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Article

The TARL Framework: A Theory-Grounded, Strengths-Based Approach for Understanding and Developing Human Talent

Ashish Ambasta[1], Shyamasree Chakrabarty[2], Basant Kumar[3]

[1]HappyPlus Consulting.
Email: maashinc@gmail.com; ashish@happyplus.in
ORCID: 0009-0003-2598-566X
[2]HappyPlus Consulting.
Email: shyamasree.chk@gmail.com; shyamasree@happyplus.in
ORCID: 0000-0001-8409-3264
[3]HappyPlus Consulting.
Email: kumarb@happyplus.in

Abstract: This paper introduces and theoretically grounds the TARL Framework, a model for understanding human talent that organizes 28 distinct talent themes into four foundational domains—Thinking (T), Acting (A), Relating (R), and Leading (L). While the psychometric robustness of the underlying TalentPlus assessment has been empirically established, this paper's primary contribution is to articulate the theoretical rationale that underpins its structure. Integrating the strengths-based philosophy with Kenrick's theory of fundamental motives, we argue that the TARL domains reflect four evolutionarily conserved motivational systems—understanding, protecting/providing, affiliating, and attaining status—that have been repurposed for adaptive functioning in contemporary organizational contexts. By explicating how individual talents represent behavioral expressions of these deeper systems, this paper advances the TARL model from a descriptive typology to a theory-informed framework, bridging the long-standing gap between psychometric evidence and conceptual understanding in talent research.
Keywords: Talent; Strengths-based; Theory of Fundamental Motives; conceptual

1. Introduction

In the quest to unlock human potential within organizations, the focus has progressively shifted from remediating weaknesses to identifying and leveraging innate strengths (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011; Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This paradigm, central to positive organizational scholarship, is predicated on a simple but powerful philosophy: "What would happen if we studied what is right with people?" (Clifton & Harter, 2003). This strengths-based approach asserts that individuals achieve excellence by building upon their natural talents defined as "naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied" (Hodges & Clifton, 2004, p. 257) rather than by tirelessly correcting their deficits.

While several tools exist to measure these talents, many are deployed as practical instruments without a deep-seated connection to overarching psychological theory. This is backed by multiple reviews (e.g., Faber et al., 2016; Lee, 2018; Nijs et al.,2014) spanning organizational, managerial, and psychological disciplines, highlighting a pervasive theory-practice gap in talent measurement. Specifically, scholars note that organizations struggle to measure talent accurately, a problem stemming from a lack of strong theoretical foundations, where tools frequently arise from practical needs and exemplars rather than robust psychological or management models (Clark & Watson, 2019; Pellegrino & Glaser, 2021). This has resulted in an uneven development of the field, with underdeveloped theoretical drivers and measurement tools that are not rooted in overarching theory. Echoing this, psychological assessment experts stress that many available scales are created without a deep-seated connection to important constructs or a

prior consideration of theoretical issues, leading to instruments that lack clarity and distinctness. This sentiment is reinforced in reviews of talent management psychology, which identify a discrepancy between practitioner and academic approaches, and in critiques of aptitude research, which emphasize the frequent absence of an understanding of the underlying cognitive processes in assessment tools (Dries, 2013). Across these reviews, a common theme emerges: the urgent need for a stronger theoretical basis, greater theoretical clarity, and the integration of different measurement approaches to ground talent measurement practices in sound science.

With an aim to address this gap between the practical deployment of talent measurement tools and their connection to overarching psychological theory, this paper introduces and theoretically grounds the TARL framework, a model derived from the TalentPlus strengths assessment. The TARL framework categorizes 28 distinct talent themes into four foundational domains: thinking (t), acting (a), relating (r), and leading (l). The TalentPlus instrument itself has demonstrated strong psychometric properties, including high reliability and a validated hierarchical factor structure that confirms these four domains (Ambasta et al., 2025). However, a sound factor structure, while necessary, is not sufficient for a comprehensive conceptual model. It tells us that themes cluster, but not why they cluster.

The primary aim of this paper is to provide the theoretical "why" by integrating two powerful theoretical lenses: the strengths-based philosophy and the evolutionary psychology of fundamental motives (Kenrick et al., 2010). We argue that the TARL domains are not arbitrary statistical clusters but represent four fundamental, evolutionarily-conserved systems of human motivation, repurposed in modern contexts for productive achievement. By delineating how the specific talent themes within each domain are behavioral manifestations of these broader motivational systems, we aim to elevate the TARL framework from a useful typology to a theory-informed model that powerfully guides both research and practice.

2. The Psychometric Foundation: Reliability and Validity of the TalentPlus Assessment

Before delving into theory, it is critical to establish the empirical bedrock of the TARL framework. The analysis by Ambasta et al. (2025) provides compelling evidence for the TalentPlus assessment's robustness, ensuring that the theoretical model is built on a solid measurement foundation.

Reliability: The assessment demonstrates strong internal consistency at the domain level ($\alpha > .86$ for all four domains). At the theme level, the majority of the 28 five-item scales show good reliability (25 of 28 have $\alpha \geq 0.70$). More impressively, test-retest reliability over a one-month interval is high (median $r \sim 0.80$), indicating that the tool measures stable, trait-like dispositions—the "raw talents" central to strengths theory—rather than transient states. This temporal stability is crucial for making long-term developmental or placement decisions.

