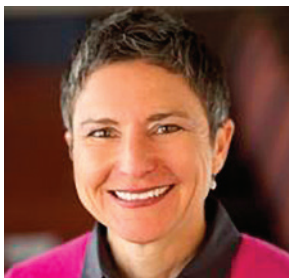
The strengths-based approach provides a pathway to change the paradigm of leadership in the domestic violence field. It is a change from relying on the heroic individual leader to embracing a shared leadership model. The emphasis is on cultivating the strengths of diverse teams and perhaps allowing leaders to achieve some semblance of work-life balance—which studies show is a priority for the millennial generation now entering their prime working years.¹

“We have moved from surviving to thriving as an agency, and a lot of that is because we are focusing on strengths,” said Laura Sunday, community services director with the Center For A Non-Violent Community in Tuolumne County.

About This Report

This report tells the story of how Blue Shield of California Foundation’s Strong Field Project is applying the principles of strengths-based leadership to support individual, organizational, and field-wide change in the domestic violence movement in California. The goals of the report are to:

- **Highlight the impacts of the strengths-based approach** at the heart of the Strong Field Project’s Leadership Development Program across three critical leadership domains: leading self, leading organizations, and leading a field.
- **Profile individual leaders** who have participated in the Leadership Development Program and share their stories of how focusing on strengths has fueled individual and organizational change.
- **Share tools and resources** on strengths and provide actionable ideas and guidance for others in the field, as well as nonprofits generally, about how to use strengths as a platform for ramping up effectiveness and impact.



“Strengths-based leadership has turned out to be one of the real gems of the Strong Field Project,” said Bess Bendet, former director of Blue Shield Against Violence at Blue Shield of California Foundation. “I believe it is shifting the field from a scarcity mindset and a bunker mentality to one where people are truly embracing the possibility of transformative change in what they can achieve as leaders, as organizations, and as a field.”

¹ See, for example, Terri Klass, Judy Lindenberger and Jean-Baptiste Marchais, “Next Generation Leaders: What They Want and Need from the Workplace,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, July 19, 2011 and *Ready to Lead: Next Generation Leaders Speak Out*, CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Meyer Foundation, and Idealist.org, 2008.

The StrengthsFinder assessment is a self-assessment quiz contained in Tom Rath's 2007 book, *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, which is published by Gallup Press.² After completing the quiz, participants receive five signature themes that help them understand the strengths they bring to their work and life.

Some of the strengths tools and assessments mentioned in the resource section of this report are free to take. The StrengthsFinder 2.0 assessment is not. In order to take this particular assessment you'll need to purchase the book *StrengthsFinder 2.0* which includes an online access code. Alternatively, you can purchase the online assessment only. Costs range from \$10-15 per person.

The authors do not have any monetary relationship with Gallup, the assessment, or with the author of *StrengthsFinder 2.0*. CompassPoint has been experimenting with strengths tools since 2001 and this is the tool that has been utilized most effectively as a complement to other Strong Field Project strengths activities. When you take the assessment, you are given your five strongest signature themes from the 34 strengths themes or common talents. Of course, we each have many more than five strengths, but results show our strongest themes which is where we are encouraged to focus.



² The Gallup Press catalog consists of more than 30 books on topics such as leadership, strengths, education, jobs, and well-being. Gallup books include *Strengths Based Leadership*, *How Full Is Your Bucket?*, and *StrengthsFinder 2.0*. Gallup®, Clifton StrengthsFinder®, Gallup Press®, Q12®, StrengthsFinder® and the 34 Clifton StrengthsFinder theme names are trademarks of Gallup, Inc. All other trademarks are property of their respective owners. StrengthsFinder theme names and their definitions have been adapted and referenced throughout this report with permission from Gallup, Inc.

From Strengths to Impact

The field of leadership development can be susceptible to fads as service providers, coaches, and others set out to apply the latest theories and approaches in their work with nonprofit and private-sector leaders. But strengths-based leadership has stood the test of time. Based on principles that have long been core in many disciplines (including grassroots organizing, community development, organizational change, counseling, restorative practices, and peer learning), it is an approach that maximizes the potential of people, organizations, and movements. The strengths-based approach also is grounded in extensive research by the Gallup Organization (see page 27).

Equally important, Blue Shield of California Foundation's Strong Field Project is showing that strengths-based leadership gets results. Today, the domestic violence movement in California is stronger and its current and emerging leaders are bringing new skills and increased confidence to the work of preventing and ending domestic violence. An important factor in these changes is that the movement and its leaders are working from strengths.

"Strengths-based leadership has really taken off in the field. It's given us a common language, and it's recognized now as one of the foundational building blocks for creating new approaches to how we do things, and getting better results for the people and the communities we serve," said Matt Huckabay, executive director of the Center for Violence-Free Relationships in Placerville.

A Transformative Approach

As it was preparing to launch the Strong Field Project, Blue Shield of California Foundation contracted with CompassPoint Nonprofit Services to design a customized Leadership Development Program for current and emerging leaders of California domestic violence organizations. From the start, CompassPoint made strengths-based leadership a core focus of the program.

As of 2014, the Leadership Development Program had enrolled three cohorts of domestic violence agency leaders from across California. Participants take part in an 18-month program of in-person convenings, coaching, webinars, performance assessments, and other activities. They are selected through a competitive application process; each cohort has included approximately 20 veteran and emerging leaders from across the state.

Key Components of the Leadership Development Program

- Kick-off Retreat
- In-person Gatherings
- Webinars
- Facilitated Peer Learning Groups
- 360-Degree Assessment Tool
- Professional Development Funds
- Organization Integration and Individual Leadership Coaching
- Organization Learning Projects
- Organizational Retreats
- Online Community
- Alumni Convenings
- Travel and Participation Stipends

Leadership Competencies



Focusing on strengths, of course, was hardly a foreign concept in the domestic violence field at the time of the launch of the Strong Field Project. For years, staff and volunteers at these agencies had been using strengths-based approaches in their work with clients. The field long ago rejected the notion of blaming survivors of domestic violence for their problems and setting out to “correct” their behaviors. Rather, the field rose up as a response to “victim blaming,” and advocates and social workers regularly help clients identify and use their strengths as a platform for achieving resilience.

However, while leaders and workers in the field were regularly using strengths-based approaches (whether they called them that or not) in their work with clients,

they rarely, if ever, used the same approaches to support their own resilience and personal and professional growth. By making strengths a focus of the Leadership Development Program for the Strong Field Project, CompassPoint was helping the field do for itself what it already does for clients, and giving agency leaders the tools and strategies for doing so.

