

## EFFECTIVENESS OF A STRENGTHS-BASED LEADERSHIP COACHING PROGRAM FOR WOMEN

### Abstract

Strengths-based coaching has emerged in past decades as an asset-based approach that can help individuals identify, harness, and leverage their strengths to achieve professional and personal goals. This paper shares the design and outcomes of a year-long strengths-based coaching program to support leadership development within the context of one university's women's leadership initiative.

Program outcomes and changes in participants' perceived confidence in identifying and applying their strengths in different contexts were evaluated through an online survey using a Likert-based REDCap survey tool after participation in the program. Findings strongly suggest that most participants lacked the self-confidence and/or self-awareness to recognize their own strengths in a granular way prior to the program. Themes that emerged in the survey findings point to the following program outcomes: participants gained an increased ability to identify and value one's own leadership strengths, an increased ability to recognize and value the strengths of others, and a supportive community of women leaders to share experiences and reflect on the application of their strengths as part of their leadership journey.

Further studies are needed to understand and measure how a program such as this can impact one's leader identity, self-awareness, and self-confidence. Given the critical need for women's leadership opportunities, this program shows promise as a means to strengthen women's leadership across career stages and disciplines.

### Introduction

In recent decades, we have seen many women break the infamous glass ceiling and become some of the most influential women leaders in the nation (e.g., Kamala Harris, Jacinda Ardern, Janet Yellen, and Ketanji Brown Jackson). However, women often

cannot even envision the glass ceiling because they are busy trying to pry themselves from the 'sticky floor.' The sticky floor is a metaphor that refers to women who work and remain in entry-level and low-paying positions with the inability to advance (Berheide, 1992). This adhesion to the floor is likely caused by numerous limiting factors - some

systemic barriers and other individual or more personal challenges. From a systemic perspective, Brown (2020) and colleagues note that some women may be unable to leave the floor because they are offered fewer promotions and institutional resources at the start of their careers compared to men. On an individual or personal level, numerous scholars have stressed the association between self-confidence levels and leadership potential (Kolb, 1999; Lundeborg et al., 1994; McCarty, 1986). One study shows that men tend to overestimate their abilities and performance while women underestimate both, despite no actual difference in performance quality between the two genders (Ehrlinger & Dunning, 2003). Further, Kay and Shipman (2014) report that success correlates as closely with confidence as it does with competence, an important factor in the underrepresentation of women at the highest levels of leadership in organizations.

Fortunately, in this paper, the authors indicate how confidence can be acquired to close the confidence gap. We believe supporting women's leadership development is critical to increasing self-confidence and providing the opportunities, resources, experiences, and social connections necessary to achieve their professional goals.

Strengths-based coaching has emerged in past decades as an approach to leadership development to help individuals identify, harness, and leverage their strengths to achieve professional and personal goals. In this context, a strength is defined as "a pre-existing capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking, or feeling that is authentic and energizing to the user, and enables optimal functioning, development, and performance" (Linley, 2008, p. 9). Using an asset-based approach to leadership development, like strengths-based coaching, has been particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic. While all populations have experienced significant challenges and losses, the pandemic has uniquely affected women. A proportion of women left the workforce in masses over the last two years, with a number citing childcare and health concerns as reasons for exiting (Zamarro et al., 2020). Likely related to the increased burden of novel challenges at work and home, women also reported higher levels of loneliness during the pandemic compared to men

(Philpot et al., 2021), and the isolation from professional, familial, or social connections led many parents to feel disconnected from their 'village' or support network (Bright Horizons, 2021).