Construct Validity: Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses provide strong support for the four-domain structure. EFA revealed a clear, interpretable four-factor solution aligning with the T-A-R-L domains, with themes loading cleanly onto their intended factors. A subsequent hierarchical CFA, modeling the 28 themes as first-order factors loading onto four second-order domain factors, demonstrated excellent model fit (CFI=0.92, TLI=0.90, RMSEA=0.06). This confirms that the data structure is consistent with the proposed TARL framework and that the domains are cohesive, yet distinct, constructs.

This psychometric rigor provides the necessary confidence to use the TalentPlus assessment as a valid operationalization of the TARL framework. We now turn to its theoretical underpinnings.

3. Theoretical Grounding: Strengths-Based Philosophy and Fundamental Motives

The Strengths-Based Imperative

The strength-based approach represents a paradigm shift in human development, moving decisively away from the deficit-oriented models that have long dominated psychology, education, and organizational science. Originating in the seminal work of positive psychology, which directed scientific inquiry toward human flourishing and what makes life worth living (Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, 2000; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), this approach has evolved into a comprehensive developmental philosophy in its own right (Bryant et al., 2021; Dejenie et al., 2023). It is fundamentally a worldview, positing that individuals and communities possess a unique constellation of inherent strengths, skills, and resources which, when identified and leveraged, become the most powerful engines for sustainable growth, well-being, and agency. This philosophy is fundamentally constructive, prioritizing empowerment, hope, and self-efficacy as the primary catalysts for change, in stark contrast to models focused on diagnosing and repairing weaknesses (Proyer et al., 2017; Silverman et al., 2023).

The robustness of this approach is evidenced by its deeply rooted, value-driven application across a spectrum of disciplines, each reinforcing its core philosophical tenets. In healthcare, Strengths-Based Nursing (SBN) is explicitly defined as both a philosophy and a value-driven approach that guides clinicians through principles of empowerment, partnership, and relational practice, adapting flexibly to the unique context of each patient and setting (Gottlieb & Gottlieb, 2017). Similarly, in social work, the approach is grounded in humanistic philosophy and ecosystem theories, operating as an unequivocally client-centered framework that locates expertise within the individual and their innate capabilities, talents, and resources to achieve self-defined goals (Semigina, 2019). This philosophical commitment extends to transformative contexts such as Indigenous health research, where strengths-based practices are mobilized to foreground self-determination, celebrate cultural and community resources, and actively reframe policies and interventions away from a deficit narrative toward one of opportunity and political empowerment (Bryant et al., 2021). Even in youth development, it is recognized as a guiding framework that emphasizes the identification and cultivation of developmental assets to foster thriving outcomes, solidifying its role as a proactive philosophy of growth (Rashid & Ostermann, 2009).

At the heart of this philosophy is the definition of "strength." It is not merely a static talent or preference, but a state of mastery achieved through the deliberate refinement of innate talents with invested knowledge, skill, and practice (Clifton & Harter, 2003). This conceptualization carries a powerful strategic implication: investing energy in developing areas of natural talent yields a multiplicative return on investment, as it aligns with intrinsic motivation and leads to faster, more fulfilling, and more sustainable growth compared to often demoralizing process of attempting to remediate areas of weakness. It is this very imperative—the systematic identification and cultivation of latent potential—that the TARL framework is designed to operationalize. By providing a clear, structured taxonomy for classifying and understanding these innate talents, TARL serves as the essential structural embodiment of the strength-based philosophy. It translates a powerful, cross-disciplinary developmental paradigm into an actionable model, enabling its application across diverse domains from mental health and education to organizational leadership, and ensuring that the focus remains firmly on building what is strong to empower individuals and systems to thrive.

4. The Lens of Fundamental Motives

To understand *why* specific clusters of talent exist and are universally relevant across human societies, we must look beyond descriptive psychology to the evolutionary pressures that shaped the human mind. The theory of fundamental motives (Kenrick et al., 2010) provides this crucial, deep-structure blueprint. Rooted in evolutionary psychology, this framework posits that human psychology is not a general-purpose computer, but a collection of domain-specific motivational systems, each sculpted by natural selection to solve recurring adaptive problems throughout our ancestral past (Aunger & Curtis, 2013; Cook et al., 2021; Schaller et al., 2017).

These motivational systems—including self-protection, disease avoidance, affiliation, status-seeking, mate acquisition, mate retention, and kin care—are functionally distinct "modules" that guide attention, cognition, emotion, and behavior in context-specific ways that historically enhanced survival and reproductive success (Kenrick et al., 2010). For instance, the self-protection motive selectively activates vigilance for threats, while the affiliation motive enhances memory for social details and drives coalition-building behaviors. This framework moves beyond descriptive taxonomies of needs to explain the ultimate functions of our deepest drives, offering a powerful lens for deconstructing the architecture of human behavior (Anderson et al., 2015; Pick et al., 2022).

The empirical support for this framework is robust and spans multiple domains (Anderson et al. 2015; Bernard et al., 2008). Further, this theory has also been successfully extended to explain complex social phenomena. Johnson, Li, and Cohen (2015) apply the framework to religion, proposing that variations in religious beliefs, rituals, and moral concerns can be understood as manifestations of different activated fundamental motives, such as coalition formation for group cohesion or disease avoidance for purity rituals. This demonstrates the theory's breadth as an integrative, hierarchical model that can connect deep evolutionary drivers with surface-level cultural expressions (Bernard et al., 2006; Cook et al., 2021).