Evaluation Shows Impact

A comprehensive evaluation of the Strong Field Project found that it has been “significantly influential” in achieving positive outcomes for individuals, organizations, and California’s entire domestic violence field. The evaluation also identified the Leadership Development Program’s emphasis on strengths-based leadership as a key factor in the overall impact of the Strong Field Project.

Hanh Cao Yu, who led the evaluation team for Social Policy Research Associates (SPR), said strengths-based leadership has been “transformative” for the field. “The strengths-based leadership approach plays a central role in the outcomes that we uncovered,” Yu stated.

According to Yu, SPR’s evaluation showed the powerful effects of the Leadership Development Program as early as six months into the initial cohort’s work; as of late 2014, the program had enrolled three cohorts and a fourth was launching. With data from the first two cohorts in hand, SPR was able to paint an even more definitive picture of the positive effect of the program, including its focus on strengths-based leadership.

Yu pointed to SPR data showing that 63 percent of domestic violence leaders across the state (including participants and non-participants in the Leadership Development Program) rated it as the most impactful of the three Strong Field Project components.

Bess Bendet, former director of Blue Shield Against Violence at Blue Shield of California Foundation, said the evaluation results affirm what she has observed in her conversations and her travels throughout the state.

“Everything we are hearing is that strengths-based leadership is making a profound difference in how people and organizations are doing their work in communities across the state,” Bendet said. “There has been a noticeable shift in how the field is operating and in how its leaders are working together to have more impact at all levels.”

Bendet added that the Blue Shield of California Foundation has been so impressed with the impact of strengths-based leadership in the Strong Field Project that the foundation is now using strengths internally with its own staff.

SPR’s interviews, together with the interviews conducted for this report, turn up countless examples of how strengths-based leadership has supported Leadership Development Program participants and their organizations to improve their performance and results. In the following pages, we highlight the impacts of strengths-based leadership across three core leadership domains: leading self, leading others and organizations, and leading the field.

The Impacts of Strengths-Based Leadership in the Strong Field Project

On Individuals ...

- Leaders of domestic violence agencies in California are becoming more confident, delegating more, and recommitting to their jobs and their leadership roles.
- Leaders are shifting work behaviors to focus on strengths so they become more productive and more effective.
- Leaders are taking on new responsibilities and advancing in their careers.

On Organizations ...

- Leaders are working smarter with teams to make the most of everybody’s collective strengths.
- Organizations are supporting their staffs to apply their strengths so they can improve overall performance and morale, while increasing innovation.
- Organizations are applying a strengths frame in hiring and are building staff teams that bring diverse strengths to bear on the challenges at the heart of their work.

- Organizations are employing a consistent, strengths-based focus in their work with clients and staff.

On the Field ...

- The field is tapping into a group of current and emerging leaders who are working from strengths to step into field-wide leadership positions.
- New leaders in local and statewide networks are bringing fresh ideas and challenging established norms to advance the field.

From Strengths to Impact: Leading Self

June Earley is using strengths to take risks and navigate change.



June Earley is director of client services with Safe Alternatives for Everyone (SAFE), a small domestic violence agency with a staff of six serving an area southwest of Los Angeles that includes rural and suburban communities. A Chicago native, Earley was drawn to the domestic violence field while living with her husband on a military base where she witnessed abusive relationships among some of her closest friends; she later went on to pursue a social work degree.

“The views around the military and the support of military families were very different then,” she said. “Now there’s more awareness and more individuals have found their voices to say, ‘We want to have fair and equitable relationships where everyone is safe.’”

As the number-two person at SAFE, Earley is responsible for supervising case management staff, writing grants, and coordinating community outreach. She said SAFE has gone through a variety of changes in staffing and programs over the last few years, and that strengths-based leadership has helped her manage and lead with added confidence and purpose. “I was able to lean into my **adaptability** strength to usher in new policies and help build buy-in among the staff so we could move in the direction we needed,” she said.

“Strengths-based leadership made perfect sense to me because your strengths undergird everything you do,” Earley added. “It gives you something very tangible and positive to carry with you—and it gives you the confidence to look at a task and say, ‘I can do this.’”

Earley also has been able to lean into her strength as a **learner** to explore new ways for SAFE to strengthen and broaden the services it provides to clients and the community. Since participating in the Strong Field Project’s Leadership Development Program, she has led a process to develop a new program at the agency to train mental health workers to become advocates for domestic violence survivors.

Adaptability: People strong in the adaptability theme are very flexible and can stay productive when the demands of work are pulling them in many different directions. They tend to be “now” people who take things as they come and discover the future one day at a time.

Learner: People with a strong learner theme have a great desire to learn and want to continuously improve. In particular, the process of learning, rather than the outcome, excites them.

In addition, Earley pushed to make strengths a core element of SAFE's youth programming. Now, teens involved in SAFE's violence prevention programs complete the StrengthsFinder 2.0 assessment and practice their five StrengthsFinder themes throughout the year.

"That has been a truly empowering and eye-opening experience for these young people," Earley said. "The next step I want to see is for the whole staff and board to complete the StrengthsFinder and to see SAFE make an agency-wide commitment to develop and lead through strengths," she added.

Battling Burnout and Trauma Through Strengths

Strengths-based leadership is supporting domestic violence agency leaders like Earley to lift their sights of who they are and what they can achieve in their lives and careers. It's an approach well-suited to a working environment often marked by high levels of stress and a sense of powerlessness against recurring violence.

"This work is about helping people find stability and safety at a time when their lives are literally on the edge, and that creates a dynamic where you are always feeling you should be doing more," said Leadership Development Program participant Elizabeth Eastlund, who is program director at Rainbow Services, a domestic violence agency in San Pedro. "Frankly, there is not a lot of time for paying attention to organizational and individual needs. It's all about the latest crisis."

What's more, the trauma that agency leaders, staff, and volunteers witness on a day-to-day basis among clients can create trauma closer to home. "These agencies can be enormously hard places to work," said Rich Snowdon, who provides one-on-one coaching to participants in the Leadership Development Program. "When you are working around trauma all the time, vicarious or secondary trauma kicks in and it is easy for your energy to dry up."

What is Vicarious Trauma? The vicarious trauma experienced by many domestic violence agency staff members results from hearing about and helping survivors manage trauma. It is also referred to as "secondary trauma" or "empathic strain." In her book, *Trauma Stewardship*, Laura van Dernoot Lipsky, a former social worker, says it comes from being unable to live with the knowledge that, despite our best efforts, most of the world's suffering goes "unnoticed and unattended." Unlike burnout, symptoms of vicarious trauma can impact a person on many levels: cognitive, emotional, behavioral, spiritual, interpersonal, and physical. Burnout, on the other hand, is not typically correlated with trauma and can be remedied by time off, a change in jobs, re-engagement in work that emphasizes strengths rather than weaknesses, or immersion in a hobby.

