Ways to embed the strengths approach into the DNA of the organization

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how the adoption of strengths-focused human resources (HR) can deliver measurable business returns, from hard results such as increased revenues and reduced costs, to “lead” indicators of future success: for example better customer engagement, improved morale, discretionary effort and personal wellbeing. The author, from specialist provider, Strengths Partnership, aims to explain how to identify and extract the “strengths DNA” from each individual and to build a convincing business case for the use of strengths, in all its different contexts, within the workplace.

Design/methodology/approach – The central methodology in this paper is extracted from Strengths Partnership’s leading Strengthscope assessment tool, designed to help individuals understand their standout strengths; the unintended consequences that may arise when strengths go into overdrive; the extent to which they are able to productively apply their strengths at work; and how visible their strengths are to others. The information is based on seven years of research conducted by Strengths Partnership into identifying, optimizing and developing strengths in organizations, supported by a growing body of published research and literature in positive psychology and strengths-based approaches to organizational effectiveness.

Findings – If they can surmount the challenge of how to embed this approach into their HR life cycle and core HR activities, organizations will see a major paradigm shift from an emphasis on fixing weaknesses to one that encourages a person’s natural energies and inclinations in the pursuit of success.

Research limitations/implications – HR and learning and development professionals need a different set of principles and tools to get the most out of the strengths approach and to ensure it becomes part of the organization’s DNA. Without these, the approach is unlikely to deliver real value beyond the initial feel-good factor that invariably arises during an initial strengths training program.

Originality/value – More research and tool development is needed in this area; however the ideas and approaches in this article will help to embed the strengths approach throughout the employee life cycle – from hiring and selection, through team development, development and culture change.

Keywords Strengths, Strengthscope, Assessment, Energy, Engagement

Paper type Research paper

Most businesses struggle to get maximum value from their human capital. This undermines their business success, particularly in today’s tough operating environment where higher levels of discretionary effort, agility and engagement among staff can mean the difference between success and failure. The value of strengths-based approaches to employee selection, development and talent management is well documented, with strengths and positive mindset being linked with a variety of outcome measures, including productivity, engagement, creativity, teamwork, etc. For example, in a study of over 300,000 employees in 51 companies, it was found that work units scoring above the median on the question “I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day” have 38 percent higher probability of success on productivity measures and 44 percent higher probability of success on customer loyalty and employee retention (Harter et al., 2002).
What we are witnessing is almost certainly the early stages of a major paradigm shift and transformational change within organizations — from an emphasis on weakness fixing to one that encourages a person's natural energies and inclinations in the pursuit of success. However, the challenge for many organizations is how to embed this approach into their HR life cycle and core HR activities so that it is not seen as another “fad” or “bolt on,” but creates enduring and measurable value for the organization.

In this article, we will propose a systematic and pragmatic approach to integrate strengths-based HR principles, practices and tools into some of the key HR activities of the organization, ensuring they become part of the DNA of the organization and improve performance on the individual, team and organizational levels.

Assessment and selection

Understanding the strengths (i.e. “underlying qualities that energize us, contribute to our personal growth and lead to peak performance”) (Brook and Brewerton, 2006) of employees should be the first stage in any organizational program designed to introduce a strengths-based approach. A strengths profiling tool such as Strengthscope™ (which has the added benefit of an optional multi-rater module), ensures reliable and accurate data is available to employees as well as HR and line management decision-makers to ensure strengths can be optimized in pursuit of organizational goals.

A common strengths framework and language also ensures effective sharing of information about strengths, as well as more effective deployment of strengths across organizational boundaries. Some of our clients have created databases of employee strengths that are then used to make decisions about how to allocate work and project assignments.

Strengths assessment and one-to-one or group debriefs to explore the implications of the profiles also enables the organization to identify what we term “performance risk” areas, including limiting weaknesses, strengths in overdrive and other blockers (including internal psychological blockers and external environmental blockers). Since these risks can sap people’s positive energy, undermine performance and confidence and derail people’s careers, we believe they cannot be ignored. We see the relationship between strengths optimization and overcoming performance risks as a dynamic Yin-Yang tension that requires continuous monitoring and recalibration. It is not sufficient to focus on only one side of the equation; both aspects require an investment of time, energy and resources depending on situational demands and the individual’s personality.

Achieving a better fit

In hiring and selection of talent, we combine Strengthscope with other assessment tools, such as strengths-based interviews, role plays, work simulations, ability tests and values inventories, to understand how the strengths translate into habits and learned behaviors as well as the values, abilities and motives underpinning a candidates’ strengths. Our strengths-based interview methodology augments the traditional competency-based approach by exploring the candidates’ natural strengths and energies and how these fit to the role requirements and organizational culture. We also explore what the candidate has learned from using these strengths and the extent to which (s)he has been able to adapt these to the demands of varying situations.