In summary, the theory of fundamental motives offers more than a taxonomy of needs; it provides a powerful, functional lens for deconstructing the ultimate origins of human behavior. By identifying the core adaptive problems our minds were designed to solve, it gives us a predictive blueprint for understanding the universal, yet individually variable, structure of human drives. This blueprint is essential for the TARL framework, as it grounds the concept of "talent" in the fundamental, evolved systems that these talents ultimately serve.

5. The TARL Framework: An Evolutionary-Adaptive Systems Perspective

Building upon these two theoretical pillars, we posit the TARL framework as an integrated model that connects the deep-seated "why" of human motivation with the practical "how" of strengths-based development. Specifically, we propose that the TARL framework aligns with adaptive systems in human psychology, as delineated by Kenrick's fundamental motives theory (Kenrick et al., 2010). Refer to Table 1.

Table 1. Alignment of Fundamental Motives and TARL Adaptive Systems

Kenrick's Fundamental Motives	TARL Adaptive Systems	Core Adaptive Problem Solved
1. Understanding the Physical/Social World	**THINKING**	"How does the world work? Who knows what?"
2. Self-Protection & Immediate Goal Achievement	**ACTING**	"How do I avoid this threat? How do I get this resource now?"
3. Affiliation (Building Coalitions)	**RELATING**	"Who is my friend? How do I build trust?"
4. Status (Seeking Prestige/Respect)	**LEADING**	"How do I gain influence and respect in my group?"
(Other motives like Mate Acquisition, Mate Retention, and Kin Care are also present but can be seen as specialized applications of these core four, particularly Relating and Leading).		

6. THINKING Adaptive System

Cognitive functioning forms the foundation of all adaptive behavior. Evolutionary and cognitive psychologists argue that survival across diverse contexts depends not merely on instinctual drives but on accurate mental representations of the environment (Kenrick et al., 2010; Tooby et al., 1992). Effective adaptation thus requires a specialized system for environmental modeling, prediction, and causal reasoning.

Within the TARL framework, the Thinking system embodies this cognitive–reflective dimension. It operates as the central integrative mechanism through which individuals reduce uncertainty, simulate potential outcomes, and generate innovative solutions. Rather than representing a singular motive, it functions as a meta-adaptive architecture that enhances the efficacy of all other systems by optimizing informational inputs and decision accuracy (Neuberg et al., 2011). In evolutionary terms, this system addresses a fundamental adaptive problem: "How do we model our environment to reduce uncertainty and exploit opportunities?"

From a strengths-based lens, individuals high in cognitive talents such as analytical reasoning, pattern recognition, and reflective insight demonstrate superior capacity to navigate complex environments, engage in innovation, and align decisions with long-term goals. The system's focus on meaning-making and foresight makes it indispensable in contexts of volatility and complexity, where adaptive success hinges on the capacity to think beyond immediate contingencies. Based on this we posit that:

Proposition 1: The THINKING system is the adaptive problem-solving system.

Subsystems of the THINKING System

While the Thinking System operates as an overarching cognitive–adaptive architecture, it comprises multiple specialized subsystems that address distinct dimensions of human reasoning and knowledge processing. Each subsystem represents a particular cognitive adaptation shaped by evolutionary pressures to enhance prediction, problem-solving, and meaning-making. Collectively, these subsystems function as an integrated network that enables individuals to interpret complexity, generate insight, and sustain innovation. By differentiating among these cognitive capacities, the TARL framework highlights the diverse pathways through which human intellect translates uncertainty into understanding and action. Below we explain each Thinking subsystem in detail:

Logical

Drawing from the fundamental motives theory "logical" as a talent can be defined as solving the sub-problem of *"What are the causal patterns?"* by applying analytical reasoning and evidence-based deduction. This talent specializes in deconstructing complex situations into linear, cause-and-effect chains. It solves the adaptive problem of identifying predictable patterns in the environment (e.g., "If I sharpen this stone in this way, it will cut better"). In modern contexts, it is the talent for data analysis, critical thinking, and constructing watertight arguments.

Quencher

Quencher solves the sub-problem of *"What information is missing?"* through an intrinsic drive for knowledge acquisition and curiosity. Driven by an intrinsic "need to know," this talent solves the problem of informational gaps. It constantly seeks new data to update the brain's internal model of the world, ensuring it remains accurate. This is the talent of the researcher, the perpetual student, and the curious mind that asks "why?" and "how?"

Forecaster

Forecaster solves the sub-problem of *"What is going to happen?"* by using intuition and pattern recognition to simulate future scenarios. This talent uses pattern recognition and intuitive modeling to run mental simulations of future events. It addresses the critical challenge of anticipating outcomes before they happen (e.g., predicting seasonal changes or the long-term consequences of a social conflict). It is the talent behind strategic planning and risk forecasting.

Philosopher

Philosopher **s**olves the sub-problem of *"What does it all mean?"* through deep reflection and the search for underlying principles. This talent delves deeper than surface-level cause-and-effect to uncover underlying principles, values, and purpose. It solves the problem of "What does it all mean?", creating coherent belief systems that guide long-term decision-making and provide existential stability. This is the talent for developing vision, mission, and ethical frameworks.

Disruptor

Disruptor solves the sub-problem of *"Is there a better way?"* by challenging existing models and generating innovative alternatives. This talent actively seeks flaws and limitations in existing systems and models. It solves the adaptive problem of "Is there a better way?" by challenging conventions and generating paradigm-shifting alternatives. It is the engine of innovation, driving progress when old solutions become obsolete.