Resources: *Trauma Stewardship* by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky and Connie Burk
<http://traumastewardship.com/the-book/inside-the-book/>

Sharon Turner, director of prevention with STAND! For Families Free of Violence in Concord in Contra Costa County, said vicarious trauma is a fact of life for many of her agency's workers. "We continue to see staff take on issues of being a victim and some even take on issues of being a perpetrator of violence to the extent that they aren't able to help clients solve their problems," she said.

The combination of resource constraints, a crisis focus, and secondary trauma leads to high levels of burnout among domestic violence agency leaders and staff.

Program Combines Strengths, Coaching, and Self-Care

The Strong Field Project Leadership Development Program sets out to support participants to beat burnout and limit the stress and secondary trauma associated with their jobs. The program does this by using a strengths frame to build self-awareness and self-confidence among participants, while reconnecting them to the aspects of their work that they find rewarding and fulfilling.

As they prepare for the Leadership Development Program's kick-off retreat, participants create a "leadership life map" and complete the online StrengthsFinder 2.0 assessment.³

Maricela Rios-Faust, chief operations officer with Human Options in Orange County, said completing the StrengthsFinder assessment and the leadership life map was an eye-opening experience. "I found that my leadership life map really validated the results from the StrengthsFinder. A lot of the same things came up in both, like my interest in learning from others. And what shifted for me was realizing that these are strengths and talents that give me real energy and enthusiasm, and I need to try and do more of those things or else I will continue to be burned out."

Following the kick-off retreat, participants engage in a 360-degree assessment that includes feedback from colleagues, stakeholders, and clients. At this time, they start working with a coach to sort through the StrengthsFinder results and the 360-degree assessment findings, while also developing a set of learning goals to guide their participation in the Leadership Development Program. During their 18 months in the program, participants get up to 12 hours of individualized coaching, either over the phone or face-to-face.

Mary Martinez, peer services manager at W.O.M.A.N., Inc. in San Francisco, said her sessions with her coach have been "crucial" in helping her become more comfortable with her strengths. "I am more of a thinker versus someone who speaks up a lot, and the coaching is helping me figure out how to use that as a strength," she said.

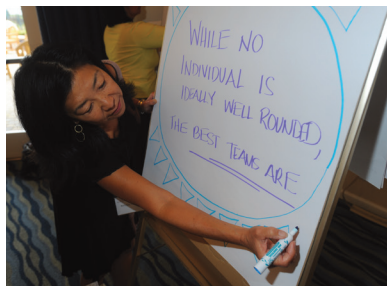
³ For the leadership life map, participants in the Leadership Development Program use words, symbols, and drawings to paint a picture of their leadership life – e.g., what their role is in their organizations, how they got there, and significant events along the way.

Wendy Horikoshi, who has coached in the nonprofit world since the late 1990s with a focus on leaders of color, said the emphasis on strengths-based leadership makes the Strong Field Project's Leadership Development Program "very unique and very rich." She added, "These people enter the coaching with a high level of self-awareness and a real enthusiasm for strengths and how to apply it in their work and their lives."

In addition to strengths, another key theme in the program is self-care; participants even engage in physical practice, such as *tai ji*, as a part of social change in the course of their work together. Said Horikoshi: "What these leaders start to realize as they think more intentionally about self-care is that if they are more compassionate toward themselves vis-à-vis how they want to live and work, then they can be better providers and more compassionate toward others."

Strong Field Project Evaluation Findings: Leading Self

- SPR's evaluation found that participants in cohorts one and two of the Leadership Development Program reported **significant gains in self-awareness** as a result of the program; the percent reporting self-awareness jumped from 46 percent to 86 percent.
- The following is a typical comment from a participant: "During my participation, I truly became more aware of myself and understood exactly what leadership really meant. I also realized what type of leader I wanted to become."
- Similarly, 93 percent of participants reported **increased self-confidence** across multiple leadership competencies after participating in the program, up from 74 percent before the program. "Participation in the Leadership Development Program has given me the confidence to engage in leadership roles that I didn't think I could participate in 18 months ago," said one participant.
- Participants shared numerous examples showing how their increased leadership capacity led to **promotions and increased responsibility** within their organizations. For example, at least four participants in cohort two received promotions or formal shifts in their job titles during their participation in the program.



From Strengths to Impact: Leading Organizations

Maricela Rios-Faust is using strengths to build an intentional culture of learning and growth in her organization.

Maricela Rios-Faust joined the staff of Human Options in Orange County after working in gang prevention and child abuse. In her earlier work, she recognized that domestic violence was a common thread in the challenges facing young people and parents, and she saw the job with Human Options as a great next step in her career. Her role as chief operations officer is unusual in the field; she shares leadership with the executive director who founded the organization in 1981.



After participating in the first cohort of Strong Field Project, Rios-Faust organized a half-day retreat for her agency's supervisors and directors where everyone completed the leadership life map and StrengthsFinder assessment.

"That was a transformative experience for a lot of people, and then we took it to the entire staff," she said. "We have had a fair amount of turnover because we are trying to align strengths with the job descriptions of various positions. For example, we had one person doing human resources and finance, and we recognized that those jobs require entirely different strengths and skillsets. Now we have separated those positions and we have two phenomenal people who are perfect in each one."

Rios-Faust added: "Working on strengths has re-grounded me in what is important to me: learning and developing people and making sure everyone is in the seat they need to be in to make our agency successful. I have found there are ways to use my **relator** strength and my **developer** strength to try and bring people along at a pace that works for everyone."



Rios-Faust's former colleague at Human Options, Vincent Marquez, was a participant in the third cohort of the Strong Field Project. Marquez, who oversaw the agency's emergency shelter, said he was initially a little skeptical of the StrengthsFinder assessment and wondered what he could learn from a multiple-choice quiz about himself. But over time, he said he has changed the way he works with his team at the shelter because of his new understanding of strengths-based leadership. Some of the StrengthsFinder themes he has brought to bear in working with his team: **strategic, input, harmony, and positivity**.

"I love innovation and being forward-thinking and bringing people together to work on a great project together," Marquez said.

Rios-Faust added that she is now much more comfortable and confident having difficult conversations to move the organization forward. One such conversation was with the Human Options CEO about the challenges inherent in their shared leadership of the organization. “That conversation really opened things up between us and has helped us build a genuine partnership where we are both working from strengths,” she said.

Relator: Enjoys close relationships with others and finds deep satisfaction in working hard with friends to achieve a goal.

Developer: The ability to recognize and cultivate the potential in others. Can spot the signs of each small improvement and derive satisfaction from these improvements.

Strategic: Creates alternative ways to proceed. Faced with any given scenario, can quickly spot the relevant patterns and issues.