Candidates experiencing this approach report far higher levels of satisfaction with the process as compared with traditional approaches, as it is a more open, natural conversation.
and has a strong developmental component. Clients using this approach also report a better natural fit of candidates to the target role as candidates’ natural strengths and passions, as well as their skills, knowledge and abilities, are aligned with the requirements of the role and organization.

Career development

Used in combination with other tools and models, such as Schein's career anchors framework, a strengths assessment profiler can be tremendously powerful for helping participants to establish the following:

- How their strengths have shaped their careers to date.
- How they could use their strengths to support future career aspirations.
- How they can “stretch” or develop their strengths outside their comfort zone in order to achieve their goals.
- How they can manage and mitigate performance risks including limiting weaknesses and strengths in overdrive in order to progress their career.

We typically take people through a powerful five-As strengths to success development process involving the following:

- **Aspiration**: Clarifying their career goals or aspirations and how these relate to the organization’s vision and goals.
- **Awareness**: Raising awareness of their strengths and performance risks.
- **Action**: Defining and implementing productive patterns of behavior and engaging in deep practice to reinforce these patterns. This stage also involves tackling dysfunctional habits and unproductive routines.
- **Agility**: Ensuring strengths are being used in a situationally appropriate way, i.e. in the right amount, at the right time in the right way. We often use the analogy of a volume control on a radio to help people understand the importance of fine-tuning the volume of their strengths to match the needs of the situation.
- **Achievement**: In addition to appropriately marking progress and specific achievements, this stage involves ensuring continuous feedback loops and stretch to promote a virtuous cycle of confidence and success.

Ways in which people can stretch their strengths include discovering opportunities to use their strengths in new or different ways within or outside their role, developing skills and knowledge and drilling or practicing productive routines through using their strengths in different ways across varying situations.

Performance appraisal

Performance appraisals or dialogues are another crucial element of optimizing talent, however, most of the times both managers and employees dislike the process because they fall short of expectations. The focus of the traditional one-sided appraisal is on weaknesses and competency “gaps,” very often resulting in negative criticism and disempowering conversations that leave the employee feeling demotivated and disengaged.

Research shows that deploying a strengths-focused approach in performance appraisal and objective-setting conversations results in significant improvements in employee performance and motivation.

In its simplest form, managers who are aware of their direct reports’ strengths and performance risks can use this information to pose some strengths-focused questions in the performance review, such as the following:

- Which of your standout strengths have you used in the past performance period to positive effect? What happened? How did it feel? What did you learn?
Which strength or strengths do you feel will be most useful to you during the next performance period? What will you need to plan to do to ensure you use this strength as effectively as possible?

Which of your strengths would you like to stretch and develop in the next performance period? How shall we plan to support you with this?

We encourage managers to move away from the popular mixed message or “sandwich” approach when undertaking performance dialogues with employees as research and our own experience shows that this undermines both the employee's performance and the manager-employee relationship. It demotivates high performing staff and leaves poor performing staff feeling upbeat about their performance.

Rather, we advocate that managers classify employees in accordance with their performance level and apply a simple 80-20 “rule of thumb” when having a performance dialogue. In accordance with this formula, for employees who have performed at a reasonable or high level we recommend that 80 percent of the time is focused on strengths-building and stretching strengths and the other 20 percent is focused on helping the person work through performance risks, including limiting weaknesses and strengths in overdrive. Conversely, for those who are underperforming, 80 percent of the discussion should focus on overcoming performance risks and blockers and 20 percent of the conversation should focus on strengths-building. This type of approach paves the way for a more productive and energizing performance conversation, but does not shy away from the need to resolve performance problems in a firm but fair manner.

Focusing on flow

With several of our clients, including a major central bank, we have used the concept of “flow” as input to the conversation between line managers and employees. The concept of flow originates from the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) who used this to describe peak motivational experiences. He proposed that optimal performance occurs when we are in a mental state of “in flow” and are completely involved in an activity for its own sake. It is also described as being in the “zone” or “groove.”

Flow can take place when we are using our strengths optimally and the level of strength and skill is matched by the level of role challenge. By inviting employees to think about times they have been in flow and areas where strengths and skills are not appropriately matched to the challenges of the job, managers can help their employees use their strengths more productively and achieve higher levels of engagement and performance.

Ongoing feedback from the manager and co-workers will help the person to stay in the zone of “peak performance,” or the crossover point where areas of competence (skills, knowledge and abilities) overlap with areas of natural strength and energy. In this way, the person has the greatest chance of achieving sustained high performance.