## Purpose

Considering the barriers women face in the workplace and the continued challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, we sought to create an opportunity for women to develop leadership and engage in social networking. This paper presents a program grounded in an asset-based approach, using strengths-based coaching in a small group context to enhance participants' abilities to identify and apply their natural talents and strengths toward achieving their professional goals. Specifically, we share the outcomes of a year-long virtual strengths-based coaching program designed to support women's leadership development and networking within the context of our university's women's leadership initiative. The following research questions guided our study:

1. Is there a significant change in participants' perceived confidence in identifying and applying their strengths pre- and post-participation in the program?
2. In what ways do participants describe the impact of their participation in the strength-based coaching program on their professional development?

This paper presents the extant scholarship that frames an asset-based approach to strength-based coaching and describes our program's goals and curriculum in the context of a broader women's leadership initiative at a higher education institution. Through an end-of-program survey, the authors assessed the impact of the program. The survey collected both quantitative and qualitative responses to explore the effect of the strengths-based coaching approach. Based on the findings, this paper provides several key insights into how an asset-based, group-oriented coaching program can support leadership development among women.

Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI) Context

Our institution's WLI has existed to empower women in higher education for ten years. Even though

women fare much better as leaders in education and public service careers (Eagly, 2018) as compared with women in the business sector (DeFrank-Cole & Tan, 2021), women only account for a small margin (24%) of senior leadership positions at research universities in the US (Silbert & Dube, 2021). Thus, the WLI was created with a mission to provide the environment, tools, resources, development opportunities, and professional networks to enable women at all career stages and positions to reach their full potential, which may or may not include advancing to senior leadership roles. Encompassing faculty, staff, and administrators, the WLI provides various leadership development opportunities to a membership of over 400 women at a large, land grant, doctoral-granting institution in the eastern United States with an R1 (highest research) Carnegie Classification. The WLI Leadership Development Framework (Dagen et al., 2022) outlines how the organization supports women's leadership development through intentional programming around three specific leadership components: leadership education, leadership training, and leadership networking.

## Strengths-Based Coaching Program

**Strengths-Based Coaching.** Strengths-based coaching stems from the belief that individuals can gain far more when they expend effort to build on their greatest talents than when they spend a comparable amount of effort to remediate their weaknesses (Clifton & Harter, 2003). The guiding principles of strengths-based education (Lopez & Louis, 2009) are that coaches provide a) an assessment of strengths, b) individualization and tailoring to participant needs and interests, c) networking with colleagues and professionals who affirm strengths, d) deliberate application of strengths outside of the coaching program and e) intentional development of strengths through novel experience or focused practice.

A key aspect of strengths-based development is to help participants identify their most natural talents using an assessment tool. While there are multiple standardized inventories to assess one's talents and strengths, this study utilizes the Clifton StrengthsFinder® (CSF). CSF consists of 177

different self-assessment items. Participants are presented with sets of two self-descriptor statements and must select the one that most aligns with how they think, feel, or behave. According to the CSF 2.0 Technical Report (Asplund et al., 2014), assessment items are based on decades of research on successful individuals (Harter et al., 2004; Schmidt & Rader, 1999) and have been repeatedly subjected to psychometric examination for reliability and validity. A summary of the assessment development, reliability, and validity has been made available by Gallup in technical reports (Asplund et al., 2014; Harter et al., 2004).

The assessment output includes an individualized, sequenced list of 34 talent themes. These themes were derived through interviews with thousands of professionals considered top performers in their respective industries. The interviews resulted in hundreds of themes of talent, which were then condensed into the 34 most prevalent themes (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). When participants review their assessment results, they identify their areas of most significant potential, known as signature themes or dominant themes. With knowledge, skill, and practice, it is expected that one can transform these natural talents into true strengths that can apply to individual and team tasks and goals. The assessment also identifies lesser talents that do not come as naturally to participants. Understanding lesser talents can help identify potential roadblocks or blind spots allowing the individual to develop management systems and plans.

In the context of leadership, strengths-based coaching has shown to be effective as a tool for developing transformational leadership skills in the workplace (MacKie, 2014). The foundational research that led to the development of the 34 talent themes that make up the Clifton Strengths® model involved over 20,000 interviews with leaders across many industries and occupations (Rath & Conchie, 2009). Something that sets this assessment apart from others in the strengths-based learning practice is that its primary application is an evaluation to support and promote strengths-based development in work and academic settings.