Harmony: Seeks consensus and areas of agreement.

Positivity: Has an enthusiasm that is contagious. Upbeat and can get others excited about what comes next.

Welcoming Strengths in a “Culture of Scarcity”

To understand why strengths-based leadership has struck a chord with domestic violence agency leaders like Rios-Faust and Marquez, it is important to remember what was happening in (and to) their organizations as the Strong Field Project got under way in 2010. In 2009, then-Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger eliminated what was left of the state’s support for domestic violence agencies. On average, the agencies that received funding from the state lost \$200,000 each. This, in turn, forced them to close or lay off staff and mobilize emergency fundraising and advocacy campaigns.

Like many other nonprofits, domestic violence agencies had long operated in what Bess Bendet (formerly of Blue Shield of California Foundation) called a “culture of scarcity”: there was never enough money or time to do everything that needed to be done. The 2009 budget cuts only added to the sense that the field was overburdened and under-resourced. While the same could be said of many nonprofit organizations, the fact that domestic violence agencies are striving to respond in real time to urgent crises in people’s lives makes their resource constraints that much more frustrating and demoralizing for agency leaders and their staff members.

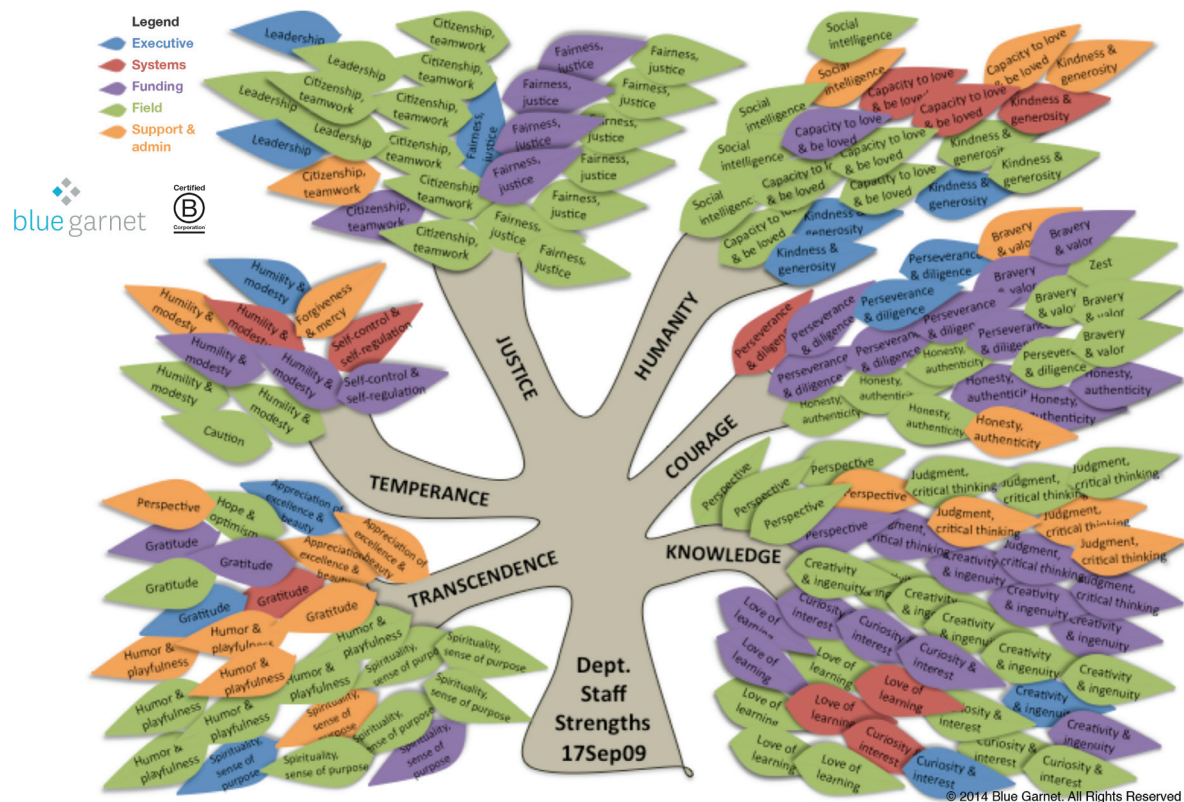
A survey by the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence found that on one day in 2012, California’s domestic violence agencies provided services to 5,258 survivors and their children. On that same day, 1,170 requests for services went unmet, largely due to a lack of resources.

“A Common Language” for Strengthening Organizations

The Strong Field Project’s Leadership Development Program supports participants to build strong, innovative organizations. As noted above, the initial focus of the program is on “leading self,” as participants identify their personal strengths and explore how to bring those strengths to bear to become stronger leaders. As the program goes on, however, the focus shifts. In peer learning groups, in-person and online discussions, and projects where they apply what they are learning to the work of their organizations, participants begin to learn how to use strengths to lead (and lead with) others. Even as they benefit from one-on-one coaching, for example, participants also receive training in how to coach colleagues.

As they bring the principles of strengths-based leadership back to their organizations, participants start to work with colleagues to align people’s jobs with their strengths. The focus: maximizing the strengths that agency staff collectively bring to the work of ending domestic violence.

“A lot of this is about looking across a team or an organization at your collective strengths,” said Marquez. “That has been enormously valuable for us, because you see that even if you do not have a strength in a particular area there may be someone else who does.”



The above image provides an organizational strengths tree from a team mapping exercise facilitated by Blue Garnet. Using a visual map of roles and strengths, they facilitated a reflective conversation on questions such as: Where do our roles and strengths intersect? Where do we balance each other out? Are there gaps on our team? How does our unique mix of strengths factor into our culture and the “feel” of everyday team life? As homework, Blue Garnet gave 360° feedback to every team member on what contributions they value and what they need from each other, looking forward, to achieve positive deviance in performance. For more information, [click here](#).

“Working from strengths has given us a common language,” said Laura Sunday, community services director at the Center For A Non-Violent Community in Tuolumne County, which lies in the Sierra Nevada foothills. “We can focus on what our talents are, and it makes it easier for people to acknowledge when something is not one of their strengths.”

Sunday added that staff members at the center re-drafted job descriptions based on the strengths needed for their jobs, and the leadership team has moved people to different roles in an effort to match strengths to positions. In addition, staff members from different departments now work on projects together based on strengths.

“We used to be very compartmentalized—for example, outreach was something that only the advocacy team did. Now, we think about who in the organization is good at the components of outreach, and we form a project team,” Sunday said.

To support the adaptation of a strengths-based leadership approach, participants in the third cohort of the Leadership Development Program were able to apply for a day-long organizational retreat where their staff received training in strengths. In addition, a majority of the third cohort chose to use their organizational coaching and learning grants to bring strengths-based leadership into their organizations.

