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STRENGTHS – THE HEARTBEAT OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

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Rarely has a topic received such overwhelming interest from HR practitioners and line managers as employee engagement. Organisations are queuing up to purchase 'snake oil' solutions to try to eek out additional discretionary effort and performance from employees. This trend has been amplified by strong evidence from recent research suggesting that employee engagement is directly related with customer satisfaction and financial indicators of performance such as sales growth and revenue (e.g Rucci, Kirn and Quinn, 1998). By James Brook, director and co-founder of The Strengths Partnership.

However, based on our own experience, most of the efforts we see in organisations aimed at strengthening employee engagement are significantly misguided. Why? Because the main underlying assumption is flawed – that employees are all engaged in the same way. This leads companies to approach employee engagement from a systems and process perspective, rolling out "one size fits all" solutions that may appeal to some employees, but generally fall short of the overriding purpose – to engage all or at least the vast majority of employees. In their attempt to energise employees and motivate extraordinary performance, efforts we typically see are new reward programmes, investment in standardised training or personal development workshops and new employee relations programmes aimed at enhancing employees' wellbeing.

We are not suggesting that such programmes are without merit and measurable benefit. However, they fail to take account of the most critical aspect of employee engagement – the importance of the employees' personal experience of engagement and the role his/her underlying strengths play in freeing up positive energy and discretionary effort. Our experience suggests that rather than seeking quick-fix, generic solutions to engagement, the starting point should be to understand employees' unique strengths.

By helping employees explore and understand how their strengths can be more productively deployed, organisations will be building a strong and sustainable basis for employee engagement and performance excellence. There are numerous benefits to helping employees understand and play to their strengths including:

- Ensuring they get clarity on their natural strengths so they can realise their full potential
- Heightening their positive energy and confidence, which is crucial for performance improvement
- Providing people with an improved understanding of how to manage their weaker areas.

Experience with a growing number of clients suggests that focusing on individual and team strengths really does unlock and focus energy and effort. Individuals start seeing old problems and performance blockers in a new light – through a strengths 'lens'. Their managers also challenge old assumptions they have about employees' weaknesses when they learn that these are overplayed strengths or strengths in overdrive.

Our work has shown us that it is necessary to provide individuals with practical and accurate assessment of their strengths (using a tool like ©Strengthscope), ideally one that provides feedback from multiple raters and not simply the individual's self-assessment. Since people are not used to talking about strengths and generally describe them in extremely non-specific ways (e.g., "I am a good communicator" or "I am excellent with people"), a major benefit of such an assessment is that it provides a language for people to start exploring their strengths.

For example, one of our clients, Thermo Fisher Scientific Inc., a global leader in supplying equipment and services to the scientific community, approached us in June 2007 to run a pilot Strengthscope Programme for HR practitioners. This involved exposing 20 UK-based HR professionals from Thermo Fisher's businesses to strengths-focused thinking as part of a "Growing from Strength to Strength" HR capability building programme initiated by the HR Director, Vanessa Mallett. The idea of building on strengths to leverage individual and team capabilities fitted well with ThermoFisher's approach to performance management and development, as well as their competency framework and values. As a result of this workshop, ©Strengthscope and the underlying strengths assumptions have been incorporated into the management development programme for Fisher Clinical Services, one of Thermo Fisher's key businesses. The incorporation of strengths assumptions has positively impacted engagement in a number of ways including:

Positive, appreciative feedback from managers invited to rate management development participants as part of ©Strengthscope's multi-rater feedback process:

- Enhanced self-esteem, optimism and sense of ownership for development among participants
- Improved teamwork built around complementary strengths partnering, where people with different strengths and talents work closely together to leverage their combined capabilities
- Creative exploration of development opportunities which play to strengths outside participants' current roles
- Consideration of the unintended performance consequences of overplayed strengths or strengths in overdrive.

Mike Yellow, learning and development manager for Fisher Clinical Services, summarised his experiences with strengths assessment and development as follows: "It is an excellent developmental process - it starts with the positives of 'now' and can then be used to focus on future development, using present strengths to help this development. It has also allowed employees to look outside their present role and consider future roles in relation to their strength profile. Everyone left the sessions feeling very positive about themselves and their ability to develop further. They have also openly stated how useful it has been."

This project has not been without challenges and critics. As with most clients, there was some initial resistance to the strengths-focused approach. Several felt that it was too positive and optimistic, preferring instead a weaknesses-based development approach which more closely matched their upbringing and personal experience. Others found it difficult to talk about their strengths, fearing coming across as complacent, superior or arrogant. However, our experience suggests that this type of inertia can be overcome through piloting the strengths-focused approach in 'early-adopting' business units, using line manager 'champions' to build support for the approach and broadcasting successes achieved through pilot initiatives.

Experience from clients such as Thermo Fisher has also shown us that making people more aware of their strengths will have little positive impact on results or engagement. Strengths-focused discussions need to be integrated into performance appraisal and development discussions and encouraged by front-line managers and senior leaders. Of course, all this requires a much closer, appreciative and enabling relationship between the line manager and employee than we often see in organisations. It requires line managers who view employees as individuals with unique capabilities and strengths to be nurtured and encouraged rather than "resources" to be directed towards compliance and control.

If organisations can create an environment where these relationships flourish and become the norm, they will be well on their way to creating high engagement cultures. They will be unleashing individual and team strengths and capitalising on the powerful multiplier effect of positive energy at the individual, team and organisational levels, ensuring a healthy organisational heartbeat for many years to come.



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This month we speak to **Victoria Petrova**
HR director/UC Rusal

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