



IDENTIFYING YOUR STRENGTHS

You are the most important asset of your practice. As such, your business vision needs to reflect your strengths and talents as a therapist. By strengths, I don't just mean a résumé of the places you have worked, the types of clients you work with, or even the methods of therapy in which you are trained. Your strengths and talents are not only what you do; they also reflect who you are, while you are doing your work. What is special about you as a therapist? What makes you happy in your work? What do you love about your craft? What are you best at?

In my experience, therapists are initially shy about defining themselves this way, saying there's nothing special about what they do. Some are very reluctant to name any strengths. When I gave a workshop in Melbourne, Australia, and asked therapists attending to talk about their strengths, one stood up and said, "Lynn, we don't like to talk this way here. It's the tall poppies syndrome."

I asked for clarification and she said, "In Australia, we are taught that the tallest poppies get cut down first. So we don't like to brag about ourselves or put ourselves above others, lest we get cut down—judged or criticized—for mouthing off."

I persisted and asked each therapist to answer these questions anyway. Not surprisingly, each one talked about his or her strengths in different ways. That is because no two people have identical strengths. I ask this question of every therapist I coach for one important reason: you need to learn to describe your unique gifts, in your own way, so that you know the full spectrum of what you have to offer and others can appreciate your value as well. Here are some examples of how other therapists identify their most important strengths:

"I have an analytical mind, mixed with a large dose of compassion.

I'm very good at showing clients how to solve difficult situations, using a pragmatic attitude, while staying empathetic with their feelings."

"I sense what is needed. As a massage therapist, I'm able to know what area of the body needs attention next, without even asking the question. I'm at my best bringing people back into their bodies and helping them deeply relax."

"I'm a jack-of-all-trades, a generalist in this era of specialization. I know a little about a lot, which is fun for me. It gives me a sense of freedom to address many topics and to refer freely to others for more specialized advice. I'm a clearinghouse of knowledge."

"I am extremely intuitive and spiritual in my approach. I make difficult moments tolerable by using a lighthearted touch and creating a meditative environment where my clients can be reflective and self-aware."

Now that you have some examples, it's time to focus on yourself. What do you love about your craft? Those aspects of your work need to be included in any vision you create of your practice for the future. Even if you are new to the practice, you probably have an idea of your strengths and talents from your school experience.

EXERCISE: IDENTIFYING YOUR STRENGTHS

Complete the following statements:

My strengths and talents: _____

What I believe is special or distinct about me as a therapist: _____

What I love most about my work: _____

INTEGRITY AND VALUES

Since most therapists rightly combine business ideas with principles, ethics, and values, I want you to recognize and prioritize those principles and values you hold most dear, the points of integrity that are at the heart of your business. Points of integrity are not the principles you think you *should* hold; instead, they are the principles you *already* stand for, that give your life and work meaning.

For example, if honesty is one of your points of integrity, you are honest, regardless of whether anyone else notices or cares. You are naturally drawn to speak the truth. Your honesty is reflected in all your relationships and the way you try to live your life. No one has to tell you to be truthful; you already are.

The happiest, most effective business owners I know are those whose businesses are centered around their principles and, as a result, they are filled with integrity. Sometimes simply defining your points of integrity can help you see where you have gone wrong in your practice and how to get back on track.

Robert, a psychologist, was unhappy about the lack of direction in his practice. He had been in practice for 20 years and had built a specialty in couples therapy. He complained that he didn't have the energy or enthusiasm he once had and was seriously considering leaving the profession.

I asked him to complete the points of integrity index (see the exercise that follows). He circled *adventure*, *risk*, *invention*, and *creativity*. In his free time, Robert loved to ski, rock climb, and travel to remote destinations for backpacking. He had a fascination with computer programming and invented new ways to streamline his billing software. These activities gave his life meaning and passion. He couldn't wait for the weekends to be off climbing or working on his computer.

I asked him how much his current practice reflected these principles. He shook his head, indicating not at all. He said that his current work with couples had a "been there, done that" feel. He saw the same problems over and over again and responded in the same way. When I challenged him to add adventure and invention into his work, he was at a loss. Robert's task was to bring integrity into his practice.

Six months later I heard from him. He had started a new premarital program for couples using a novel approach. He took the couples on an adventure weekend in the mountains that included an obstacle course. As the couples struggled to climb a rocky hillside or build a bridge out of fallen tree limbs and cross a swift stream, they learned the importance of partnership and teamwork. Robert was having a lot of fun and his words spilled out on the phone. He had more ideas about other adventure workshops to offer. He was writing a paper and giving presentations. By letting his integrity infuse his practice, he found a new energy and commitment for his work.

I developed the points of integrity index to help therapists prioritize their principles after seeing firsthand the effectiveness of this approach during my training at Coach University, a coaching institution that employs many such indexes and exercises. Here is a list of words developed by the therapists in my classes that signify points of integrity.