Strong Field Project Evaluation Findings: Leading Organizations

- The SPR research found that as participants in the Leadership Development Program have learned to lead themselves more effectively, they also are “developing **better techniques to lead others** and their organizations.”
- The researchers found that the application of tools from the Leadership Development Program was the most frequently cited impact of the project on organizations. After participating in the program, 96 percent of participants reported that they were **able to work effectively** with teams they supervise, up from 83 percent before the program.
- Furthermore, there were notable increases in the percent of participants reporting **strengths in areas that are critical to organizational success and sustainability**, such as finance (63 to 88 percent) and fund development (60 to 95 percent).
- While just 61 percent of participants reported that they knew how to **apply a multicultural lens** to their leadership and work before the program, this number rose to 89 percent following their participation in the program.



From Strengths to Impact: Leading the Field

Sharon Turner is using strengths to step up to a field-wide leadership role.

Sharon Turner has served on the staff at STAND! For Families Free of Violence in Contra Costa County since 1994. Before joining the agency, she worked in international development and community organizing in regions including Africa, Latin America, and urban America.

“As I did this work around the world, a common denominator was that women in many of these communities were invisible and you would regularly hear stories of women being beaten. Coming from a position of privilege as an American, it was a slow awakening over time to the plight of women around the world,” she said.

As director of prevention and a member of the senior management team at STAND!, Turner oversees a variety of programs aimed at stopping violence before it starts. An example is Youth Education and Support Services (YESS), which works with teen boys and girls in the city of Richmond to explore the dynamics of teen dating violence.

“A lot of my work right now is focused on schools. The theory is that the earlier you can model different behaviors and teach bystander courage, the better you will do in keeping these kids on track,” Turner said.

With eight staff members reporting directly to her, Turner said she finds herself leading in a new way since being exposed to strengths. “It is now more about working with colleagues and asking people the kinds of questions that allow them to come up with the answers,” she said.

Turner also has found herself stepping into a field-wide leadership role since participating in the Leadership Development Program. In early 2014, she presented a “Power Talk” at the Strong Field Project Institute where she drew on her **futuristic** strength to paint a picture of the future of the domestic violence movement in the state. Today, Turner also serves on various committees and task forces at the county and state levels and recently chaired the board of directors of the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence.

Futuristic: Inspired by the future and what could be. People with this theme inspire others with their visions of the future.

“I believe that the focus on strengths is helping all of us start to have the conversations we need to have to build stronger agencies and a stronger field,” she said.

A Time of Transition for the Field

California's domestic violence movement was roughly 30 years old at the time of the launch of the Strong Field Project; the first shelters for battered women opened their doors in the early to mid-1970s. Because many agencies have been under the same leadership since they were established, the field is facing a time of generational change.

"When you think of the life stages of these organizations, a lot of them have tenured leaders who are thinking about retirement, and there is an urgent interest in attracting and developing that next generation of leaders who can help lead these agencies and the field for the next 30 years," said Bendet.

Report Shows Power of Focusing on Strengths for Providers and Survivors

How do survivors of domestic violence define "success" for themselves? That's the primary question behind a wide-ranging project in California. Launched in 2012 by the Full Frame Initiative (FFI) with funding from Blue Shield of California Foundation, the project included conversations with more than 150 survivors and 185 practitioners working with survivors, during 46 workshops across the state. Among the key findings: survivors and practitioners define survivor success differently, and understanding those differences is a key step toward improving the services and support the field provides.

The project showed that the definition of success and positive achievement for survivors is not necessarily connected to leaving or changing an abusive relationship. Rather, survivors see success in their connection to family and friends, through creating value for themselves and others, and "moments of normalcy."

By contrast, practitioners generally said that success for survivors was integrally tied to their identity as "survivors" and characterized by transformative or "breakthrough" moments.

Seen through the lens of strengths, the project reinforces the power—for survivors and practitioners alike—of focusing less on deficits and problems and more on assets and achievements. According to a 2014 project report, "The findings do call into question the wisdom of holding tightly onto a service delivery system that requires people to identify, first and foremost, with a singular problem instead of allowing them to show their whole selves, and that emphasizes help from formal systems as the primary path to success."

"When you start with problems you get programs. When you start with strengths you get possibilities." – Lupe Serrano, former ED of Casa de Esperanza

For the full report, go to <http://fullframeinitiative.org/how-do-survivors-define-success-report-recommendations/>

Identifying and developing leaders who are more reflective of the populations they serve is critical to the movement's effectiveness and impact in the years ahead. As of 2012, white people made up just under 39 percent of the California population; Latinos and Latinas were 39 percent, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders were 13 percent, and African Americans were 5.8 percent. The domestic violence field, however, traditionally has been led by white women. Additionally, while men also experience domestic violence, there are very few male staff in these agencies.

Another priority for the field is supporting leaders to come together to explore new and innovative approaches to ending domestic violence. In the 30 years since the California domestic violence field has taken shape, the problems of violence have not gone away. Today, more than 1 in 3 women in the United States have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetimes, and approximately 15.5 million children are exposed to domestic violence every year.⁴ The seemingly intractable nature of the problem has prompted more agencies to emphasize prevention as a core focus, while exploring new strategies, such as trauma-informed care, in their work with clients. But the capacity of these agencies to try new things hinges on the openness of leaders and staff to change.

"The truth is we have grown out of some of the ways we provide service," said Sharon Turner. "Things have changed and if we can't adapt through the use of new approaches and new service delivery models, then we aren't going to be able to really move the needle on these problems." Strengths, Turner added, supports leaders to develop the confidence and the skills they need to innovate and explore new solutions.



⁴ "Domestic and Sexual Violence Fact Sheet," National Network to End Domestic Violence, 2013.
http://nnedv.org/downloads/Census/DVCounts2013/DVSA_Factsheet.pdf

Broadening Field Leadership Through Strengths

The Strong Field Project Leadership Development Program is achieving field-wide impact by supporting a cadre of current and emerging leaders to gain the self-confidence and the skills they need to step into field-wide leadership positions and advance new strategies and solutions for ending domestic violence. (See sidebar for statistics on how many participants in the program have assumed field leadership roles.)

As of 2015, 12 out of 20 board members of the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence are alumni of the Leadership Development Program. 75% of CPEDV's board leadership are program alumni.

The program also has adopted a deliberate approach to scaling its impact on the field—in part, by implementing a train-the-trainer program for participants. Designed to help create a core of domestic violence leaders with the ability to bring strengths to more agencies across the state, the train-the-trainer program is open to all alumni of the program. Initially, participants teamed up with CompassPoint staff to co-deliver strength-based training to organizations whose leaders were enrolled in the third cohort of the Leadership Development Program.