Solver

Solver solves the sub-problem of *"How do we fix this?"* by deconstructing obstacles and generating multiple solution pathways. This talent is hyper-specialized in breaking down immediate, concrete problems and generating multiple, practical pathways to a solution. It addresses the challenge of "How do we fix this now?" It is the talent of the engineer, the troubleshooter, and the crisis manager.

Interrelation

Interrelator solves the sub-problem of *"How is everything connected?"* by perceiving hidden networks and systemic relationships that are not immediately apparent. This talent perceives the complex, non-linear, and often hidden connections between disparate elements of a system. It solves the problem of understanding emergent properties and unintended consequences (e.g., how a change in the food supply affects social hierarchy). It is the talent for systems thinking, ecosystem mapping, and sophisticated strategy.

For a quick overview of Thinking subsystems refer to Table2.

Table 2. Subsystems of the THINKING System

Subsystem	Adaptive Question Solved	Core Function
Logical	"What are the causal patterns?"	Analytical reasoning and evidence-based deduction to identify predictable cause–effect relationships.

Quencher	"What information is missing?"	Curiosity-driven knowledge acquisition that fills informational gaps and refines internal models.
Forecaster	"What is going to happen?"	Pattern recognition and intuitive modeling to simulate future scenarios and anticipate outcomes.
Philosopher	"What does it all mean?"	Deep reflection to uncover principles and values that create coherent belief systems and purpose.
Disruptor	"Is there a better way?"	Challenging existing models to generate innovative alternatives and paradigm shifts.
Solver	"How do we fix this?"	Deconstructing obstacles and producing practical solution pathways for immediate problems.
Interrelator	"How is everything connected?"	Systems thinking that perceives hidden interdependencies and emergent patterns.

7. ACTING Adaptive System

Whereas the Thinking System provides predictive understanding, effective adaptation ultimately requires execution. Evolutionary psychology underscores the primacy of self-protection and resource acquisition motives as central drivers of survival and goal attainment (Kenrick et al., 2010; Schaller et al., 2017). These motives evolved to ensure that organisms could both mitigate threats and secure the means necessary for continuity.

The Acting system within TARL translates these primal imperatives into goal-directed action, emphasizing vigilance, persistence, and disciplined follow-through. This system governs how individuals transform intention into behavior bridging cognition with execution through regulatory processes such as focus, planning, and accountability. The Acting system therefore addresses dual adaptive challenges: "How do I avoid being harmed?" and "How do I secure necessary resources?"

In strengths-based development, this system manifests as talents of perseverance, reliability, and structured foresight. By transforming instinctual drives into consistent patterns of action, it fosters both personal efficacy and social trust. These capacities are foundational to professional integrity and organizational reliability, enabling individuals to sustain performance under conditions of uncertainty and constraint. Thus, we posit that

Proposition 2: The ACTING System is the Self-Protection and Resource-Acquisition System.

Subsystems of the ACTING System

The Acting system translates motivational impulses into purposeful, goal-directed behavior through a set of specialized subsystems. Each subsystem represents an evolved mechanism for managing threat, exerting control, and converting intent into tangible outcomes. Together, they form the behavioral execution core of the TARL framework—bridging instinct with deliberate action. These subsystems ensure that survival-oriented motives such as vigilance, persistence, and ownership are expressed in adaptive, socially constructive ways. In essence, the Acting system operationalizes the transition from intention to impact, transforming primal drives into disciplined competence and reliability. Below we explain each subsystem in detail:

Cautious

This is the primary subsystem for self-protection. It specializes in *"What are the potential dangers here?"* by anticipating risks and advocating for safety. This is the primary talent for the self-protection motive. It is perpetually scanning the environment for potential risks, pitfalls, and dangers. It answers the question "What could go wrong?" and advocates for prudence, ensuring survival by avoiding unnecessary harm. It is the talent of the risk manager and the safety officer.

Owner

A core subsystem for goal-attainment. It ensures *"Who is responsible for ensuring this outcome?"* through psychological ownership and unwavering commitment. This talent creates a powerful psychological link between the individual and a task or outcome. It solves the problem of "Who will ensure this is done?" by fostering an innate sense of accountability. In ancestral terms, if you "owned" the task of building the shelter, the group's survival depended on your commitment.

Finisher

A critical subsystem for goal-attainment. It answers *"How do we ensure the resource is secured?"* by providing the persistence and energy to follow through to completion. This talent provides the relentless drive and energy to see a task through to its conclusion. It addresses the critical gap between starting a task and securing the resource, answering "How do we cross the finish line?" It is the talent that guarantees productivity and avoids wasted effort.

Planner

A supporting subsystem for both motives. It addresses *"What is the safest and most efficient path to the goal?"* by creating structure and mitigating uncertainty through preparation. This talent creates structure and sequence to achieve goals safely and efficiently. It mitigates uncertainty by breaking down the journey to a resource into manageable, logical steps. It solves the problem of "What is the safest and most efficient route?" and is the talent behind project management and logistical coordination.

Multitasker

A specialized subsystem for goal-attainment in complex environments. It manages *"How can we acquire multiple resources simultaneously?"* by juggling variables and optimizing effort. This talent allows an individual to manage multiple streams of information and action simultaneously. In a complex environment, it solves the problem of "How can I secure multiple resources (e.g., gather berries while watching for predators) without neglecting any?" It is the talent for juggling competing priorities in dynamic settings.

