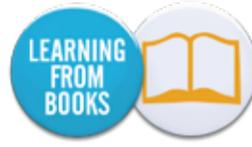


ARE WE OVEREMPHASISING OUR STRENGTHS?



WHEN TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING IS BAD FOR YOU

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THE strengths-based development movement has taken the leadership and development world by storm since the book, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, by Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton was published in 2001.

In fact, that book and its associated StrengthsFinder assessment have been used by millions around the world to identify their talents and focus on their unique collection of strengths.

The strengths-based development wave has been further energised by the positive psychology movement which focuses on optimising human performance.

There are two well-intentioned reasons that the strengths-based approach has caught on so strongly around the world:

1 It's 'nice'.

In many ways, it's easier for development professionals to embrace a programme built around emphasising the positive in everyone.

These programmes are encouraging and participants love them.

Given the over-reliance on participant reactions as training evaluations, strengths-based programmes will show strong numbers.

Usually, strengths-based writers highlight their articles with feel good quotes such as "the sting of criticism lasts longer than the balm of praise" or even quasi-related scientific research showing that people remember criticism longer but respond more to praise.

This approach to development has been a very helpful antidote for overly critical workplace cultures.

For example, companies where managers have spent an inordinate amount of time dealing with performance problems rather than helping good employees have improved as a result of adapting a strengths-based approach.

Switching the focus from criticism to praise is a good thing.

2 It's 'easy'.

The strength-based approach greatly simplifies development.

It has taken many theories covering personality, motivation and values, and abridged these into a relatively short list of 34 items.

This list is further shortened to only the top five for any individual.

Now, individuals need only focus on how to maximise their use of these strengths.

This approach doesn't ask people to change.

A *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) article entitled, "How to Play to Your Strengths" highlighted the quote, "Why should a natural third baseman labour to develop his skills as a right fielder?"

Of course, he wouldn't do that.

The "natural third baseman" would continue to hone his quick reflexes and throwing accuracy rather than focusing



on skills related to any other defensive position.

There are clear applications of the strengths-based approach to career counselling and job fit.

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?

Although the strengths-based approach is intuitive and attractive for employee development, it has many drawbacks.

In fact, some authors assert that you should *Fear Your Strengths* (book title by Robert E. Kaplan and Robert B. Kaiser).

Perhaps the enthusiasm about the strengths-based approach has gone too far and has oversimplified employee development and done more harm than good to individuals and the workplace at large.

1 It's 'too easy'.

Coming back to the example of our "natural third baseman," what if he is a terrible hitter?

He has quick reflexes, strong arms, and throwing accuracy but simply can't hit.

If the movie *Moneyball* taught us anything, it was that we needed to choose players based on the numbers.

Extending this example to the typical workplace, the example of a "natural third baseman" still doesn't really hold up.

The idea of one being able to focus only on five strengths – and ignoring weaknesses – isn't practical in today's complex workplace.

Few jobs today are so unidimensional that they require only a few strengths.

Growth in weak areas is especially important as individuals progress into higher level jobs that require new skills and abilities in coaching subordinates, influencing others, leadership, and business management.

The world renowned coach, Marshall Goldsmith, said it best with the title of his book *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*.

While the strengths-based approach to development is simple, it focuses only

on the relative strength of the themes within the individual.

That is, the StrengthsFinder assessment identifies the top five themes (called "strengths") of an individual, relative to all the other strengths on the list.

What we don't know is how strong the strengths are relative to others.

For example, we don't know if the person is stronger than 90% of the world in 15 themes.

You only know the relative strength of the themes compared to your other themes.

While this information helps people discover generally what they like and what they do well (relative to other tasks), it tells us nothing about how strong they are compared to other people.

Growth in weak areas is especially important as individuals progress into higher level jobs that require new skills and abilities

2 It's actually not 'nice'.

The strengths-based approach can be deceptively simple and potentially misleading to individuals.

This information may give an individual a false sense of confidence about his "strengths" only to find out that there are others who are actually stronger in those themes.

Is it "nice" to mislead someone about strengths?

Development professionals have long known that "overused strengths" quickly become weaknesses.

Acting in ways that align with one's strengths is natural and comfortable. Thus, individuals will tend to demonstrate behaviours in line with their strengths – even when they aren't appropriate.

Furthermore, individuals tend to seek out feedback from others that confirm behaviours aligned with their strengths.

They never learn to behave flexibly and incorporate behaviours from other themes into their work style.

PARTING THOUGHTS

As stated by Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic in his HBR article, *Strengths-Based Coaching Can Actually Weaken You*, there is no scientific evidence that strengths-based development works.

We know based on decades of research that programmes incorporating both strengths and weaknesses yield statistically significant performance improvements.

In my opinion (along with other authors referenced here), although strengths-based development programmes are popular (and costly), we may be doing a disservice to the participants and our organisations by continuing to use them.

Clearly, the strength-based approach to development has gone too far.

What started out as a constructive reaction to negativity in traditional performance reviews and development planning has become 'harmful'.

The strengths-based approach has become an overused strength.

I am a strong believer that when it comes to individual development, it's important to have an approach that celebrates strengths, supports efforts to close gaps, and provides opportunities to develop new strengths which allow individuals to grow into new roles.



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Appreciation is an important part of work life, and a key characteristic of every good leader is the ability to appreciate his or her colleagues. In their book, *The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace*, Gary Chapman and Paul White talk about the five basic ways to express appreciation: through Words of Affirmation, Acts of Service, Receiving Gifts, Quality Time, and Physical Touch. Are you showing enough appreciation to your work mates? Check out bit.ly/StAppreciation

■ Dan was the managing director of a US-based consulting firm focusing on leadership assessment, development and coaching. For advice on which assessment tool is best implemented for your organisation, kindly email us at info@leaderonomics.com.