**Program Goals.** The overarching vision of the WLI strengths-based coaching program was to enhance the strengths-based culture and community within the WLI. This program emphasized the leadership education and networking components of the WLI Leadership Development Framework. The program's intent was for members to understand their talents and strategically apply them in a meaningful and powerful way toward the mission of the organization and their career goals.

Specifically, the program's goals, adopted from Lopez and Louis's (2009) principles, included:

1. Support participants in identifying and understanding the talents and strengths listed on their strength's assessment.
2. Discern the value each individual brings to their team and the inherent talents they can leverage to maximize their performance.
3. Cultivate a supportive and inclusive community through facilitated conversations that support curiosity, appreciation, and a deeper understanding of differences.
4. Coach participants on how to leverage and capitalize on their strengths to enhance their performance in their professional and personal lives.
5. Foster personal development in the areas of self-awareness, confidence, resilience, purpose, and engagement through focused practice and experience.

**Program Implementation.** The strengths-based coaching program used a small group or 'pod' model to facilitate collective participation. The pods were designed to create a small community to promote psychological safety and a sense of belonging, as well as counter stereotype threats. We know that stereotype threats, such as gender-based expectations of "fit," behavior, or inferiority, among women leaders can negatively impact engagement and motivation (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). We aim to disrupt the narrative that often leads to stereotype threats among women by facilitating conversations with other women who have similarities and differences and may seek similar goals and

outcomes. The program focused on women supporting other women, and each group member was intentionally assigned to avoid overlap within the same unit to maximize the opportunity to expand their network and strengthen the ability to maintain confidentiality around the conversations.

Enrollment in the virtual WLI strengths-based coaching program was offered via an open invitation to all members of the WLI using a first-come, first-served model. Enrollment was capped at thirty-one participants to maintain appropriate pod sizes and coach to participant ratios. Participants included eleven early- to late-career faculty with academic appointments, five administrators (four of whom also hold academic appointments), and fifteen staff members (employees without academic appointments) working within various units on campus. Administrators represent those faculty or staff with a formal leadership role on campus. All participants identified as women.

Each of the five pods was facilitated by a "lead coach" who had participated in a WLI-sponsored strengths coach training with the Gallup® organization and/or had five or more years of experience in strengths-based education and coaching. Four pods also had co-coaches, with some training, though less experience. The lead coaches mentored co-coaches throughout the program. All coaches received the same orientation session before the implementation of the program. The orientation provided an overview of the program and its objectives, the role of the coach, coaching best practices, common questions and concerns, and additional resources to support their coaching experience. The coaching approach was built upon the five practices of strengths coaching (Shields, 2015), the Gallup® Performance Development Model (Wigert & Harter, 2017), and the Strengths Coach Checklist for Leaders (Linley et al., 2009).

**Program Session Design.** Before the program's first group session, each participant completed the CSF assessment and received access to their Full 34 report at no cost to the participant. Participants then attended a virtual introductory workshop on interpreting their reports and initiating connections among participants. After the initial workshop,

participants were divided into five pods of 6-7 members each. Pod assignments were made considering diversity across career stages, roles at the university, academic discipline, and home unit. An experienced and trained strengths coach led each pod, partnering with a co-coach. Pods met monthly by Zoom for 60-90 minutes. Monthly

sessions focused on targeting the overall program goals, learning objectives specific to coaching pods, and a strengths-based curriculum (See Table 1 for example, pod objectives and curriculum topics).

