

## ***Support for Strength-Based Development? It's been there all along...***

– Michelle Shields, PhD, Organisational Psychology

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Self-awareness is the foundation of any leader's development. Knowing what you're good at helps you make good decisions about your career. Yet, as a society, we gravitate to the gaps – to where the deficits are. This is one reason people dislike performance reviews – they focus too much on talking about what needs fixing. Over the last few years we've seen organisations toss performance management aside in favour of development conversations. Cutting out the evaluation of gaps and focusing on what employees have done well and where there is potential for even greater impact. Taking a strengths-based focus is not new – it's around for some time.

The idea of developing strengths was addressed by Peter Drucker, in his seminal work on personal leadership (Best of HBR, 1999). In Drucker's words, "*Most people think they know what they are good at. They are usually wrong. More often, people know what they are not good at—and even then, more people are wrong than right. And yet, a person can perform only from strength. One cannot build performance on weaknesses, let alone on something one cannot do at all.*"

Inherent in the idea of 'leaning in to what one is good at' is the concept of 'flow' described by recently deceased (2021) Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. When we're working in the 'flow' we find genuine satisfaction and experience a state of consciousness that sees time passing without notice. To reach this level of performance, you are likely doing something that you enjoy and therefore over time, get better at. There is no limit to how good you can become at a given skill, though, taken to extremes, we may see a flip-side to a leadership strength readily evident when we performed at a moderate level (e.g. Kaiser, LeBreton & Hogan, 2012).

Using tools such as the *Strengths Finder*, the Gallup Organization have found support for using a strengths-based approach and that:

- People who use their strengths every day are six times more likely to be engaged;
- Teams that focus on strengths every day have 12.5% greater productivity and;
- Teams that receive strengths feedback have 8.9% greater profitability.

The emphasis on strengths is also a core tenet of the positive psychology school of thought as reflected by Martin Seligman, author of *Authentic Happiness* and *Flourish*. Seligman in his speech at the Lincoln Summit in 1999 expressed frustration when he addressed his American Psychological Association colleagues saying that, psychology is 'half-baked' and that the psychology profession gets "the part about mental illness [while] the other side's unbaked, the side of strength, the side of what we're good at."

So why do we focus on weaknesses when a concerted effort to do so results in mediocre performance overall? To illustrate this point, psychometrician, Joe Folkman looked at 24,657 leaders who had participated in 360-degree feedback assessments. Each had at least seven respondents and results showed that regardless of how much effort they spent trying to correct weaknesses, their efforts only brought them to the midpoint on the overall measure of effectiveness (Zenger, 2012). In contrast, Folkman found that when someone excelled at three to five competencies — defined as being at the 90th percentile or above — they were highly likely to be one of the organization's top-tier leaders. Results showed that those working on strengths had roughly *twice the gain* as those working on weaknesses.

Drucker's, Seligman's and Folkman's call for a strengths-based approach requires that as OD practitioners, we help organisations to shift their thinking. We can do this by the numbers – Zenger Folkman's analysis showed that only 28 percent of leaders have weaknesses that are so glaring that they must be addressed, while 72 percent of leaders should be focused on building their strengths.

To shift the cultural mindset, we need to start with the leaders at the top of the organization. The feedback they receive (which is often scarce) needs to reflect identification of their profound strengths so that they experience the difference for themselves.

To tap into an executive's strengths, we can use tools such as multi-rater feedback questionnaires (360-degree feedback) that enable us to measure:

- *What does this leader do better than anyone else?*
- *What unique capabilities and resources does the leader possess?*
- *What do others perceive as the person's strengths?*

Once executive teams have experienced a strengths-based approach for themselves (an experience that many report is 'surprisingly refreshing'), then a cascade of the approach down through the leadership layers helps ensure that development conversations that focus on what employees do well are consistent with top leadership experience of the same. One organization we worked with has used this approach for several years. It is now customary (and expected) that those who attend the organisation's leadership development programme will have a conversation with their manager about how they can build on their strengths.

Our work helping organisations take a strengths-based approach extends beyond individual 360s to include development of teams who are looking to expand positive psychology approaches. One way they do this is by mapping team skills to strengths-based criteria of success. Another extension of the approach is to craft an organisational strategy that differentiates the organization based on the products and services that they are good at, that they can build on and that will continue to set them apart in the marketplace. For more information on taking a strengths-based approach with your team, contact ODI who can connect you with the resources you need.

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