

The Case for Strengths-Based Team Management

BY TODD POLLOCK

We are a society obsessed with our own weakness. Our fascination with weakness is so palpable that we often are willing to intentionally disregard our inner sensibilities telling us that the blueprint for success and fulfillment is actually predicated by our strengths.

Perhaps we redirect energies away from our strengths because their inherent ease renders them unexceptional to us. Quite possibly, we divert our attention away from our best abilities because we don't want to appear prideful or arrogant to others. Conversely, oftentimes our pride and arrogance attempt to keep us from appearing anything short of well-rounded. Whatever the reason for our zeal for weakness, we seemingly spend more time attempting to fix the things that are wrong with us, rather than building upon that which is right.

A 2001 Gallup poll posed the following question to a representative sample of Americans: "Which would help you be more successful in life: knowing what your weaknesses are and attempting to improve them, or knowing what your strengths are and attempting to build on them?" The results were telling. Of all respondents, 45 percent believed their strengths were pathways to success. More than 52 percent were inclined to focus on their shortcomings. Gallup has asked this question since then, and the results aren't much different. The belief in fixing weaknesses trumps building strengths each time.

It's no surprise then to find this way of thinking in today's business culture, which can be just as inflexible in its focus on deficiencies. The conventional approach to management and evaluation of team members has been to help them identify their weaknesses and work on the worst of them. The rationale for this is fairly straightforward: as weakness tends to depress optimum performance, correction of said weakness results in the opposite. While focusing on weakness may come naturally, viewing improvement as correction is a subpar strategy for approaching team management. In fact, more than 50 years of strengths-based research strongly supports the assertion that true success is found in reversing that way of thinking.

HISTORICAL FOUNDATION

The roots of strengths-based management are woven into the writings that make up the philosophical and practical foundations of the modern business corporation. Peter Drucker, the father of modern management, was the first to correlate strengths with effectiveness.



His management analyses in the 1950s equated focusing on weakness as a great misuse of human resources because organizational impact can only be maximized by focusing on what individuals are able to contribute. Drucker asserted that effective organizations must nourish opportunities (strengths) and starve the problems (weaknesses).

Strengths-based management is also derived, in part, from the positive psychology movement, which studies the strengths and qualities that enable individuals and communities to flourish. Psychologists Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Martin Seligman have spent considerable time studying the affirmative, adaptive and emotionally fulfilling aspects of human behavior. They both conclude that authentic happiness and optimum motivation occur when people discover and amplify their fundamental strengths for use in all areas of their life. Psychologist Donald Clifton, the father of strengths psychology and grandfather of positive psychology, has dedicated his life's work to helping people recognize and build upon their strengths. His success studying top performers led to the development of the Clifton StrengthsFinder, an

online assessment tool that has helped millions of people identify and augment their strengths. These pioneers, along with many others, have generated concrete empirical and theoretical evidence justifying a modern-day focus on strengths.

WEAKNESS CORRECTION IS A SUBSTANDARD BULLS-EYE

Before we look at the inadequacy of weakness as a performance focal point, it is important to note the difference between a typical weakness and a fatal flaw — a weakness at or below the bottom ten percent compared to others. Three characteristics distinguish the two: if an individual has a trait or competency that is profoundly weak, imperative to the current job, and is readily observable to others, that weakness may be a fatal flaw, and therefore must be immediately addressed. These types of weaknesses, which are anchors that overshadow all other abilities and negate the positive impact of profound strengths, are not the subject of this article.



Who focuses on their strengths?

Which do you think will help you improve the most: knowing your strengths or knowing your weaknesses?



45% of all Americans believe that the secret to success lies in their strengths.

So what makes weakness correction an insufficient performance target? For starters, team management deals with people rather than processes. Deficiency elimination may work for streamlining manufacturing methodology, but it is counterintuitive to apply that approach to human capital. Why? Diminishing returns. A concentrated effort to remedy a particular weakness can, under best conditions, make people competent, but never exceptional in that area. Zenger's research on 24,657 business leaders who had participated in 360-degree feedback assessments revealed that, regardless of the level of effort these leaders dedicated toward correcting weaknesses, their labors only brought them to the midpoint on measures of effectiveness. While correcting weaknesses brought those at the lower end of the bell-shaped curve up to the middle, it did not push them into the upper half of the effectiveness curve. This is because overt focus on weakness correction is a classic representation of linear development devoid of momentum — although it has a starting point and ending point, it will always reach the point of diminishing returns because its additional effort will ultimately make very little difference in overall effectiveness.