**Table 1**  
*Examples of strengths-based coaching pod objectives and curriculum topics*

Coaching Pod Objectives	Curriculum Topics
<p>In strengths-based coaching pods, participants will be able to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Identify and develop their distinct talents and strengths</li> <li>● Communicate with others about their talents and strengths</li> <li>● Increase awareness and appreciation of the unique talents and strengths of others,</li> <li>● Understand how they can maximize their contributions in relevant areas of their life</li> <li>● Develop leadership skills to foster both short-term and long-term success</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Identifying and Owning your Talents</li> <li>● Targeting your strengths to Competencies, Goals, and Outcomes</li> <li>● Using Strengths to Foster a Growth Mindset</li> <li>● Navigating your Strengths Continuum (the pros and cons)</li> <li>● Strengths-based Advising and Mentoring</li> <li>● Leading Strengths-based Teams</li> </ul>

## Methods

**Participant Survey.** An online survey was created and distributed by email to all thirty-one participants after the program to measure the program's impact on individual participants. Participation in the survey was voluntary and the responses were kept confidential. No compensation or incentives were provided for participation in the study. Responses were anonymized and maintained in a secure data collection system (REDCap).

The survey asked participants to identify their role at the institution (e.g., faculty, staff, administrator) and rate their overall experience in the program from 1-10, with 10 being the highest rating (very positive). The survey also asked participants to rate their confidence level before and after the program in six strengths-based content areas using a four-point Likert scale (very confident, confident, somewhat confident, not confident). Three additional rating questions were posed to determine participants' confidence in applying their strengths after completing the program. The survey included five open-ended questions to allow respondents to further comment on their experiences and the impact of their participation in the strengths-based coaching program. Lastly, to gauge future interest, participants were asked whether they would be interested in continuing their strengths-based education.

**Data Analysis.** To address the research questions in this paper, we used two approaches to analyze the survey responses. First, the Likert-based survey responses were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27). The results were presented as descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test compared the perceived level of participant confidence before and after completing the strengths-based coaching program. Second, the open-ended responses were reviewed to provide context to the quantitative changes in perceptions of confidence in implementing strengths-based approaches to their professional activities.

## Findings

Sixty-one percent of participants completed the strengths coaching program survey. Respondents included 47 percent faculty, 32 percent staff, and 21 percent administration (categories defined above in the Program Implementation section). On a scale of 1-10, the mean rating of the program was  $8 \pm 2$  (Range: 3-10). Ninety-five percent of respondents indicated that they have some interest in continuing their strengths-based leadership education in the future. Only 1 participant stated they were not interested in continuing education. Of those interested in continuing their education, 58 percent were interested in a more advanced curriculum in a pod-based format similar to the current program, 47 percent were interested in periodic advanced workshops, and 26 percent were interested in training to be a strengths coach or co-coach in the future. Of note, those participants who did enroll in the advanced (Phase II) strengths-based leadership coaching program offered the subsequent year cited the following reasons or goals, a) continued self-awareness in order to be a more effective and impactful leader, b) continued personal and professional growth, c) seeking future leadership roles, and d) building relationships with other women leaders.

Table 2 summarizes the responses of the six quantitative survey items assessing participant confidence before and after completing the strengths-based coaching program. After completing the program, there was a statistically significant increase in participant confidence, across all six items (See Table 2). In their open-ended responses, participants provide context and broader meaning to changes in confidence noted in the quantitative responses.

**Table 2.**

*Participant assessment results after completion of the strengths-based coaching program.*