The Strong Field Project's Leadership Development Program also achieves field-wide impact by supporting a new generation of leaders to step into leadership roles both inside and outside their organizations. While the first cohort of the program was comprised primarily of executive directors, the following two cohorts admitted emerging leaders as well. Evidence of the program's success in reaching an emerging pool of leaders shows up in many places, including the age data on the three cohorts. Where the average age was 45 in cohort one, it dropped to 41 in cohort two and to 38 in cohort three.

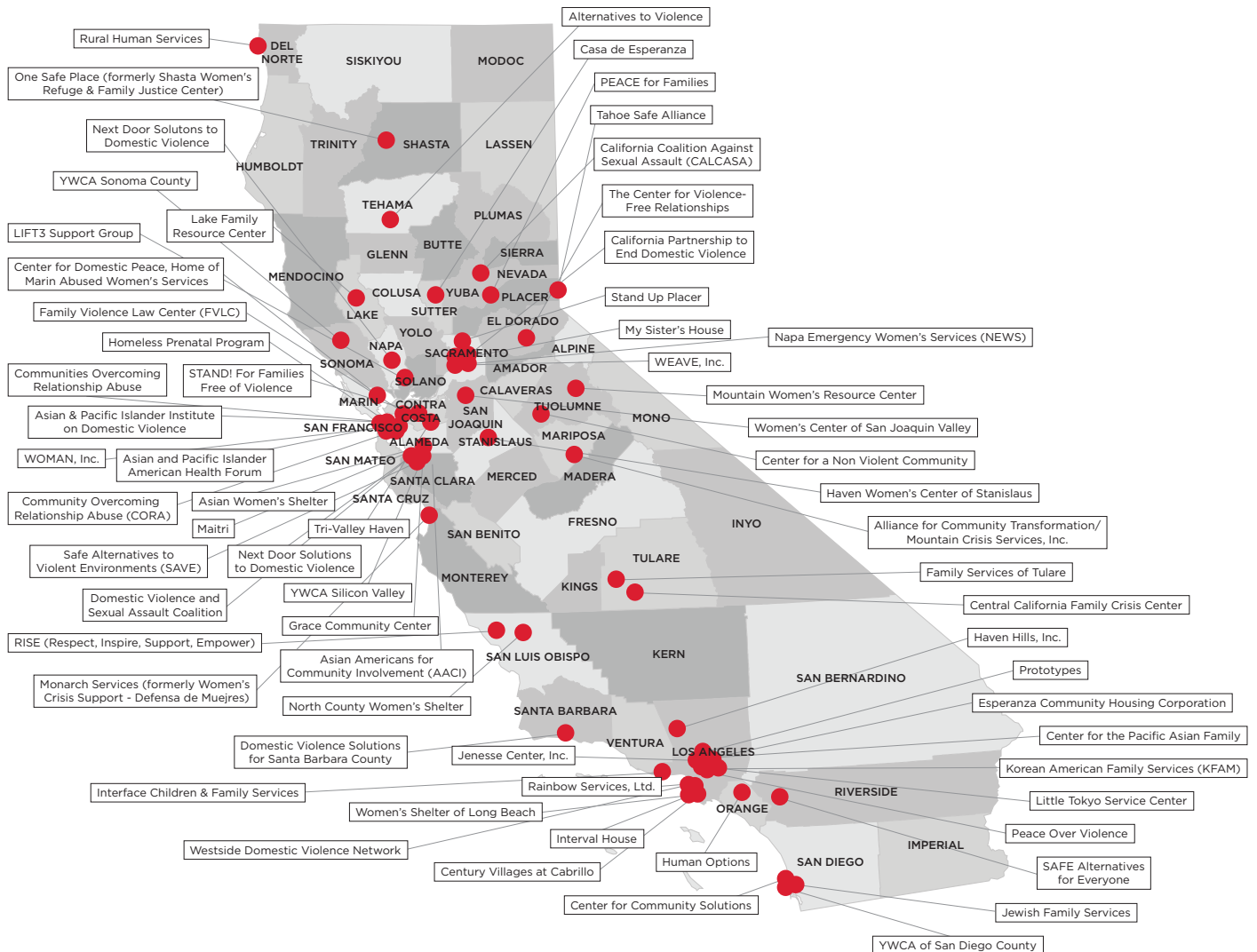
The cohorts also have become increasingly diverse as the program has gone on, with broader multicultural representation and more participants from inland and rural communities in addition to urban and coastal areas. Leaders of color, in fact, increased from 40 percent of cohort one to 65 percent of cohort three.

Vincent Marquez, a participant in cohort three, said the diversity of the group has added to the positive impact on participants. "We really learn a lot from each other because we are coming at the work from so many different perspectives," he said.

While diversity has increased in the Leadership Development Program, there is still a lot of work to do. Priorities for the future include ensuring representation from transgender and queer communities, providing access to those for whom English is not a first language, and addressing the question of men and their role in the field.

Leadership Development Program

Cohorts I, II, III and IV Organizations



© 2014 CompassPoint Nonprofit Services. CompassPoint provides the leadership development component of Blue Shield of California Foundation's Strong Field Project.

Strong Field Project Evaluation Findings: Leading the Field

- SPR asked leaders and practitioners how the field had changed since the start of the Strong Field Project in 2010—and the top two answers were related to stronger leadership:
 - 91 percent of respondents agreed there was now **a larger critical mass of domestic violence leaders** than in 2010.
 - 96 percent agreed that **collaborative and individual leadership is now stronger** in the California domestic violence field than in 2010.
- SPR also found **significant gains in local and state leadership in the domestic violence field among participants** in the Leadership Development Program.
- Overall, **60 percent of alumni reported holding leadership positions** in local, regional, and statewide networks; for the first two cohorts, the number of participants holding these leadership positions jumped by about 15 percent.
- Twelve program participants have become board members of the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence during the course of their involvement in the Leadership Development Program. Today, **a majority of the board members of the partnership are alumni** of the Leadership Development Program.
- Said one participant: “The Leadership Development Program has brought out new leaders in the field who haven’t been active in the statewide networks until [the Strong Field Project].”



Image: Ben Felsing



The Origins of Strengths

In 2001, the Gallup Organization, relying on years of public opinion polling and management studies, produced a book documenting the power and the potential of a “strengths-based” approach to individual and organizational development.

The premise of strengths-based leadership, advanced by authors Marcus Buckingham, Donald O. Clifton, and later Tom Rath, is that identifying and “fixing” weaknesses—the traditional approach to improving workplace performance—doesn’t deliver the best results. Rather, the strengths-based approach posits that the best way to develop people is to help them identify and “maximize” their unique and natural talents.

