



Thrive, not just survive

Hiding your weaknesses may save your job but it's your strengths that will secure your future, says **Paul Brewerton**

Times remain tough for all of us. Uncertainty is prevalent in all sectors when it comes to continuity of employment and opportunities for work elsewhere. So there is a tendency for us to keep our heads down, to “keep calm and carry on”, in the hope of holding on to our jobs. From a developmental perspective, we may even proactively seek to deal with our most noticeable weaknesses to avoid being singled out in restructuring or redundancies.

While this survival mentality has its advantages, how sustainable can it be for us to keep up a constant vigilance – looking over our shoulders for those we feel may be eyeing our jobs, avoiding risky situations in which we might make a career-limiting mistake, beating ourselves up over our shortcomings and trying to keep our weaknesses hidden from view?

If full economic recovery is to take the best part of a decade, perhaps the time has come for an alternative approach, even if it's just to make our ‘survival strategy’ something we can live with day to day.

Make way for strengths, a foundation of engagement

Over the past few years, the ‘strengths’ approach has become far more prominent in L&D and HR circles in the UK. Coming to light first in the US during the late 1990s and early 2000s, the approach proposes that, to increase engagement, enjoyment and ultimately performance at work, L&D and HR professionals, managers and leaders should focus first on what employees naturally enjoy and also typically do well at work, rather than focusing solely on their weaker areas. That is, to focus on developing their strengths.

In most recent times, the approach has started to gain currency outside the US and there has been an increased interest in how it can drive organisational value, particularly from L&D and HR professionals. Most notably, people practitioners’ interest has grown around *practical applications* of the strengths approach, for example in terms of induction, onboarding, performance management, talent development, team development, leadership development and even organisational development.

Organisations now seem to be asking us for strengths-focused solutions at each stage of the employee lifecycle, aligned with existing

people management and development processes but providing something over and above what traditional approaches can offer, in order to promote and sustain engagement, particularly during tough times.

It may be that recent economic challenges have fuelled the interest in an approach that claims to help employees build their confidence, promote a sense of wellbeing and increase their engagement and performance at work. With employees today being asked to achieve the same (or increased) output with fewer and fewer resources (and many weighed down with ‘survivor syndrome’), L&D and HR professionals are being asked to achieve what is verging on the impossible: to help make this happen.

The research grows ever-more compelling

Research is telling us increasingly that a focus on employees’ strengths has considerable benefits.

For example:

- Rath and Conchie showed that, when an organisation’s leadership focuses on strengths, engagement increases from 9 to 73 per cent¹
- Harter, Schmidt and Hayes, in a meta-analysis of more than 10,000 work units and more than 300,000 employees in 51 companies, 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 per cent higher probability of success on productivity measures and 44 per cent higher probability of success on customer loyalty and employee retention²
- Stajkovic and Luthans presented a study of 212 students that showed that strengths-based development programmes could significantly improve confidence, which was in turn related to improved work performance³
- In a study of 90,000 employees, drawn from 135 organisations across seven industries and 29 countries, the Corporate Leadership

References

- 1 Rath T, Conchie B *Strengths-based leadership* Gallup Press (2008)
- 2 Harter J K, Schmidt F L, Hayes T L “Business unit-level relationship between employee satisfaction, employee engagement and business outcomes: A meta-analysis” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 87(2) 268-279 (2002)



The area of strengths and what energises people remains relatively under-explored

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3 Stajkovic A, Luthans F "Self-efficacy and work-related performance: A meta-analysis" *Psychological Bulletin* 124 240-261 (1998)

4 Corporate Leadership Council *Managing for High Performance and Retention. An HR Toolkit for Supporting the Line Manager* Corporate Executive Board (2005)

Council found that an emphasis on performance strengths in appraisal was linked to a 36 per cent improvement in performance. By contrast, an emphasis on performance weaknesses was linked to a 27 per cent decline in performance⁴.

So can strengths help people manage their careers?

Even in challenging economic circumstances, then, we can see that a focus on strengths may have a place. If we are more focused on the things we do well – the aspects of work that energise and enthuse us – research is suggesting that perhaps we can remain more positive, more resilient and more productive.

Indeed, even when we are under pressure and feel that the future is uncertain, perhaps we can create a more positive outlook for ourselves and for our careers by building on the strongest aspects of our contribution at work and of who we are, rather than by focusing on mitigating our weakest areas.

Companies have commissioned strengths-based career management programmes for employees at various levels in a range of professions. One well-known insurance company utilised a workshop-based programme to help senior technicians identify their career 'anchors' (ie their desired career direction) and then understand better their strengths as resources that they could use to achieve their aspirations. This then led to delegates developing a strengths-based career plan designed to help them build a clear 'brand' for themselves, with a defined career path and real certainty about how they would use their strengths to get there, as well as the internal and external resources and support they would need.

And there is a battery of strengths assessment tools of which staff at middle-management levels who are considering their next career move can take advantage. Once they have made use of the tools and have had a career conversation based on their assessment profile, they can then meet with HR to discuss their findings and agree an action plan.