Weakness correction is also an inadequate focal point because it is overly focused on acquisition of a “jack-of-all-trades” persona, where team members become competent in all areas, but masters of none. A team with members able to do a variety of jobs acceptably is merely a collection of generalists. Such a team may be able to minimize detractions, but it also has little time or incentive to turn individual prospective strengths into profound ones. In short,

an emphasis on weakness paired with a push toward all-around versatility could confine your team toward pursuits that aren't congruent with their innate strengths and talents. Because internal motivation is inextricably linked with these strengths and talents, suppressing the ability to develop strengths inadvertently reduces what most substantially motivates your team.

STRENGTHS AS THE VANTAGE POINT

In order to understand the complex interplay between strengths and high performance, it is important to note that strengths extend far beyond talents — those qualities that are hardwired in individuals. Strengths are traits that: are performed well, are successfully used in diverse settings, endure, produce consistently positive outcomes, are enjoyably used, are valued for their intrinsic worth, transcend culture, do not diminish other strengths, and are developed by focused effort and deliberate practice. Research has shown that best-in-class business leaders possess and regularly employ five or more profound strengths that truly matter in order to set apart their performance and reach new levels of success. These types of leaders do not attain distinction by eliminating one or two egregious weaknesses, rather it's their reliance on and development of their strengths that propel them into extraordinary leadership.

To exemplify this principle, Zenger et al. completed a study following an organization's 360 process that separated those leaders who elected to work on developing their weaknesses from those who worked primarily



51%

of people living in the western U.S. concentrate on their strengths.



53%

of women over 50 focus on their strengths.



59%

of people with master's degrees and doctorates do the same.

on building upon their strengths. Approximately 12 to 18 months later, the 360 process was repeated to evaluate improvement or gain over time. Both groups enhanced performance. Leaders who fixed weaknesses went from an overall leadership effectiveness percentile score of 34 to 46. **But leaders who focused on strengths saw that same percentage increase from 41 to 77 percent. In other words, these individuals exhibited three times the improvement as those concentrating on weaknesses** — even though both groups invested the same amount of time. Consider seriously those last few words. Triple the result in the same amount of time. What accounts for the difference? Happiness and motivation. Most leaders prefer strengths over weaknesses because weaknesses are something they do poorly and, therefore, don't enjoy. As strengths are more fun to pursue, intrinsic motivation, and by extension, output, are vastly increased. From a returns perspective, it seems obvious what should be done. Regrettably, business acumen often instinctively defaults to an individual's lowest competency to establish the bar for personal effectiveness, when practicing the philosophy of building strengths can actually more than double and even triple it.

THE MARRIAGE OF STRENGTHS AND TEAMS

Though the development of strengths is habitually associated with business leaders and executives who directly manage people, it is underutilized as a viable approach to management of teams made up of individual contributors. So why should strengths-based

management dominate team-based dynamics? The answer is simple. Because building on strengths is the underpinning of success at every level. These individuals are, in fact, leaders who have tremendous potential to make a difference within an organization. Because teams are often established to deliver end-to-end solutions, the individuals who comprise those teams must be aware of the big picture — but from the vantage point of their own strengths. Consider a massive, organization-wide initiative that requires everything from strategic planning to change management. Such an endeavor does not necessitate a team of individuals with exactly the same strengths. Rather, it requires the assembly of strong individuals with a variety of traits so that the initiative is approached from all angles. Only then can targets be met and superlative results attained. When team assembly doesn't pay enough attention to individuals' unique strengths, it runs the risk of allowing weakness avoidance to factor heavily into team compilation. A team assembled to avoid weakness will, at best, end up with mediocrity, and at worst, incompetence. Reality reveals that strong people have strong shortcomings because, as Drucker notes, "where there are peaks, there are valleys." **No executive, business leader, manager, or supervisor has ever suffered because their individual team members were uniquely strong and effective.** Rather, they are recognized for identifying the match between an individual's strengths and the role that they should fill.