Concentrator

A supporting subsystem that filters distractions, answering *"How do I maintain focus on the current threat or priority goal?"* This talent acts as a cognitive filter, blocking out distractions to maintain intense focus on a single, high-priority threat or goal. It answers the question "What demands my absolute attention right now?" It is the talent of the surgeon, the sharpshooter, and the deep-work practitioner.

Values

This theme functions as an internal self-protection and coherence mechanism. It establishes *"What are the non-negotiable rules for my behavior?"* ensuring actions are consistent with a stable moral identity, which fosters self-trust and signals trustworthiness to allies. This talent establishes a non-negotiable internal code of conduct. It functions as a form of self-protection by ensuring behavioral consistency, which builds self-trust. Externally, it signals unwavering integrity to allies, answering "Is this person predictable and trustworthy?" This makes them a reliable partner in cooperative endeavors.

For a quick overview of Acting subsystems refer to Table3.

Table 3. Subsystems of the ACTING System

Subsystem	Adaptive Question Solved	Core Function
Cautious	"What are the potential dangers?"	Vigilant risk anticipation ensuring survival through prudence.
Owner	"Who is responsible for ensuring this outcome?"	Psychological ownership and accountability fostering reliability.
Finisher	"How do we ensure completion?"	Persistence and stamina to translate goals into tangible results.
Planner	"What is the safest and most efficient path?"	Structured foresight and preparation to mitigate uncertainty.
Multitasker	"How can we achieve multiple goals simultaneously?"	Managing parallel priorities in complex environments.
Concentrator	"What demands my absolute attention now?"	Sustained focus by filtering distractions and maintaining high engagement.
Values	"What are my non-negotiable rules of conduct?"	Internal moral consistency enhancing self-trust and external credibility.

8. RELATING Adaptive System

Human survival has always depended on social cooperation (Leonardelli et al., 2010). From an evolutionary standpoint, the need to belong and to maintain reliable coalitions constitutes a core adaptive motive (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The Relating system within TARL extends this principle, representing the set of psychological

mechanisms that enable individuals to cultivate empathy, mutual trust, and durable alliances. This system addresses one of the most persistent adaptive problems in human evolution: “How do I build and sustain cooperative alliances that ensure protection, belonging, and shared success?”

The Relating system transforms affiliative and kin-care motives into socio-emotional competencies like empathy, conflict resolution, restorative behavior, and emotional regulation — that sustain the cohesion of social groups. Within the strengths-based paradigm, it represents the relational capital engine that nurtures collaboration, psychological safety, and collective well-being. It is particularly salient in modern organizational and community contexts, where interdependence, inclusion, and support are critical for adaptive success. Hence, we posit that:

Proposition 3: The RELATING System is the Coalitional Alliance System.

Subsystems of the RELATING System

The Relating system encompasses the adaptive architecture through which humans form, maintain, and repair social bonds. Each subsystem represents a specialized socio-emotional mechanism evolved to promote trust, reciprocity, and collective resilience within groups. Together, they operationalize the affiliative motive by converting empathy and cooperation into enduring social capital. These subsystems ensure that individuals can navigate the complexities of interdependence—balancing belonging with individuality—while fostering psychological safety and group cohesion. In this sense, the Relating system serves as the connective tissue of the TARL framework, sustaining the cooperative networks that underpin both individual flourishing and collective survival. Below we explain each subsystem in detail:

Binder

The core subsystem for deep affiliation. It specializes in *“How do I create unbreakable bonds?”* by fostering deep intimacy and loyalty. This talent is specialized for creating intense, intimate, and loyal one-on-one relationships. It solves the problem of forming life-or-death alliances by fostering profound trust and emotional connection. It is the talent for building an inner circle of unwavering allies.

Kindness

The emotional subsystem for affiliation. It answers *“How do I signal I am a trustworthy and caring ally?”* through empathy and compassion. This talent is the engine of compassion and altruism. It signals "I am a safe and caring ally" through acts of generosity and empathy, encouraging reciprocity and strengthening the social fabric. It solves the problem of building goodwill and social capital.

Coach

The investment subsystem for affiliation. It addresses *“How can I strengthen my allies?”* by mentoring and developing the potential of others in the coalition. This talent invests in the growth and development of others within the coalition. It solves the problem of strengthening the group’s overall capability by answering "How can I help my allies become more capable?" It is the talent of the mentor and the teacher.

Flexible

The harmony subsystem for affiliation. It solves *“How do I avoid conflict and maintain group cohesion?”* by adapting one’s own behavior to the social context. This talent prioritizes group cohesion over individual preference. It solves the problem of "How do I avoid disruptive conflict?" by adapting one’s behavior, compromising, and going with the flow. It is the oil that reduces social friction.

Optimistic

The morale subsystem for affiliation. It focuses on *“How do I keep the group’s spirit high during adversity?”* by radiating positive energy and hope. This talent generates and radiates positive energy, especially in the face of adversity. It solves the problem of maintaining group spirit and resilience, preventing despair and giving the coalition the hope needed to persevere through tough times.