Survey Item		% Respondents				Z-score	p-value
		Not	Somewhat	Confident	Very		
I can name my own unique talents and strengths	<i>Before</i>	26	32	37	5	-3.589	<0.001
	<i>After</i>	0	5	16	79		
I can identify unique talents and strengths in others.	<i>Before</i>	37	42	21	0	-3.494	<0.001
	<i>After</i>	0	37	53	10		
I can intentionally direct my talents and strengths to accomplish goals.	<i>Before</i>	37	26	26	11	-3.384	<0.001
	<i>After</i>	6	0	47	47		
I can talk to my peers about my talents and strengths.	<i>Before</i>	37	42	21	0	-3.779	<0.001
	<i>After</i>	0	11	21	68		
I can have conversations with others about our differences.	<i>Before</i>	21	47	21	11	-3.442	<0.001
	<i>After</i>	5	5	53	37		
I can develop a strategy to address my weaknesses or limitations.	<i>Before</i>	37	37	21	5	-3.473	<0.001
	<i>After</i>	5	5	42	48		
I am confident that applying strengths knowledge will help me perform more effectively in my professional role.	<i>Before</i>						
	<i>After</i>	5	0	58	37		
I am confident that application of my strengths will help me overcome setbacks and challenges more effectively.	<i>Before</i>						
	<i>After</i>	5	5	48	42		
I am confident that application of my strengths will help me manage challenging situations with my colleagues and peers more effectively.	<i>Before</i>						
	<i>After</i>	0	11	42	47		

**Identification of Strengths.** After completing the program, 95 percent of participants indicated confidence (confident/very confident) in naming their own talents and strengths, compared to only 42 percent before the program ( $p < 0.001$ ), and 90 percent of participants were confident that they could develop a strategy to address their own weaknesses, compared to only 26 percent before the program ( $p < 0.001$ ). Further, 63 percent of participants indicated confidence in identifying the talents and strengths of others, compared to only 21 percent before the program ( $p < 0.001$ ).

Several participants commented on the value of simply naming one's strengths or providing a language to identify one's strengths and the strengths of others. Below are select participant responses that emphasize the importance of the identification of strengths:

- *Being able to 'name it' has been really helpful in articulating and understanding strengths.*
- *As a program chair, I have always assessed my faculty's strengths and weaknesses and capitalized on strengths. I just never knew it had a "name".*
- *I have always thought of my role as a developer as a supportive rather than a leadership role and learning about this allowed me to see that I am a leader.*
- *Often in academia, we denigrate the role of mentor and teacher. My strengths training has allowed me to see that I have something that others in my dept might not have.*

**Communication of Strengths and Differences with Peers.** Eighty-nine percent of participants indicated confidence in discussing talents and strengths with peers, compared to only 21 percent before the program ( $p < 0.001$ ), and 90 percent of participants indicated confidence in discussing differences with others, compared to only 32 percent before the program ( $p < 0.001$ ).

The survey asked participants to "describe the impact, if any, that this program has had on your appreciation and understanding of diversity". Several comments suggested a newfound appreciation for diverse strengths as being essential for building effective teams and collaboration:

- *I often look at what I don't have (I'm not "X" enough or am too "Y"). Understanding that we have different strengths, that no one has every strength, helped me feel more confidence to rely on what I bring and to identify people who bring a different set of strengths that I can team up with.*
- *I appreciate that different people have different strengths, and that success is predicated on aligning a person's strengths with the responsibilities of the role.*
- *It definitely has opened my eyes to different ways that people lead, how different styles are valuable to teams, and how to capitalize on other people's strengths.*
- *Leaders need to be open to diverse ways of thinking and being. Different strengths complement one another to make the team stronger.*

**Application of Strengths.** Ninety-five percent of participants indicated confidence in directing their talents and strengths to accomplish goals, compared to only 37 percent before the program ( $p < 0.001$ ). After completion of the program, 95 percent of respondents were confident (confident/very confident) that application of their strengths would allow them to perform more effectively in their professional role; 90 percent were confident that application of their strengths would help them overcome setbacks and challenges more effectively; and 90 percent were confident that application of their strengths would help them manage challenging situations with their colleagues and peers more effectively.