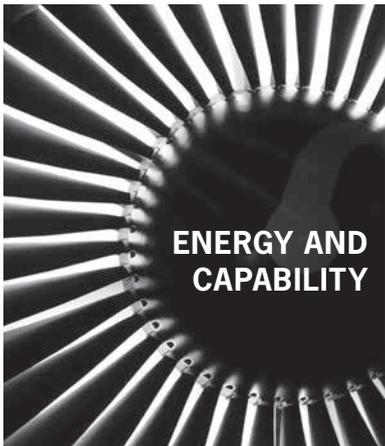
Another reason strengths-based team management is effective for individual contributors is because they do not meet the traditional definition of organizational leaders with vast positional power. They must inspire



“Nearly 60 percent of middle-class people strive to get better at tasks they are not good at. Exactly zero percent of high net worth individuals said the same.”

– Lewis Schiff, author of *Business Brilliant: Surprising Lessons from the Greatest Self-Made Business Icons*





For an additional insight into a strengths-based approach ...

Read Fred Jewell's article *Energy and Capability* from the Spring 2013 edition of the Jabian Journal. He discusses "enhancers vs. depleters" within an organization.

www.jabian.com/journal-spring-2013-digital

by influence outside of the confines of assigned leadership, and therefore, it can be argued that a strengths-based approach is even more valuable to them than it is to those with authoritative control.

Consultants often talk about the idea of becoming trusted advisors to clients. While they may lack an official capacity to dictate organizational practices, they are regularly placed in positions that contribute to its standards, performance, and pace. Attaining trusted advisor status can only be achieved from a position of strength. Individual contributors working toward collective organizational goals must understand how their fundamental strengths and entrepreneurial spirit can help bring about what the organization truly needs.

Finally, strengths-based team management is the most efficient way to motivate a team. Substantial energy is required to build relationships with clients and turn those relationships into repeating, scalable projects. Drucker notes that temperament plays a large role in accomplishment. Research tells us that strong individuals are good at discovering how they work best, and that individuals who are focused on their strengths rather than weaknesses are more willing to harness that energy and more able to substantially contribute to team goals. They more accurately assess their strong points because management has dismissed their weaknesses, which renders them able to make unique differences to an organization and simultaneously humbles them into reliance on other team members with different strengths.

CONCLUSIONS

Drucker notes that in human affairs the difference between influential and the average remains constant. Just as new world records in sports produce new dimensions of accomplishment, high performance

levels of top contributors drive the performance of all others upward. These types of individuals are set apart by a few profound strengths rather than the absence of weaknesses. Strengths-based team management is not mindless cheerleading or a simple way to avoid dealing with the negative aspects of individual performance. Rather, it is a philosophy that is adept at helping individuals maximize their natural and recurring strengths and serve as the building block for collective success.

© 2013 JABIAN, LLC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



TODD POLLOCK

todd.pollock@jabian.com

Todd is a Director at Jabian with deep expertise in business analysis and a personal passion for human capital management

REFERENCES:

- Brim, B. (2008a). *Debunking Strengths Myth #2: Why taking a strengths-based approach isn't as easy as it seems*. Gallup Management Journal Online, 1-3.
- Brim, B. (2008b). *Debunking Strengths Myth #4: Understanding the real connection between talent and motivation*. Gallup Management Journal Online, 1-4.
- Buckingham, M. & Coffman, C. (1999). *First break all the rules: What the world's greatest managers do differently*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Drucker, P. (2002). *The Effective Executive*. New York, NY: Harper Row.
- Zenger, J., & Folkman, J. (2013). *Develop Strengths. Leadership Excellence*. 30(1), 12.
- Zenger, J.H., Folkman, J.R., Sherwin, R.H. & Steel, B.A. (2012). *How to be exceptional: Drive leadership success by magnifying your strengths*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill.