Equaliser

The conflict-resolution subsystem for affiliation. It manages *“How do we resolve disputes and restore harmony?”* by finding common ground and mediating disagreements. This talent is specialized for mediating disputes and restoring balance. It addresses the problem of intra-group conflict by finding common ground and facilitating fair outcomes, thereby healing rifts and preserving the coalition’s integrity.

Reinstate

The repair subsystem for affiliation. It addresses *"How do I help a fallen ally recover and rejoin the group?"* by providing support and restoring their status and confidence. This talent focuses on helping a group member who has failed or been ostracized to recover their status and confidence. It solves the problem of "How do we bring a valuable ally back into the fold?" preventing the permanent loss of a coalition member and strengthening group loyalty.

For a quick overview of Relating subsystems refer to Table4.

Table 4. Subsystems of the RELATING System

Subsystem	Adaptive Question Solved	Core Function
Binder	"How do I create unbreakable bonds?"	Fostering deep intimacy and loyalty for life-sustaining alliances.
Kindness	"How do I signal I am a trustworthy ally?"	Empathy and altruism that strengthen social reciprocity.
Coach	"How can I strengthen my allies?"	Mentorship and developmental investment in others.
Flexible	"How do I maintain harmony?"	Behavioral adaptation to sustain group cohesion.
Optimistic	"How do I sustain morale?"	Generating positive affect and resilience during adversity.
Equaliser	"How do we resolve conflict?"	Mediation and fairness to restore equilibrium.
Reinstate	"How do I help a fallen ally recover?"	Restorative support that rebuilds trust and inclusion.

9. LEADING DOMAIN

The pursuit of status, influence, and prestige constitutes a universal dimension of human motivation (Anderson et al., 2015; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Leadership, from an evolutionary–adaptive perspective, evolved as a social mechanism for coordinating group behavior, allocating resources, and ensuring collective survival. The Leading system within the TARL framework captures this higher-order motive transforming ambition and status-seeking into prosocial influence and collective uplift. The central adaptive challenge addressed by this system is: "How do I gain influence and respect in my group?"

This system integrates cognitive foresight from the Thinking dimension, behavioral regulation from the Acting system, and social intelligence from the Relating system synthesizing them into directional influence. Talents within this domain manifest as confidence, vision articulation, persuasion, and mentorship. Importantly, effective leadership is framed not as dominance but as prestige-based influence achieved through competence, fairness, and contribution to group success (Henrich et al., 2001).

In a strengths-based context, the Leading system channels individual aspiration into collective excellence, fostering environments where others can also thrive. It thus becomes both the integrator and multiplier of the preceding adaptive systems. Based on above arguments we posit that:

Proposition 4: The LEADING System is the Social Navigation and Influence System.

Subsystems of the LEADING System

The Leading System represents the adaptive suite through which humans navigate status hierarchies and exercise influence within social structures. Each subsystem reflects a distinct leadership mechanism ranging from signaling competence and asserting direction to inspiring collective movement and elevating others. Together, these subsystems channel the innate drive for status into prosocial and prestige-based forms of leadership that enhance group coordination and long-term survival. By integrating motivational energy with social intelligence, the Leading system transforms ambition into influence, ensuring that power is exercised not merely for dominance but for the advancement and cohesion of the collective. Below we explain each subsystem in detail:

Confidence

This is the signaling subsystem for status. It projects *"I am competent and deserve your followership,"* reducing uncertainty in followers and attracting support. This talent projects an aura of self-assurance and capability. It solves the problem of attracting followers by reducing their uncertainty, people are naturally drawn to those who appear to know what they are doing. It is the foundation of charismatic leadership.

Generalship

This is the command subsystem for status. It answers *"Who is in charge here?"* by taking control of situations and providing decisive direction, especially under pressure. This talent takes charge in ambiguous or high-pressure situations by providing clear direction and making tough calls, often associated with a dominance-oriented path to status.

Winner

This is the competitive subsystem for status. It is driven by the question *"How do I prove I am the best?"* fueling a desire for competitive victory and dominance. This talent is fueled by a desire to compete and win. It solves the problem of establishing superiority in zero-sum or competitive contexts, thereby claiming status by demonstrating superior ability or force.

Convincer

This is the persuasive subsystem for status. It specializes in *"How do I win you over to my side?"* using charm and tailored communication to build a following. This talent wins people over through tailored communication, charm, and building rapport and is central to the prestige pathway to leadership, where status is freely granted.

Speaker

This is the broadcast influence subsystem for status. It addresses *"How do I inspire and align the entire group?"* through powerful, persuasive communication to large audiences. This talent moves and aligns entire groups through powerful oratory and storytelling. It addresses the challenge of unifying a large coalition around a common goal, translating a leader's vision into shared motivation.

Starter

This is the initiative subsystem for status. It seizes the moment by asking *"When do we move?"* generating momentum and establishing leadership through action. This talent generates momentum by being the first to act and establishing leadership through action and forcing others to react to their agenda.

Enhancer

This is the prestige-by-proxy subsystem for status. It gains influence by answering *"How can I make everything and everyone around me elite?"* thereby earning respect and status as a catalyst for excellence. This talent gains status not just through personal achievement, but by elevating everything and everyone around them. It solves the problem of attaining prestige by becoming a catalyst for excellence, making others successful and, in turn, being revered as the source of that success.

For a quick overview of Leading subsystems refer to Table5.