Several open-ended survey questions were included to address the program's impact on fulfilling their



personal and professional goals. Some participant responses included:

- *I had the courage to apply for a new job that is a leadership role. I am not sure I would have ever made that leap before.*
- *I have always seen myself as a leader, but this program gave me more confidence in my ability to pursue formal leadership roles.*
- *The program was helpful in thinking more carefully and articulating my goals.*
- *I don't think it's changed my goals, but it's changed how I think about them. I think it will assist me in any future job interview. It's given me the language to talk about what I do well.*

## Discussion

In line with the overarching vision of the WLI, the purpose of the WLI strengths-based coaching program was to support women's leadership development by providing an opportunity and community to help women understand their talents and strategically apply them toward their career goals. Our first research question was "Is there a significant change in participants' perceived confidence in identifying and applying their strengths pre- and post-participation in the program?" One of our key findings was that 95 percent of participants could name their talents and strengths after completing the program, compared to only 42 percent at the program's start. Another key finding from this study was that 95 percent of participants indicated confidence in directing their talents and strengths to accomplish goals, compared to only 37 percent before the program. Both findings strongly suggest that most participants lacked the self-confidence and/or self-awareness to recognize their own strengths prior to the program. The "sticky floor" is a metaphor used to symbolize the barriers that hinder women from advancing their careers and/or attaining leadership positions, and several sources have described a positive correlation between self-confidence and advancement and success (Kolb, 1999; Lundeberg et al., 1994;

McCarty, 1986). Thus, given our participants' reported improved self-confidence as a result of our program, we believe a strengths-based approach can help some women take the first step from the sticky floor toward the achievement of their professional goals.

Our second research question was "In what ways do participants describe the impact of their participation in the strength-based coaching program on their professional development?"

We view professional development as various opportunities for individuals to engage in to help them pursue and achieve their professional goals. Professional development comes in many forms but can include continuing education, networking, learning new skills, and advancing careers. One key finding from our survey was that participants were more confident in identifying their strengths after completing the program. Specifically, several participants noted that the program provided a novel, common language they could use to describe their strengths, which helped them view themselves in a new, more positive, and confident manner. For example, one participant commented that the program helped her see herself as a leader, rather than only in a supportive role as she had previously. This change in the sense of self and/or advancement from supporter to leader demonstrates professional development. Another example of professional development comes from learning new skills, such as being able to identify, acknowledge, and value the strengths of others. Participants noted that the program made them more aware of how others lead and how teams can work more collaboratively when they utilize and capitalize on each individual's strengths. Transitioning from the narrow mindset that there is only one best way to lead, work, innovate, problem solve, etc. provides room for individuals and teams to develop, grow, and achieve greater goals. Lastly, participants noted how the program helped them develop professionally and influenced their ability to advance their careers. One participant noted that during the program, she gained the confidence to apply for a new leadership role that she likely would not have considered prior to the program. Another participant indicated an intention to pursue a leadership position in the near future.

Beyond the assessment results, an important aspect of the strengths-based coaching program was the time for self-reflection and self-evaluation. Participants were given pre-work, which prompted spending time focused on thought around their beliefs, values, and motivations. The discussion among the group led to additional processing of 'self' and integration of the information into their awareness. Several participants mentioned the rarity of taking the time to think about themselves, given they were busy working professionals, and caretakers, among other roles. Self-awareness is a critical leadership trait leading to better decision making, team performance (Dierdorff & Rubin, 2015), and overall leadership effectiveness (Carden et al., 2022; Collins, 2001; Showry, 2014). Further, Eurich (2017) notes that one's self-awareness sets the threshold for one's leadership skills that specifically improve our ability to be team players, build relationships, and overall become exceptional leaders.

Several participants credited the pod design of the strengths-based experience as valuable to the outcomes. Our pod design intentionally encouraged self-reflection, discussion, and engagement with colleagues to understand and apply their distinct strengths. Our overarching goal was cultivating a supportive and inclusive community through facilitated conversations that encouraged curiosity, appreciation, and a deeper understanding of differences. Notably, the diverse experiences and various strengths of the pod participants provided an opportunity to learn from each other and illustrated that our leadership journeys are not all the same. The pod offered supportive suggestions for identifying strategies to move within their responsibilities. Still, it was also a space for simply listening and acknowledging the challenges. Lastly, the community also created a space for acknowledging and celebrating achievements resulting from applying strengths in various settings and allowing participants to build and sustain confidence in their unique and collective leadership journeys.

