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HR Zone *Feature*

Helping employees play to their strengths

Whilst there has been much focus on implementing a US-style 'strengths approach' in the workplace, there is very little advice out there as to how it may be used. Dr Paul Brewerton explains how HR can encourage staff to play to their strengths.



Much has been made of positive psychology and the so called 'strengths movement' in recent years, initially in the US but increasingly in the UK and Europe. It sounds interesting, maybe even ground-breaking, but many HR practitioners have been left feeling that while the idea of a 'strengths approach' may be exciting, there is little out there in the way of pragmatic advice as to how organisations can pick it up and use it.

So, is it really worth taking this American import seriously and if so, how can HR professionals make it work practically?

"Typically a strength will be something you are good at doing, but the most important aspect is the extent to which it gives you energy."

The modern positive psychology movement was sparked in the late 1990s, when a well-respected psychologist, Martin Seligman, addressed the American Psychological Association, proposing that traditional approaches to psychology had hitherto ignored a big chunk of human experience, by focusing solely on the negative, on dysfunction and deficit, thereby missing out on the 'science of what goes right in life'.

As a result, while psychology was able to deal relatively well with fixing mental illness and people who were in some way 'broken', it was less well equipped to help 'normal' people to fully realise their potential.

There are echoes for HR here: how often do we find, for example, that people are hired into organisations for their strengths and are then performance managed according to their weaknesses? How, then, can HR adopt a 'strengths' perspective from a practical point of view?

Defining strengths

We define strengths as "underlying qualities that energise us, contribute to our personal growth and lead to peak performance" (Brook and Brewerton, 2006). Key to this definition is the issue of 'energy': strengths are not just about competence (i.e. how good you are at something); instead, they relate to what energises you, what fuels you – typically a strength will be something you are good at doing, but the most important aspect is the extent to which it gives you energy.

For example, someone might have a 'collaboration' strength – if this is a true strength, it is likely that they will be energised by working with others on tasks and problems, that they will be motivated to seek out opportunities to work with people who share the same overall objective as them, and that they will try and find ways of including and involving others in projects they are working on, bringing in their skills and knowledge to help achieve the objective more quickly and effectively than by working alone.

We have found that it is important for individuals, and teams and organisations to create a common language around strengths. There are a number of models and metrics that claim to help people identify strengths. In truth, such measures can only be a starting point to help people define their strengths in a way which makes most sense to them.

Ultimately, it is important that people 'own' their strengths, using their own words, stories and examples and this is an area where HR's involvement is crucially important.

One area of concern relates to the differences and/or overlaps between strengths and competencies. While competencies (behavioural and technical) tend to be fairly job-specific and relate to skills, knowledge and abilities required for effective job performance, strengths relate to underlying characteristics informing how we respond emotionally to different activities and tasks, i.e. are we energised or weakened by tasks/activities we encounter? Therefore, strengths are broader and can translate across different job roles.

Of course, competencies are enormously useful for stipulating the requirements of a job and competency frameworks are absolutely here to stay. However, helping employees to gain an understanding of their strengths allows them to find ways of remaining engaged and energised when working on a task, irrespective of their role or the task in hand.

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As regards to using strengths to assess/identify potential in selection, promotion and succession processes, our experience of strengths at work has shown us that it is people's understanding of their strengths, and the extent to which they can use these strengths appropriately (i.e. in the right place, at the right time and in the right measure) that will partly define employees' success at work.

We tend not to look for specific strengths when assessing talent, but



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gains."

instead we look for individuals' capacity to be aware of and apply their strengths in a balanced way, across a range of situations to achieve a positive outcome. Receiving feedback on strengths during assessment events can be very enlightening (and energising) both for those giving and receiving the feedback.

Performance management and appraisals

If a true 'strengths' approach is to be adopted by organisations, the areas that needs to be carefully considered are performance management and appraisal processes.

We have found that while the physical modification of a performance review questionnaire to make it more 'strengths friendly' is a relatively straightforward task, it is organisations who take the time to familiarise line managers and staff with the underlying philosophy and purpose who make the greatest gains.

Our advice is to ensure that all staff with line responsibility have conversations with their managers about strengths: how they can use them more often; and how they can develop them further, as this is the only way that managers can engage emotionally with the approach.

Of course, there are many more ways in which the HR community can help employees to play to their strengths – what appears above merely scratches the surface.

However, if the emerging research in this area is to be believed (e.g. the Corporate Leadership Council's 2005 finding that focusing appraisals on performance strengths led to a net 36% positive change in performance), shouldn't all people professionals be making efforts to turn this 'interesting concept' into concrete interventions geared to make a difference to the bottom line?

Dr Paul Brewerton is co-founder of [The Strengths Partnership](#) and a chartered occupational psychologist with a PhD in organisational psychology.

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