Strengths, of course, wasn’t entirely new when Gallup published the bestselling *Now, Discover Your Strengths* in 2001. For years, people had adopted “asset-based” approaches to individual and organizational development. Feminist theory, for example, was based on the belief that women would overcome gender inequality by embracing their own value and strengths. Similarly, the civil rights and immigrant rights movements have long called on communities of color and socially marginalized groups to acknowledge and build on their inherent strengths (such as community connections and social capital). And “appreciative inquiry” emerged in the 1990s as a way to shift businesses, organizations, and systems from a problem-solving focus to one where people are identifying and building on strengths to get to a desired future.

CompassPoint’s Embrace of Strengths

CompassPoint Nonprofit Services had been working on strengths-based approaches to leadership development for more than a decade when it became involved in the Strong Field Project. CompassPoint’s work on strengths grew from research in the late 1990s and early 2000s that showed the nonprofit sector was losing significant numbers of leaders and potential leaders to burnout. Nonprofit leaders and staff were overwhelmed by the burdens of fundraising, meeting budgets, and managing staff, volunteers, boards, and other stakeholders—and the fact that they were doing all of this for little in return added to their frustration.

In 2001, for example, CompassPoint’s original *Daring to Lead* study found that high stress, long hours, and concern about agency finances were major stress factors for nonprofit executive directors.⁵

“In the nonprofit sector, the sense has been that you are here to serve and to sacrifice in order to help people,” said Rich Snowdon, the leadership coach who first incorporated strengths-based approaches into CompassPoint’s training and coaching programs and is now a coach with the Strong Field Project. “It is a culture where leaders are not supposed to be seen; the

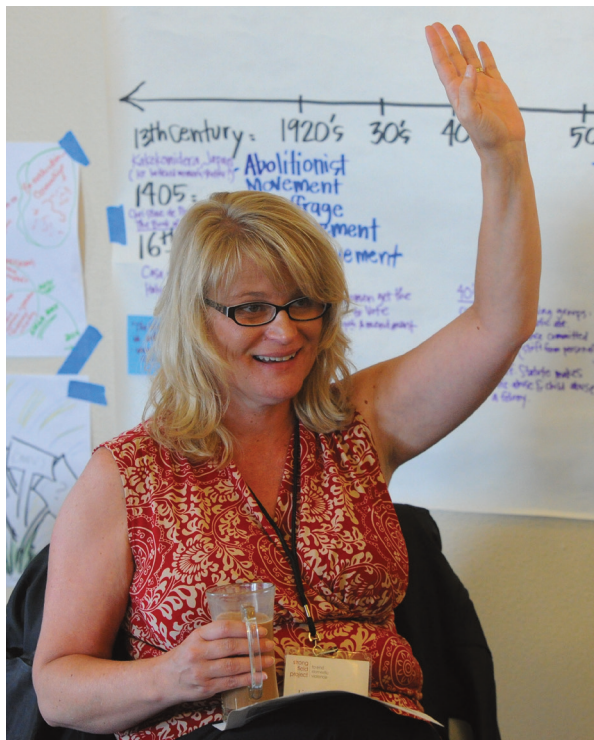
⁵ Cornelius, M., Moyers, R., and Peters, B., *Daring to Lead: A National Study of Nonprofit Executive Leadership*, CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, 2011. <http://daringtolead.org/wp-content/uploads/Daring-to-Lead-2011-Main-Report-online.pdf>

mission is what matters. And what that does is it pushes people to a mode of scarcity thinking and a focus on problems, not strengths.”

Snowdon recalls becoming interested in strengths-based leadership shortly after Gallup came out with its research in 2001. Before long, he was experimenting with applying a strengths lens in the training and coaching he was doing for CompassPoint clients. “From the very start, I could see how the strengths approach really brought people back to life,” he said. “It gets them out of the burnout mindset and they start to see the resources they have inside themselves that they have not been using and that they can start using right away to perform better and feel better about their work.”

In 2004, Snowdon teamed up with Michelle Gislason, one of the authors of this report, to develop and present a workshop series, *Thriving as an Executive Director*, that incorporated the principles of strengths-based leadership. Over time, CompassPoint asked participants in the *Thriving* series and other leadership programs to take the StrengthsFinder 2.0 assessment in Tom Rath’s 2007 book of the same title. CompassPoint even began to use StrengthsFinder and strengths-based leadership training for its own staff team.

CompassPoint recognized early on that strengths is not solely a way to improve individual performance; it also is a tool for improving the performance of teams and entire systems. StrengthsFinder, for example, is explicitly designed to help teams and organizations identify the strengths that members collectively bring to their work and subsequently to determine strengths that should be a priority for recruiting to create an even stronger team.



Conclusion

“Nothing can dim the light that shines from within.” —Maya Angelou

For decades, almost intuitively, leaders in the domestic violence field have been using a strengths-based approach with clients with profound results. Even a mental model shift has occurred – shifting from the notion of domestic violence “victims” to domestic violence *survivors*. Instead of pointing out perceptions of weaknesses and deficits through the lens of judgment, the domestic violence field has long celebrated the individual strengths and collective assets of individuals who have experienced violence. By tapping into survivors’ core strengths, courage, and inner power, leaders in the domestic violence field have partnered with countless individuals and their families as they find their way to safety and justice. These leaders know that healthy and sustainable relationships with their clients are built through a strengths-based methodology. With strengths as the foundation, leaders create the space for survivors to become the very best version of themselves.

Now, as you have just finished reading, an emerging current of leaders is asking the field a deceptively simple yet revolutionary question: “What if we took the same strengths-based approach we use with our clients and used it with our *own* staff?” The results of following through on this line of inquiry have been powerful. The courageous leaders of the domestic violence movement have transformed, shifting their work behavior to better deal with the burnout and vicarious trauma often embedded in this difficult work, and, organizationally, are moving away from a culture of scarcity.

Therefore, the challenge for the field and its supporters is to continue to practice and resource these efforts. As a movement, let us continue to take the same strengths-based approach with ourselves and our staff as we do with our clients. The field is discovering that when they leverage their own assets, they are better equipped to harness the assets of those they serve. We are arriving at a critical mass of leaders who truly want to double-down on the strengths initiative, and who want to see this become the norm not only for their organizations, but for all organizations and their communities. The call to action is to continue to build this momentum and ingrain it more deeply in the domestic violence movement and across movements as well.

Resources

To that end, we would like to share numerous resources available for individuals and organizations wanting to learn more about strengths-based leadership, and also for those who already have experience with strengths and want to go to the next level. Whether you are in the domestic violence field or not, we recommend the following resources. We find that developing talents and strengths keeps paying off year after year—for individuals, for their organizations, and for the communities they serve.

