



Let Your Employees Flex Their Muscles

Why Strengths-Based Development Is Good for Business

“Everyone is a genius. But if you judge a fish on its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid.” – Albert Einstein

Think for a minute about something you do really well. How do you feel when someone notices or compliments you on that thing you do well? Proud? Confident? Strong? Capable?

Now think about something you don’t do so well. How do you feel when someone points out that weakness? Self-conscious? Sub-par? Unmotivated? Demoralized?

Using this example, it’s easy to see how the conventional approach to personal and professional development — which is to maintain strengths, but fix weaknesses — may not produce the desired results. This is why many organizations are taking a strengths-based approach to development, enabling employees to identify and develop talents, focus on strengths and manage around weaknesses.

What Is Strengths-Based Development?

Psychologist Donald O. Clifton is credited with founding the strengths-based psychology movement in the 1950s ... and it all began with a simple question — “What will happen when we think about what is right with people rather than fixating on what is wrong with them?” Clifton’s decades of research on strengths and success led him, along with researcher and author Tom Rath and a team of scientists at Gallup, to create the online StrengthsFinder assessment. Since its release in 1998, the Clifton StrengthsFinder has become the world’s best-selling strengths assessment tool. The idea behind strengths-based development is simple — when people are allowed and encouraged to utilize and build upon their strengths, as opposed to trying to “fix” their weaknesses, they perform better, are more confident, are happier and are more engaged.

What Are the Benefits of Focusing on Strengths?

Gallup has done extensive research on strengths-based development and has studied hundreds of workgroups that are using strengths-based interventions to examine the effects those interventions are having on workgroup performance. In one such recent study, which included 49,495 business units with 1.2 million employees across 22 organizations in seven industries and 45 countries, Gallup researchers examined six outcomes of the strengths-based approach: sales, profit, customer engagement, turnover, employee engagement and safety.

As Brandon Rigoni and Jim Asplund of Gallup report in the *Gallup Business Journal* article “Strengths-Based Employee Development: The Business Results,” “On average, workgroups that received a strengths intervention improved on all of these measures by a significant amount compared with control groups that received less-intensive interventions or none at all.” The study found that 90 percent of the workgroups that received strengths intervention had performance increases at or above the following ranges:

- 10 percent to 19 percent increased sales;
- 14 percent to 29 percent increased profit;
- 3 percent to 7 percent higher customer engagement;
- 6 percent to 16 percent lower turnover for low-turnover organizations and 26 percent to 72 percent lower turnover for high-turnover organizations;

- 9 percent to 15 percent increase in engaged employees; and
- 22 percent to 59 percent fewer safety incidents.

Writes Rigoni and Asplund, “Almost seven in 10 employees (67 percent) who strongly agree that their manager focuses on their strengths or positive characteristics are engaged. When employees strongly disagree with this statement, the percentage of workers who are engaged in their work plummets to 2 percent.”

Other studies have proven that when individuals work within their areas of weakness, they can only improve slightly; but if they work within their areas of strength, they can grow exponentially. Becky Carter, human resources specialist for the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources (IANR) at University of Nebraska-Lincoln, is seeing this in action with IANR’s workforce. The Institute is rolling out strengths-based development for all of its 1,100+ employees, infusing the practice into performance management, team building, onboarding and leadership training. What results has Carter seen? “When people are operating in their strengths zone, they are more energized and excited about their work and are making a bigger impact on their own performance and the overall mission of the IANR,” she says. “They learn their roles faster and adjust to change more quickly, they are more precise and more productive, and they are more engaged and innovative.”

Adds Carol Ott Schacht, leadership consultant for IANR, “Research has shown that people who focus on using their strengths look forward to coming to work; are more likely to tell people they work for a great company; have more positive than negative interactions with coworkers; treat customers better; achieve more on a daily basis; and are three times more likely to report having an excellent quality of life.”

How to Move Toward a Strengths-Based Environment

Like any change, getting people on board with strengths-based development may take some time. The key is to start small and infuse elements of it where you can, for example in the realm of performance management, as IANR has done. The Institute is moving away from annual performance evaluations and toward more frequent and meaningful conversations which, says Carter, are more like work strategy sessions. “We’re emphasizing the need for managers to recognize the strengths their employees bring

to the table and to be more affirming of those strengths and how they can be used and developed to the benefit of both the employee and the unit.” Human resources also created a five-question conversation guide for managers to use during these conversations. Questions include: “What accomplishments have you had since the last time we met?” “What will you accomplish before we meet again?” “What are your natural strengths and talents, how can you further utilize them in your job, and how can we help you further develop them?” “What challenges are you currently facing?” and “How can I help you be your best?”

Onboarding is another area in which a strengths-based approach can be easily infused. At IANR, every new hire takes the Clifton StrengthsFinder. Says Carter, “Not only does this help identify these new employees’ strengths right off the bat, but it also helps them very quickly start to understand the strengths-based culture we’re building.” Results are shared with the employee’s supervisor so as to inform meaningful conversation between the two. Manager training on the strengths-based approach is also fairly easy to do and can help to begin to shift the mindset around talent development. After managers are trained on the concept, it can be rolled out to all staff.

Findings from the previously mentioned Gallup study uncovered seven strategies common to organizations that accomplished the most with their strengths-based development approaches. According to Rigoni and Asplund, these strategies are:

- **Leadership alignment:** Putting the elements in place for a strengths-based culture, beginning at the top;
- **Manager alignment:** Developing teams and employees from the perspective of strengths;
- **Internal communication:** Generating awareness of and enthusiasm for strengths;
- **Strengths community:** Making strengths an integral and natural part of the organization’s day-to-day operations;
- **Performance management:** Focusing development and recognition on employees’ strengths;
- **Coaching:** Building a network of strengths experts and advocates; and
- **Brand building:** Tying the organization’s strengths-based culture to its larger brand.

Tools for Identifying Strengths

There are some great tools available to help an individual identify his or her strengths and learn how to better use them at work. IANR has had great success using the following (which can all be found with a quick Google search):

Clifton StrengthsFinder

So far, roughly a third of IANR’s workforce has taken the StrengthsFinder assessment. “This is the first step in implementing our strengths-based development approach at the Institute,” says Carter.

Love It or Loathe It

From Marcus Buckingham’s book *Go Put Your Strengths to Work*, this simple exercise, where you record everything you did at work during a given week and note whether you loved it or loathed it, can help you determine what energizes you and what saps your energy at work, and can help you think about how you can infuse more of what you love into your days.

FREE and STOP

Also from Buckingham, this activity can help you free your strengths and stop your weaknesses. By answering a series of questions, you can identify how and where a specific strength helps in your current role and think about how you can use that strength more in your work. Another series of questions helps you think about how you might be able to stop spending so much time on what you don’t like about your job.

Five Clues to Talent

This activity from Gallup can help you identify your strengths by thinking about to which activities you are naturally drawn, which activities energize you and which activities you truly enjoy.

Play to Their Strengths

Letting your employees flex their muscles by using their strengths every day at work makes good business sense. When your organization focuses its attention on what’s right with people instead of what’s wrong, you’ll reap the benefits of more confident, higher performing, happier and more productive individuals and teams. 

To learn more about strengths-based development and how University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources is using the model with its workforce, view CUPA-HR’s free, on-demand webinar “Strengths-Based Development: What’s Right With You” at www.cupahr.org/webinars.