Numerous participants noted the formation and importance of a supportive community of fellow women leaders. Additionally, many participants emphasized the value of community, particularly in

the current era of isolation and pandemic challenges. Below are powerful participant responses emphasizing the success of the program in building a community and the value of the community:

- *After each conversation with my pod, I had to actively practice self-care through walks, meditation, and journaling because those meetings brought to the surface some really tough challenges I am experiencing in my workplace, especially related to the roadblocks to my own advancement and my inability to use my strengths in the workplace in ways that are meaningful to me and to my job. The women in my pod provided such a safe space to process and also reminded me that in my next role, I need to be working with at least one other woman instead of with only men. I think I had forgotten how being surrounded by women can change the energy in a space and offer confidence, empathy, and mutual understanding.*
- *I appreciated being able to connect with other women who share similar experiences. This type of connection has been lacking based upon the sex and gender composition of teams I work with on a daily basis. My sense of belonging improved upon regularly connecting with other women across campus.*

Living through the pandemic has strained women's opportunities to be reflective and commune with others in an effort to grow professionally. Although it was evident that use of strengths contributed to increased confidence, the influence of the pod design and reflective practices warrants further exploration.

## Limitations

While this paper shows positive outcomes of our strengths-based coaching program, the study is not without limitations. First, while our survey response rate of 61 percent is not unreasonably low for survey-based research, we, unfortunately, did

receive feedback from nearly half of the participants. Similarly, open-ended responses were even slightly more limited for those who completed the survey. However, all participants who chose to provide qualitative feedback on the survey shared positive experiences and reflections. Overall, we may be missing the insight from individuals who felt differently about the program and lacked direction for the improvement of the program in the future. Second, while the survey questions specifically asked participants to answer based upon the strengths-based components of the leadership program, we could not measure how much of the perceived confidence can be attributed to the lengthy time spent with the pod/cohort, allowing for psychological safety and trust to develop. Third, while this study addressed several of the program's goals, the quantitative survey responses did not capture all the elements of Program Goal 5, which was to "foster personal development in the areas of self-awareness, confidence, resilience, purpose, and engagement through focused practice and experience." This study demonstrated a remarkable increase in confidence in identifying strengths, and self-reported responses indicate that participants believe applying these strengths will support the attainment of personal and professional goals in the future. However, given that the survey was collected at a single time point, future longitudinal studies are needed to address the longer-term impact of strengths-based coaching, such as resilience.

Further, we intend to modify our survey before the program starts for the next cohort of participants. We can directly solicit participant feedback on leader identity, self-confidence, self-awareness, etc. Lastly, we also intend to survey coaches in addition to participants to determine the effect on the coaches themselves as leaders.

## Conclusion

In this study, we shared the design and participants' outcomes following a strengths-based coaching program at our institution. We provide evidence for several positive outcomes: (1) Increased ability to identify and value one's own leadership strengths, which likely leads to increased self-confidence as a

leader; and (2) Increased ability to recognize and value the strengths of others and the importance this lends to creating effective teams and collaboration, and (3) The program encouraged the formation of a supportive community of women leaders to share their experiences and reflect on the application of their strengths in the future. Notably, despite its virtual nature, the format of this program was feasible — and, in many ways, was an unexpected and agreeable outcome during the COVID-19 pandemic. We were still able to fulfill our mission of creating a community of women leaders to support their collective growth as leaders. Given the critical need for women's leadership opportunities, in our opinion, this program is invaluable for narrowing the gender gap in leadership positions and may be helpful in allowing women to be freed from the sticky floor.

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