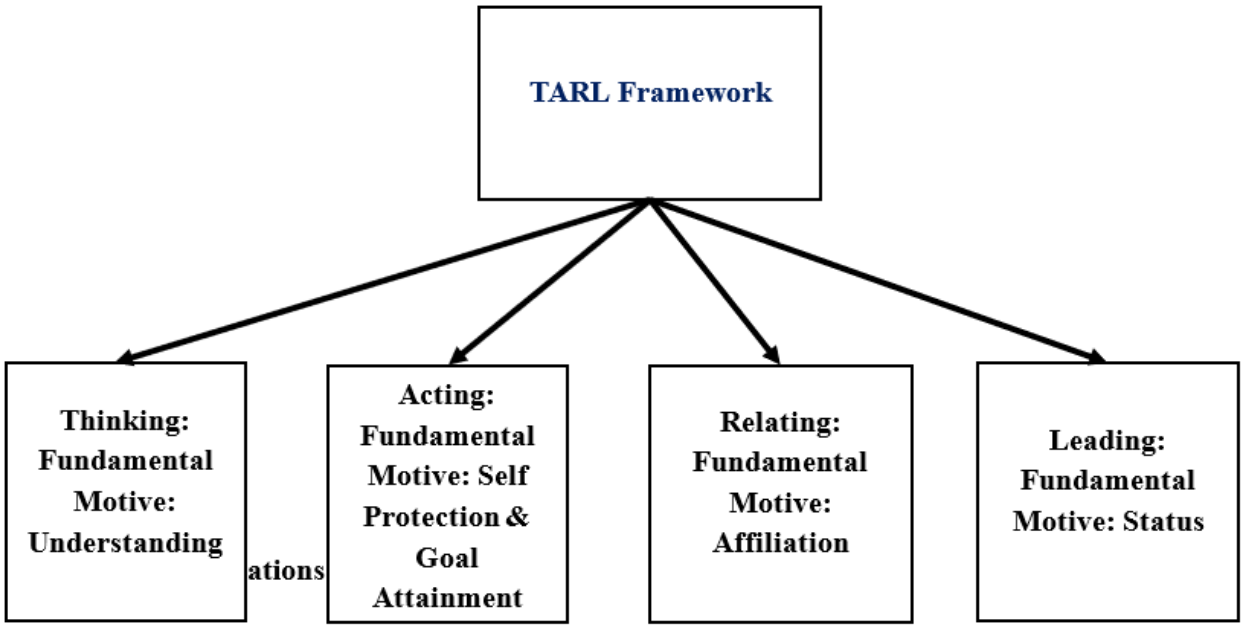
Table 5. Subsystems of the LEADING System

Subsystem	Adaptive Question Solved	Core Function
Confidence	"How do I signal competence?"	Projecting assurance to attract followership and reduce uncertainty.
Generalship	"Who provides direction?"	Command and decisiveness in complex or high-pressure situations.
Winner	"How do I prove my capability?"	Competitive excellence demonstrating mastery and superiority.
Convincer	"How do I win others to my side?"	Persuasive communication and social influence.
Speaker	"How do I inspire collective action?"	Visionary storytelling and public influence to unify groups.
Starter	"When do we move?"	Initiative that generates momentum and sets direction.
Enhancer	"How can I elevate others to excellence?"	Creating prestige by enabling collective success and systemic uplift.

10. Discussion

This paper set out to address a critical, widely-acknowledged theory-practice gap in talent measurement (Dries, 2013; Faber et al., 2016; Nijs et al., 2014). While the field has embraced the strengths-based imperative, its tools have often lacked a deep-seated connection to overarching psychological theory, leaving practitioners with robust data but insufficient explanation (Clark et al., 2019; Pellegrino et al., 2021). In response, we have introduced the TARL framework not merely as a typology of talents but as a theory-grounded model that provides a multi-level explanation for the very architecture of human talent. Refer to figure 1. By integrating the developmental philosophy of the strengths-based approach (Bryant et al., 2021; Clifton et al., 2003) with the explanatory power of Kenrick's fundamental motives theory (Kenrick et al., 2010), we have moved the conversation from descriptive categorization ("what" talents are) to explanatory science ("why" they exist and cluster as they do). This integration yields profound implications for both theory and practice, positioning the TARL framework as a bridge between the deep time of human evolution and the contemporary personal and organizational life.

Figure1: TARL Framework



Theoretical Implications

The primary theoretical contribution of this work is the synthesis of evolutionary psychology with industrial-organizational and strengths-based psychology. This synthesis forges a framework where the structure of talent is no longer seen as an arbitrary social construction, but as a reflection of deep, evolutionarily-conserved adaptive systems. This helps in first, moving from descriptive typology to an explanatory adaptive architecture**.** The four-domain structure of TARL (Thinking, Acting, Relating, Leading) is empirically validated by its psychometric properties (Ambasta et al., 2025). However, by positing that these domains represent fundamental systems for understanding, protecting/providing, affiliating, and attaining status (Kenrick et al., 2010), we provide the missing theoretical "why." This answers the call for greater theoretical clarity in talent measurement (Dries, 2013; Clark et al., 2019), moving beyond a purely factor-analytic endeavor. The framework suggests that our modern talents are the measurable expressions of ancient psychological adaptations, providing a stable, universal foundation upon which individual differences and cultural expressions are built.