EXERCISE: POINTS OF INTEGRITY

Look at the points of integrity index. Pick your top three. If you have one that is not listed, write it in. Picking only three will force you to become very clear about your essential values in life.

health	compassion	influence	mastering
strength	freedom	honor	winning
fun	spirituality	trust	accomplishment
sexuality	service	creativity	peace
sensuality	sacredness	invention	quiet
love	security	openness	calm
kindness	home	imagination	inner strength
grace	family	planning	intuition
understanding	community	building	intellect
beauty	partnership	challenge	play
adventure	growth	discovery	truth
courage	enlightenment	learning	nurture
risk	happiness	self-expression	wholeness
leadership	joy	feelings	safety
inspiration	support	nature	vitality
change	contribution	action	persuasion
honesty	advocacy	rules	encouragement
patience	respect	fairness	power

My top three points of integrity:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Questions to answer:

What would a practice based on these points of integrity look like?

What would need to change about me or about the way I operate my practice?

How would I benefit from making these changes?

USING YOUR IMAGINATION

The next resource that you need to create your vision is one that is often forgotten in business—your creative imagination. Although we are building a practical vision, I want you to examine it and have a mental dress rehearsal by using a process of guided imagery. The great benefit of bringing in your imagination at this point is that it lets your creative mind begin to fill in the missing pieces. Your intuition will be the true architect of the vision. As a result, when your vision takes form, its details and actual appearance may surprise you.

The following exercise is designed to stimulate your creativity and expand awareness of what may be possible for you in your practice. I suggest that you follow the exercise exactly as it is written. You may ask someone to read it to you while you close your eyes, or record your own voice reading the instructions. Give yourself enough time to relax before you begin the exercise. Breathe easily. Then close your eyes and let your senses take over. You may see a clear picture of the vision, or you may have a felt sense of it. You may experience auditory clues or emotions as you construct the vision. Be nonjudgmental. Simply allow the vision to form in your mind. This is a natural thought process. Once you have finished the exercise, take some time to write your impressions on the worksheet. Try not to edit or critique what you experienced. Any time you want to return to the vision for more information, close your eyes and go through the exercise again. It is helpful to revisit this vision from time to time, to see how it may be shifting to adapt to your personal changes.

EXERCISE: MENTALLY SEE YOUR VISION

Record this or ask someone to read it to you slowly. Sit with your eyes closed.

Close your eyes easily and naturally and allow yourself to feel relaxed. You will know that you are relaxed when you can listen to this exercise while breathing easily and comfortably and allow yourself to see images, hear sounds, or notice sensations. Feel free to use your imagination to help you create a fuller vision of a possible future for your practice.

Time to begin. Now think about your practice and about the future, and remember to allow your imagination to take part in this thinking. Imagine your practice, not as it was in the past, or as it is today, but as it could be in the future, perhaps a year from today, perhaps 5 years from today, perhaps even further out. You decide where to place it in the future. As you think of your practice in the future, allow yourself to include any of the trends that you see today that feel important to include and carry them forward in time. Take your time as you move forward in your imagination. See a future that makes sense to you, that feels right to you, given all you know, hear, see, and sense. See the future and see your practice existing in it. Notice what you see, hear, and sense about your practice, one year out in time, two years out, or more.

As you see or sense your practice of the future, allow it to change and adjust to be successful and flourishing in its future evolution. Let your practice shift and evolve as needed to take its best shape and form, to be strong, profitable, and ideal for you in the future. See and know that your practice flourishes in part because of your true strengths and talents. See and know that your practice allows your strengths and passions to shine through your work. See and know that your practice attracts those clients you most want to work with. See and know that your practice attracts the opportunities that allow you to be at your best. See and know that your practice reflects your core values and professional integrity.

As you observe your future practice, allow yourself to move closer to it. Move even closer, so that you can enter the practice, walk into the front door, and be inside the future practice. See and sense and hear all that you need to have a clear sense of how it feels to work inside this future practice. Notice what might please you, what might surprise you. Easily, using your intuition or imagination, adjust or change this vision to make this practice even more ideal. Take the time you need to get to know your practice from the inside out.

Now, when you are ready, allow yourself to leave the practice by stepping outside to observe it once more. Take as much time as you need and allow yourself to move further back from the practice, the better to observe it. As you do this, take time to also begin to come back to your

present time, still with your eyes closed. Allow yourself to have a split attention, one part of you aware of the present moment, one part still observing the vision of your future practice. As you hold awareness of both, the present moment and the vision, notice where you have located this vision in your imagination. Is it out in space, far away from you? To the right or to the left? Is it in your mind's eye? Imagine relocating it and placing it close to your heart. Notice how it feels to have it at the center of your chest. Hold the vision in your heart.

Now come fully back to the present so that you can open your eyes, while still holding this vision in your heart. This is how it feels to have a vision aligned with your own heart.