And here is the caveat: We like to think of the strengths-based approach as a way of being, not just a collection of interesting tips. It is an orientation, rather than a destination. So, here is a question for you to consider: Given what you know about yourself, what's the most effective way for you to continue developing yourself? It might be reading, videos, interviewing people, putting together a success team for mutual support and challenge, teaching others what you want to learn yourself, putting your strengths to work in situations where people need what you have to offer, all of the above, or something new that you invent and then pass on to the rest of us. We also want to acknowledge that many of the resources below are from mainstream organizations. Here are some resources to get you started, wherever you may be entering on the strengths-based approach. Take what works best for you and go from there. Onward.

For Those New to Strengths:

Publications

- [*StrengthsFinder 2.0*](#) by Tom Rath
- [*Soar With Your Strengths*](#) by Donald O. Clifton

Assessments and related resources

- [*StrengthsFinder 2.0*](#) and [Gallup website on Strengths](#)
- [“Values in Action” character strengths assessment](#) — an alternative or complement to Strengthsfinder 2.0.
- [“StrengthsQuest”](#) — an online resource with great worksheets and activities for working with strengths individually and in groups.
- [“Reflected Best Self” exercise](#) — an exercise that creates an opportunity for participants to receive feedback regarding who they are when they are at their best.

Articles and blog posts that emphasize strengths-based leadership in the nonprofit sector

- [“The Inside Scoop on Strengths-Based Performance”](#) by Blue Garnet

- [“Nonprofit Fundraisers, Focus on Your Strengths”](#) by Mark Koenig
- [“My Strength Finder Experience: Skeptic Turns Believer”](#) by Ashlee Lawson

Videos and films

- [*Akeelah and the Bee*](#)
- Marcus Buckingham video summary [“Trombone Player Wanted”](#)

Activities

- Journal or reflect on activities in your work that engage and energize you rather than deplete you.
- In supervision, using the StrengthsFinder themes as a guide, discuss how to enhance the supervisory relationship.

Reflection Questions (pick one or two)

- When I was a child, what did I love to do?
- Where do I learn quickly? What things do I pick up easily?
- As I think back on the year, what is something I feel proudest of in my work?
- What were the fun things I did? What were the not-so-fun things?
- What activities do I tend to avoid?
- What were my biggest challenges/roadblocks/difficulties?
- What knowledge and/or skill might I need to develop so I can “manage for” (become more competent in) a potential weakness that is part of my job description?
- How might I want my supervisor to:
 - Better communicate with me?
 - Build a strong relationship?
 - Understand my motivation?
 - Approach my professional development?
 - Recognize my accomplishments?
 - Discuss how to manage for weakness?

For Those Familiar with Strengths Who Want to Make a Case for Using It:

Publications

- [“How Do Survivors Define Success?”](#) by the Full Frame Initiative
- [“Strengths-Based Leadership”](#) by Tom Rath
- [Coaching Skills for Nonprofit Managers and Leaders](#) by Judith Wilson and Michelle Gislason — guidance on appreciative inquiry/coaching questions to use with staff and teams
- [The Inside Scoop on Strengths-Based Performance](#) by Giselle Nicholson — more about how to incorporate strengths into a 360-degree evaluation system
- [5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace](#) by Gary Chapman and Paul White
- [The Gifts of Imperfection](#) by Brene Brown

Articles and blog posts that emphasize strengths-based leadership in the nonprofit sector

- [“Building Transparency Momentum”](#) by Exhale founder, Aspen Baker in *Stanford Social Innovation Review*
- [“Using StrengthsQuest in Multicultural Education”](#) by Michael J. Laney and Debbie White

Webinars

- Strong Field Project presentation on [“Cultivating Emerging Leaders in the DV Field”](#)

Activities

- Using [“Strengths-Based Leadership”](#) as a guide, map out your team strengths and engage in a discussion about what individual and collective strengths you have, what can be leveraged, and what is missing given the team’s charge or defined scope of work.
- Interview other organizations that use a strengths-based approach to see how they use strengths both internally (with teams and to on-board new staff members) and externally (with clients to learn from experiences that are positive and go well).
- Use [this map](#) to connect with Strong Field Leadership Development Program alumni who facilitate strengths-based retreats.
- Seek a partner within your organization who has influence/authority over staff development.

Reflection Questions (pick one or two)

- How am I using my strengths in my work now? What do I want to do more of?
- How am I integrating a strengths-based approach into my supervision or peer partnerships?
- What is the stance I want for my work as it relates to strengths-based leadership?
- How have I seen my colleagues grow? How have I seen them contribute?
- How does my organization currently integrate a strengths-based approach?
- What are the challenges and institutional barriers to following a strengths-based model in my organization?
- Given the mission and work of our organization or project, what individual and collective strengths do we have on our team? What do we want to emphasize? What is missing that we need to tend to?
- What is one thing my organization could do more of to support a strengths-based approach?

“I had to leave home so I could find myself, find my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that had been imposed on me.”
—Gloria E. Anzaldúa



For Those Experienced with Strengths Who Want to Go to the Next Level:

Publications

- *[Wellbeing: The Five Essential Elements](#)* by Tom Rath
- *[The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry](#)* by Sue Annis Hammond
- *[What is Reflective Practice? Community Science](#)* by Joy Amulya

Activities

- Consider participating in a [coach training program](#) to shore up your strengths in appreciative inquiry and an asset-based approach
- Explore and learn from community coaching approaches like those offered by [Beyond Emancipation](#)
- Research facilitation techniques that specifically identify and learn from positive moments (like those offered by Full Frame Initiative's Cultural and Linguistic Pilot component)

Reflection Questions (pick one or two)

- Where do I enjoy spending my time now?
- Of all of the strengths activities I have engaged in, which do I gravitate towards the most?
- What strengths practices do I want to reinforce or engage in?
- Given what I know about myself, what is a natural next step to pursue in mastering my work with strengths-based leadership?
- What are the strengths of other community and movement leaders and how can I learn from them?
- What intentions do I have for the future?
- What do I need to say “no” to so I can say “yes” to something more aligned with my strengths?
- It's 3 years from now and I've met my intention. What is it like? What does it look like, feel like? Who is there?
- What would my bravest self do next?
- What would I do if I knew I could not fail?

“Strengths replenishes you over and over. In a field like ours, we are struggling all the time to try and keep our leaders, staff, and volunteers from becoming depleted. Strengths provides a way to do that. It's a new way of seeing the world, and it helps you build stronger teams and more resilient organizations that are ready for anything that comes along.” —June Earley, director of client services at Safe Alternatives for Everyone (SAFE), Temecula

strong
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violence

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