Second, a key strength of the TARL model is its ability to seamlessly connect ultimate evolutionary explanations with proximate organizational behaviors. We can now understand that a high "Finisher" (Acting) feels a deep, often non-conscious drive to complete tasks because it is a modern expression of the ancestral imperative to secure a resource fully (Schaller et al., 2017). Similarly, the "Convincer's" (Leading) talent is a refined tool for navigating status hierarchies, a critical determinant of social success in our past (Anderson et al., 2015; Henrich et al., 2001). This bridge, as called for by the integration of fundamental motives theory (Cook et al., 2021), demonstrates that organizational behavior is not separate from human nature but is a complex, culturally-mediated expression of it.

Third, the evolutionary lens inherent in the TARL framework provides a powerful, de-stigmatizing narrative for individual differences. What might be misconstrued as a "bias" or "weakness" in a narrow context is often a highly tuned adaptive specialization. The "Cautious" talent's risk-aversion is not a flaw but a vital threat-detection system; the "Disruptor's" challenging nature is the engine of innovation when old solutions become obsolete. This perspective, aligns with the empowering ethos of the strengths-based philosophy (Clifton et al., 2003; Semigina, 2019), champions neurodiversity by framing different talent profiles not as deficits, but as specialized adaptive strategies that are crucial for collective resilience and problem-solving.

Fourth, the TARL framework offers a powerful, hierarchical heuristic for organizing the vast landscape of human differences. It acknowledges the granular specificity needed for precise prediction (the 28 themes) while providing the utility of broader, functionally coherent domains for understanding team climate and motivational fit. This structure allows for integration with other models, suggesting, for instance, that the Big Five's conscientiousness may be the phenotypic expression of a well-developed Acting domain, while extraversion and agreeableness may map onto the dynamic interplay between Leading and Relating.

Practical Implications

For practitioners, the evolutionarily-grounded TARL framework provides a more intuitive, actionable, and profound language for talent management, moving practice from a focus on "fit" to one of "alignment" with fundamental human motives. First, the framework enables a "motivational archeology of roles, moving beyond matching skills to job descriptions. Organizations can now define positions by their primary evolutionary demands. A Security Analyst role is fundamentally a Thinking (understanding threats) and Acting (vigilance) position. A Sales Manager role is a Leading (status, influence) and Relating (affiliation, building rapport) position (Baumeister et al., 1995). By selecting for complementary TARL profiles that align with these deep-seated demands, organizations can achieve a more sustainable person-role fit, leading to intrinsic motivation, higher engagement, and lower burnout. Second, the traditional development can feel remedial, focusing on "fixing" weaknesses. The TARL model, true to its strengths-based foundation (Clifton et al., 2003), reframes development as the process of "channeling" innate motivational energy. Coaching becomes more effective and authentic when it helps individuals leverage their innate wiring: a high Thinker can learn to apply their "Logical" talent to communicate complex strategies more effectively (channeling T into L), while a high Relator can leverage their "Coach" talent to deliver difficult feedback in a way that strengthens bonds rather than damaging them (refining R). This makes development a journey of self-actualization, not a catalog of deficiencies. Third, the framework provides a diagnostic blueprint for building resilient, high-performing teams. Leaders can now diagnose team dysfunctions not as personality conflicts, but as imbalances in fundamental adaptive systems. A team with a deficit in the Acting domain may be creative but will consistently miss deadlines. A team with an overabundance of Leading ("Winner") and a deficit in Relating ("Equaliser") will be rife with internal competition. Understanding this allows leaders to strategically compose teams, ensuring the group has the synthetic capabilities to understand, execute, connect, and influence as a cohesive unit.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

As a conceptual model, the TARL framework opens several avenues for future inquiry that can further validate and refine its propositions. First, the evolutionary interpretations, while theoretically grounded, require direct empirical testing. Future studies should employ behavioral genetics (e.g., heritability of TARL profiles), neuroscience (e.g., neural correlates of domain activation), and experimental methods (e.g., priming fundamental motives to see changes in talent expression) to test the proposed links between TARL domains and specific adaptive systems (Kenrick et al., 2010). Second, the model focuses on innate talents, the raw potential. A critical next step is to explore the dynamic interplay between TARL profiles, acquired knowledge, and practiced skills in the development of true, world-class "strength" as defined by Clifton & Harter (2003). Third, while the four-domain structure is proposed to be universal (an etic framework), the valuation, expression, and development of specific talents are shaped by culture (emic manifestations) (Cook et al., 2021; Pick et al., 2022). Cross-cultural research is essential to explore how, for example, the "Leading" domain is expressed in high versus low power-distance cultures. Fourth, the model emphasizes trait-like stability, but the activation of domains may shift across the lifespan, as suggested by Kenrick et al.'s (2010) life-stage model. Longitudinal research is needed to track how TARL profiles interact with life experiences and career transitions.

11. Conclusion

By providing a robust theoretical foundation that spans from the deep time of human evolution to the modern workplace, the TARL framework offers more than a new tool; it offers a new, more coherent narrative for

understanding human potential. It tells a story in which our modern professional struggles and triumphs in boardrooms, on sales floors, and in team meetings are contemporary expressions of ancient, adaptive challenges—to understand our world, to protect and provide, to form lasting bonds, and to earn respect. This framework powerfully addresses the theory-practice gap by moving the conversation beyond *what* people are good at to *why* they are motivated to do it in the first place. We hope this integration spawns a new wave of research and practice that is both scientifically rigorous and humanely applied, ultimately helping to build organizations where human nature is not a problem to be managed, but the very source of our collective strength, innovation, and fulfillment.

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