

An introduction to strengths at work

One of our most popular and successful events of recent times that IES has run, was 'The influence of strengths at work'. It was interesting to see how much demand there was for this new and emerging area of psychological thinking, and the energy that the discussions generated.

In many organisations, we see that development is based on identifying where people could do better, their 'gaps' and areas of poor performance, and trying to fix these. Much less time is spent on what people already do well and what energises them, and using these as a basis for developing high performance.

There is now emerging a new approach which, in a similar way to appreciative enquiry for organisational development, is focusing on how to identify what individuals *are good at*, what *energises* them and how to build on these things.

Background

Whilst focusing on strengths is an idea that is currently gaining prominence, it is certainly not a new idea. Immediately after the Second World War, Bernard Haldane developed an approach to help veterans returning from the war identify their strengths so they could return effectively to civilian life. Haldane believed that 'because you are unique, there is something that you are better at than anyone else'. His work lives on through the Dependable Strengths Articulation Process, and the Centre for Dependable Strengths, in Des Moines.

In 1967, Peter Drucker in his classic book *The Effective Executive* stated that: 'The effective executive makes strengths productive; (s)he knows that one cannot build on weaknesses. To achieve results, one has to use all the available strengths – the strengths of associates, the strengths of the superior, and one's own strengths. These strengths are the true opportunities.' Despite the common sense that lies behind this comment, it seems

that many of us still try to fix weaknesses, a model that started with our education, when traditionally the focus was always on correcting what was wrong rather than focusing on and building what is already good.

The very recent impetus, though, has come from work done in two different areas: Martin Seligman, the American founding father of Positive Psychology, and the work done by Gallup in the areas of strengths, engagement and performance. Martin Seligman in his presidential address to the American Psychological Association challenged his fellow psychologists to switch their focus from just fixing 'broken' people to also focus on identifying what is positive about individuals, organisations and communities. Seligman himself has gone on to build a classification of strengths based on character, virtues and values (see his 2002 book *Authentic Happiness* for a full description) which has broader applications than just work.

Alongside, Gallup has been developing the idea of focusing on strengths after analysing the results of their engagement survey. They identified* that organisations scoring highly on the statement: 'At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day' showed higher levels of productivity, customer loyalty and employee retention. Their work reached many people through two classic books: *First, break all the rules* (Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, 1999), and *Now, discover your strengths* (Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton, 2001). The latter introduces the on-line tool, Strengthsfinder, which people can use to identify their top five strengths based on the classification of 34 strengths developed from Gallup's extensive database.

Advances in neuroscience over the same period have confirmed that once neural pathways are established (probably by the late teenage years), it is easier to grow existing pathways than it is to create new ones; these strong neural pathways are those that are associated with

people's strengths. Indeed, this work suggests that it takes more energy to use weak neural pathways and so, in contrast, it feels energising to use those pathways that are already established. It is worth noting though, that it is possible to grow new pathways (and hence strengths) if someone has a strong reason to do so, believes that they can, and puts sufficient focus towards making it happen.

Work in the area of developing new strengths is really just beginning and so the underlying view of the strengths-focused approach is that strengths are essentially fixed and that the question is how best to use them.

Identifying and deploying strengths

Strengths are more than just things that we are good at, they are underlying qualities that:

- **energise us**; we feel good when we are doing them (although we may be so wrapped up in the activity that we don't actually notice) and we look forward to using them
- contribute to our **personal growth**; we naturally seek to find out more and get better in the strength area
- lead to **peak performance**; we achieve high quality results time and time again when we are using a strength

Strengths can be skills (eg presenting, analysing data, selling), knowledge (eg product knowledge, employment law,) or characteristics (eg empathetic, competitive).

It is important to be as specific as possible about defining a strength, thinking about the context (who, when, where, why) as well as the skill, knowledge or characteristic itself.

Example ■ A first thought about a strength might be 'presentation skills'. With a little further thought, it might become 'presenting new business ideas to senior management so that they are enthused to take action'. Or, it might become 'presenting complex ideas in a simple way so that my colleagues gain new insights'.

There are different means by which people can identify their strengths, including psychometric type tools such as *Strengthsfinder* and *Strengthscope*. Alternatively, people can work through a structured process of reflection on what energises them. When strengths have been identified, they can be deployed through a process that we call DANCE:

Develop	How can you strengths be further developed so that someone becomes truly outstanding in the area of strength?
Apply	How can strengths be applied so that someone can fulfil their existing role even better?
New things	What new things can someone do with their strengths, perhaps taking on new responsibilities that play to their strengths?
Cope with non-strengths	How can someone use their strengths to cope with weaker areas, or perhaps partner with others with the relevant strengths?
Expand awareness	How can someone help others become more aware of what their strengths are so that they get more opportunity to demonstrate their strengths?

Reflections on strengths-focused approaches

Some people when they first hear about strengths-focused approaches think that it is another soft and fluffy approach to managing people, whereas in practice the opposite is true. A strengths-focused organisation focuses strongly on performance outcomes, but rather than defining all the behaviours or competencies that are necessary to get there, it accepts that people with different strengths will get there in their own way. Indeed, in the manner of DANCE, it actually helps people use their strengths to be more productive.

This doesn't mean that weaknesses are ignored, but in fact they are tackled head-on by helping people use their own strengths to manage the weakness, by finding other people that have the relevant strength to help or, if the weakness is genuinely business critical, by providing development to bring the weakness up to an acceptable level. Similarly, a strengths-focus doesn't mean that individuals can decide that they just won't do something because it doesn't play to their strengths; there needs to be a continued recognition that the organisation has objectives that employees need to help achieve. There is also the risk of people over-playing their strengths and using them in situations where it is not appropriate, a concept called by some 'strengths in overdrive'. Remember, strengths are only strengths when they lead to repeated high-level performance.

Another quite common response when people first hear about strengths-focused approaches, is for them to say either that their job is defined so they have no scope to use their strengths, or that their business (or team) is so

small that they just have to do things that don't play to their strengths. Whilst people in these situations may be constrained more than some others, the interesting question is whether they can find some way to use their strengths more. Even though they may not reach the 75 per cent aspired to by some organisations, they may be able to move up from where they are now. And the key point is how to achieve the same goals, but using different skills and strengths, rather than changing what they are setting out to achieve.

So, there is an opportunity to help individuals become more engaged with their work by playing to their strengths (a stretching target of spending 75 per cent of their time using their strengths is one set by some organisations), whilst still being very focused on delivering business results. Clearly, as the valuable assets of businesses continue to shift from tangibles and information to the performance of the people, finding new ways to get the most from people (and provide fulfilling work for them) moves even higher up the agenda. Many organisations are now wondering how they can access even more of the real potential of their

people. A switch away from fixing weaknesses to identifying, building and using strengths appears to be one possible route to move up to the next level. Certainly, IES's experience, when working with teams and individuals in coaching, is that switching the focus to what works and what people's strengths are, changes the nature of the conversation, leads to much higher energy levels and ultimately to better performance.

* Harter JK, Schmidt FL, Hayes TL (2002). 'Business-unit-level relationship between employee satisfaction, employee engagement, and business outcomes: A meta-analysis', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87, 268-279

Contact

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About IES

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IES aims to help bring about sustainable improvements in employment policy and human resource management. We achieve this by increasing the understanding and improving the practice of key decision makers in policy bodies and employing organisations.

We believe that HR can make a significant impact on the success of organisations of all types. In order to help bring this about, we help organisations:

- decide what they want HR to achieve
- identify what high performing HR people are like
- design and deliver bespoke development programmes for HR people
- evaluate how they are progressing against their goals.

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