Team development

Using strengths-based assessment and development tools and techniques for team development helps to achieve the following:

- Facilitate complementary partnering and collaborative working based on team members’ strengths.
- Illuminate weaker areas where the team may have to invite external support.
- Encourage a positive, energized team environment.
- Build appreciation of diversity and contribute to relationships of trust, openness and mutual respect.

Using an assessment tool like StrengthscopeTeam™ helps the team leader and team understand the distribution of strengths in the team as well as research-based team habits, which are required to translate these strengths into productive outcomes. It also provides high quality input on performance risk factors, including weaker areas and strengths in overdrive, which the team can target for improvement and skill building.
Once the team is more aware of its strengths as well as performance risks, a facilitator can work with it to put in place a focused development plan that builds on the team’s clear strengths and overcomes areas of risks and limitation in furtherance of the team’s goals. This is typically a longer-term process over several months, during which the team is moved through the 5-As strengths to success development process, from Aspiration to Achievement, mentioned previously.

Leadership development and coaching

Recent research supports the idea that rather than all having similar traits, successful leaders have very different strengths and qualities that they draw on in achieving their results. What they have in common is that each truly understands and can leverage his/her unique combination of strengths, skills and abilities (i.e. their “leadership edge”) to get the most out of people and teams in any given situation. By helping leaders understand their strengths and how they can use these to further their own, as well as the organization’s goals and aspirations, an organization can establish a strong, durable people advantage.

One of the key aspects of this is for leaders to understand how they can not only stretch their strengths to the next level, but also help people and teams find positive stretch. By “positive stretch” we mean stretch that is in line with their strengths, but is also supported through leadership that provides relevant information, devolves decision making, provides constructive and regular feedback and engages in open and respectful dialogues. Conversely, negative stretch is stretch in areas of weakness or non-strength (neutral areas that can deplete the person’s energy if they do too much of these activities) or unsupported stretch – “being thrown in at the deep end.”

Our modular strengths-based leadership development program is supplemented by action learning methodologies including peer coaching, action learning groups and project work. We also use a proprietary strengths-focused coaching process called STRONG to support leaders in their development. STRONG is an acronym that reflects the different stages of the coaching process, as shown below:

- S: Setting stretch goals.
- T: Translating goals into specific plans and strategies.
- R: Releasing productive strengths.
- O: Overcoming risk areas and blockers.
- N: Nurturing progress.
- G: Gaining commitment.

This highly contextualized and action-learning development format is aimed at helping the leader gain a better understanding of their strengths and how they can use these to improve the way they lead in a way that works best for them and feels authentic. We also work with leaders to explore ways to overcome performance risks and potential derailment factors, including limiting weaknesses. To get the most out of such a program of this nature, particularly when it involves the whole leadership team, it is beneficial to encourage disclosure and discussion of leadership insights and commitments from one-to-one coaching discussions during team development meetings. This will ensure awareness is translated into action, not only at the individual level, but in the team context as well.
Robust and systematic measurement

As with any HR approach, robust and systematic measurement of the effectiveness of the approach and specific interventions is crucial in order to determine its value and ensure continuous improvement. In our work with clients, we typically advocate measuring effectiveness of different levels, including participant reactions, specific learning, skill acquisition and behavior change and impact on business results.

To measure the effectiveness of Strengthscope-based interventions, we have introduced what we call the “Strengths Engagement Index.” This measures the extent to which employee engagement increases as a result of strengths interventions, together with the extent to which respondents feel they are able to use their strengths more productively to achieve work outcomes. Respondents are invited to complete a short questionnaire pre- and post-intervention, which enables the shift in engagement and productive use of strengths to be measured over time.

More innovative tools required

The mobile phone era has brought with it the need for different ways of thinking and a myriad of innovative tools (iPhones and other smartphones, games, 3G base stations, camera phones, etc) to ensure relevance and maximum value creation. In the same way, HR and learning and development professionals need a different set of principles and tools to get the most out of the strengths approach and to ensure it becomes part of the organization’s DNA. Without these, the approach is unlikely to deliver real value beyond the initial feel-good factor and buzz that invariably arises during an initial strengths training program.

Although a lot more research and tool development is needed in this area, the ideas and approaches in this article will help ensure the strengths approach is deeply embedded throughout the employee life cycle, from hiring and selection, through team development, to development and culture change.

References


About the author

James Brook is Co-founder and Director of Strengths Partnership Ltd, a specialist provider of strengths-focused assessment and training services. An accomplished executive coach, facilitator, consultant and speaker, he has over 15 years’ experience developing high performing leaders, teams and organizations through helping people optimize their distinctive strengths and competencies. He has a Masters Degree in Industrial and Organizational Psychology and an MBA from the University of Maryland in the USA, as well as an Advanced Diploma in Executive Coaching. He is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (FCIPD), and is also a member of the Association of Business Psychologists. James Brook can be contacted at: james.brook@strengthspartnership.com

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