Answer the following questions:

1. What did you see or sense?
2. What pleases you about this vision?
3. What surprises you about this vision?
4. What have you learned that can help you plan for the future of your practice?
5. What have you learned that can help you today?

Louise, a high-powered lawyer and mediator, had returned to graduate school to get a master's degree in social work. She complained that she "couldn't see" how to start her practice because she needed to earn a certain amount of money. Leaving law and her status as a partner to start over in a small practice was not appealing. The dilemma she faced was that she loved being a therapist; all of her core values reinforced her decision to change professions. She went through the guided imagery exercise and reported that she was stunned by the results. She saw a clear, detailed vision of herself purchasing an existing, very busy therapy practice that was for sale in her city. Although she knew that the practice was for sale, it had never occurred to her that she should make an offer. She wasn't even out of school, she protested. But there was the picture, in her vision, of owning a group practice and bringing all of her legal and professional skills to the new venture. By answering the five questions,

she was pleased that in her vision, she could start at the top, as the owner of an ongoing concern, instead of at the bottom. She was surprised that her imagination presented such a sensible solution. The vision brought her great excitement and energy. But one thing disturbed her: what would she need to know about owning and operating a therapy practice? She knew the business of law, not the business of therapy. Based on this concern, we created a list of advisors who worked with therapy practices and could help answer all of her questions—an accountant, lawyer, two other group practice owners who were willing to consult, and me, as a general business coach. With this support in place, Louise was ready to make an offer for the practice, which she later bought. She used her vision to stretch her ability to see a better future for herself and identify potential concerns. Then she followed through to make her vision a reality.

ARTICULATING YOUR VISION, PURPOSE, AND MISSION STATEMENT

Having a written vision, purpose, and mission statement can keep your business focused. The first part of the statement, the vision statement, is a brief sentence or two at most that sums up what you see as being possible. Your purpose statement addresses who you need to become to fulfill your vision. The mission statement sets your immediate goals. Bill Gates of Microsoft had a powerful vision in the early stages of building his company: a computer on every desk running Microsoft software. This clear, simple vision seemed possible to him, based on what he knew about the trends in computer technology as well as his passion and drive. At the time he envisioned it, it was little more than a personal dream, steeped in his imagination. Now his vision is part of our everyday reality.

Martha teaches movement classes. She has developed a strong reputation in her local area and has self-published a book on her methods. When she mentally constructed her vision, she reported seeing a picture of herself on TV! She was selling DVDs of her classes on an infomercial. She had several emotions in immediate response to the vision—

pleasure, surprise, and fear. I asked her to take the next step and write her vision, purpose, and mission statements. For her vision statement, she wrote: “I help thousands of people learn to move more easily and gracefully with my movement tapes and products.” She identified her strengths to include teaching and enrolling others in her classes, so the idea of working with more people pleased her. One of her top three points of integrity was contributing; selling DVDs would make a much bigger contribution than teaching small local classes, so that appealed to her as well. But Martha was disturbed. She loved the vision and felt energized by it, but she wasn’t sure how she would be able to fulfill it, due to her shyness.

Martha realized that she would have to do a lot of work on herself. For her purpose statement, she wrote: “I will need to be able to speak to large groups of people and stop being so scared and shy.” After she wrote her purpose statement, she began to back away from her vision. This is a normal reaction to having an expanded vision for your practice. If you see a large vision, you will be required to go beyond your normal boundaries. You may need to learn some new skills and stretch beyond your comfort zone. The purpose statement is the personal-growth component inherent in the vision process. A powerful vision will call you to become more than you are right now.

The mission statement, in Martha’s case, “reach the broadest audience possible with national marketing,” can lead to a list of the practical, strategic steps that will take your vision from dream to reality. Martha’s list included: review written materials, develop a script, find a producer, rent studio time, find a distributor, and contact infomercial companies. She also needed to address her weakness in terms of public speaking. She added: sign up for a public speaking class, go back into therapy, and take an acting class to help overcome performance anxiety.

Although she had a long task list, Martha felt challenged and excited. She would need the support of coaching to help her accomplish the steps on her list. But because the vision was a product of her deeply held values and strengths, it was uniquely suited to fascinate and appeal to her.

EXERCISE: WRITE YOUR VISION, PURPOSE, AND MISSION STATEMENT

Complete these three statements using short, simple sentences.

Vision: The vision I see for my future practice is:

Purpose: The changes I will make within myself to fulfill this vision are:

Mission: The ways I will make this vision a reality are:

The aligned vision process will reveal a lot about you and what is possible for you to achieve. I hope that your vision calls to you, pulling you forward to make positive, wonderful changes in your practice and your life. Making your vision a reality will depend on your ability to follow through on the steps and actions inspired by your mission statement. To do this more easily, you need to develop the dynamic mindset of a successful entrepreneur, so you can shift from thinking to action and make your vision real. Next we look at what that mind-set encompasses. You may be surprised at the entrepreneurial qualities you already embrace.