Across these strengths-based career conversations, participants report feeling energised, more confident

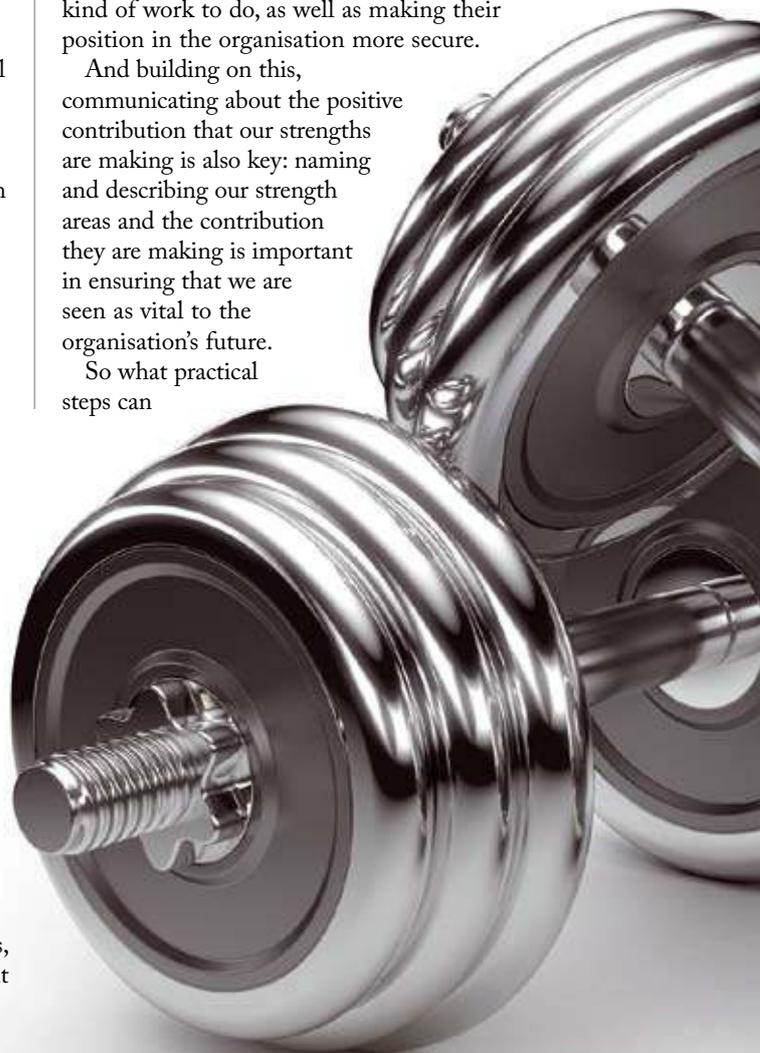
and far clearer on their next actions. This is because the area of strengths and what energises people remains relatively under-explored so, even in a short conversation, people gain a significant set of insights into what drains them and energises them at work, what obstacles might exist to getting the most from work (and overcoming them), how to talk to others about their strengths and weaknesses (without worrying so much about the consequences) and, finally, understanding how to communicate about their strengths in a way that demonstrates value to the organisation.

How can I use strengths right now to secure my future?

At the simplest of levels, our research and practice in the area has shown that, if people focus on their strengths and communicate these to others, they have more chance of the kind of work they really enjoy coming their way. This can create a virtuous cycle in which employees do more of the work they love, deliver it to a higher quality standard, attract positive feedback and receive more of this kind of work to do, as well as making their position in the organisation more secure.

And building on this, communicating about the positive contribution that our strengths are making is also key: naming and describing our strength areas and the contribution they are making is important in ensuring that we are seen as vital to the organisation's future.

So what practical steps can



you take to ensure that you are communicating your strengths and contribution at work?

- Firstly, you need to be able to describe what it is you enjoy doing at work, that energises you, in a way that makes sense to other people, and that helps them see quickly where you could add value to their project, team or part of the business. There are various tools available that help provide a framework for describing your strengths
- Once you have given a name to your strengths – for example, you may have collaboration, strategic-mindedness and results-focus – try to link them to outcomes that the organisation values in a very practical way. For example, you could use these strengths to build a cohesive cross-functional work group (collaboration) to tackle a tricky issue for the organisation created by changes in the external environment (strategic-mindedness), that will deliver recommendations to the executive team within three months (results-focus)
- Ensure that your strengths ‘get seen’ by others so you can start to build a reputation and a ‘brand’ based on them. There is a ‘brand pyramid’ methodology that helps employees establish various levels of their ‘brand’, from underlying values/motivations, through strengths and expertise, to the contribution you would like to be remembered for, and ultimately your ‘brand essence’ in six words or less (how you would like to be introduced at a meeting or conference). Creating something similar for yourself will help crystallise what makes you different (your ‘unique selling point’) and will help you become comfortable in talking openly about your strengths. As Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon, says, “it’s what people say about you when you’re not in the room”. So we would encourage you to

Communicating about the positive contribution that our strengths are making is also key

get working on yours. The trick with this being useful to you is in becoming comfortable with strengths language so that you can communicate your value without it feeling clumsy or arrogant. This does take practise but is worth it

- Finally, make sure that you weave the strengths language (linked to outcomes) into your interactions with key stakeholders and into any documents that relate to your performance at work. So your CV should contain strengths language, giving prospective employers a flavour of what it would be like to have you on the team. At any interviews you attend for new roles (internal or external), describing your strengths and passions will help you stand out, in an authentic way, from other candidates. At appraisal time, make sure that you describe your strengths clearly to your manager so that he fully understands your strengths and can describe why they’re important to the team. As you enter new project teams, encourage the group to talk about its strengths and lead by describing yours.

Can I weather the tough times better with a focus on strengths?

Of course, ultimately, it is up to you whether you choose to focus your developmental energies on your strength areas or on covering your back and keeping your weaknesses hidden away. What we do know is that a focus on positive aspects of work and self create positive emotional responses, which, in turn, have a positive effect on those around you.

So by focusing on developing, stretching and communicating your strengths, you are more likely to enjoy a greater sense of work satisfaction, create good feelings in your network and attract more of the work that you want to do.

In the end, if we are to create positive workplaces in which employees thrive rather than survive and in which people want to come to work and give the best of themselves, the case for a strengths focus at least being considered as part of the developmental mix seems stronger than ever. **TJ**

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