Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research
2014, Vol. 66, No. 1, 20–37

1065-9293/14/$12.00 DOI: 10.1037/cpb0000002

STRENGTHS-BASED LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: INSIGHTS FROM EXPERT COACHES

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There is a growing trend in which coaches are using a strengths-based approach to help leaders move from fair leadership performance toward greater capacities. Although a number of strengths assessments are popular now, there is not enough research on how strengths mature in a long-term, sustainable way. In this article a multiple case study method was applied to investigate how expert coaches help leaders reach their greater potential through using their strengths. The nuances and challenges to this approach are also explored. Four overarching themes are derived from the analysis, and these are illustrated with stories from expert coaches. Questions for reflection on the findings are offered for consulting psychologists and leaders who want to cultivate a strengths-based approach to leader development.

Keywords: leadership development, self-awareness, strengths assessments, strengths-based coaching

Strengths-based coaching is an increasingly popular approach to leadership development. Although most methods of leadership development include an aspect of learning to capitalize on strengths and eliminating shortcomings (Riggio, 2008), the traditional approach focuses mostly on overcoming weaknesses and fixing problems. This is said to result in leaders running out of energy trying to convert weaknesses to strengths and, "while people remember criticism, awareness of one's faults doesn't necessarily translate into better performance" (Roberts, Dutton, Sprietzer & Suesse, 2006, p 31). The strengths-based approach, rooted in positive psychology, is gaining popularity as an approach to support leaders to develop more of their full potential.

Positive psychology brings empirical research to bear on questions related to the achievement of high levels of potential and strengths in individuals and organizations. It became a focused discipline in 1998 when Martin Seligman, president of the American Psychological Association, along with his colleagues, created a new agenda calling for "massive research on human strengths

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We thank Alex Linley, Dawna Markova, Sara Orem, Jessica Pryce-Jones, Marjorie Schiller, and Maria Sullivan and also co-researchers Robyn L. Bartlett, Andrea D. Drake, Juan M. González, John Miller, Ingrid Ocasio, Deborah L. Thomas, and Sonya Tinsley. Also thanks to Sara Jarvis for support in the analysis of data.

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and virtues" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) to bring more balance to a strong focus on studying problems and dysfunction in psychology. Although studies of problems and dysfunction have their place, they do not necessarily inform us about how thriving at work or optimal performance develops.

On Strengths in Leadership Development

At the same time that the literature on positive organizational scholarship has been growing, there has been an increase in the use of strengths assessments. For example, Clifton's Strengthsfinder (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001) has been used by 7.8 million people (Saad, 2012). Strengthsfinder is a tool for self-awareness to capitalize on talents and apply them to challenges. Rath and Conchie (2008) illustrate ways that individuals can work within their natural talents to more effectively develop what Gallup found to be most important in a leader: trust, hope, caring, and stability. Other assessments that are well known include the Values in Action (VIA) inventory of strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), Realize2 (Linley, Willars, & Biswas-Diener, 2010), and the Reflected Best Self (Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy, & Quinn, 2005).

One way to foster leadership development throughout an organization is to develop and support the strengths of individuals and to help them apply those strengths in their work. Strengths are defined in the literature as natural talents combined with knowledge and skills (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001) and also as "potentials for excellence that can be cultivated through enhanced awareness, accessibility, and effort." (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan & Minhas, 2011, p. 106). And Linley's (2008) definition seems most all encompassing, "a preexisting capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking, or feeling that is authentic and energizing to the user, and enables optimal functioning, development and performance" (p. 9). According to Clifton and Harter (2003), strengths-based development, or developing based on working with one's strengths, involves the identification of talent, and integration of that talent into how one views him- or herself, and behavioral change.

Relating strengths to leadership development, Russ Moxley says this about strengths or what he calls unique gifts: "when properly discerned and claimed [they] provide individuals with knowledge of the distinctive contribution they can make to the practice of leadership" (Moxley, 2005, p. 265). Research is showing that the more leaders use their unique strengths, the higher their performance will be in the workplace (Linley, Woolston & Biswas-Diener, 2009; Cameron, 2012); and their levels of happiness, fulfillment, authenticity, goal accomplishment, and optimal functioning will increase (Linley, Nielsen, Wood, Gillett & Biswar-Diener, 2011). There are also caveats and cautions noted in the literature on a strengths-based approach to leadership development (Kaiser & Overfield, 2011) which are explored in this study.

Purpose of the Study

There are a number of books, articles, and assessments for identifying strengths for leadership development, but there is a scarcity of research available to illustrate how coaches help leaders develop their fullest potential over longer-sustained periods of time. To learn how strengths-based leader development operates in light of all the complexities leaders face, we conducted interviews with six expert coaches who had extensive experience applying the strengths-based approach. The purpose of the interviews was to make explicit some of the tacit knowledge these experts use to guide their strengths-based work with leaders and identify common themes that may be of use to other practitioners of strengths-based coaching. This article summarizes the key themes in these interviews and is written for those who are coaching leaders as well as those who simply would like to grow as leaders.

Method

The multiple case study method (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2009) was used to provide a depth of insight with regard to the perceptions of expert strengths-based coaches as to how they help leaders learn to identify, own, and use their strengths. We interviewed six expert coaches from the United Kingdom and the United States who have written books or won awards for their strengths-based coaching work. We purposely sought out coaches who use different assessment tools, yet all had inspired us through their writing and work. They had 10 to 40+ years of experience in a strengths-based approach to leadership development. It should be noted that although strengths-based leadership became popularized in the last 10 years, many of these expert coaches identified having a strengths approach for many decades. For example, influences of strengths philosophies can be found in earlier writings such as Maslow's (1954) work, which focused on self-actualization in the 1950s and was used in workplace settings (Maslow, 1965).

The coaches had experience with strengths-based leadership development by self-report and their expertise was evident from their writing and reputation in the field. The expert coaches we interviewed were Alex Linley, Dawna Markova, Sara Orem, Jessica Pryce-Jones, Marjorie Schiller, and Maria Sullivan. A partial list of their publications are noted in the reference list: Linley, Willars, and Biswas-Diener (2010); Markova (1996, 2008); Orem, Binkert, and Clancy (2007); Pryce-Jones (2010); Schiller, Riley, and Holland (2001); and Maria Sullivan (n.d.). Five members of the research team conducted the semistructured interviews. An interview training was completed by six coresearchers and there was a focus on the intent behind the guiding questions (see Appendix) and that all coresearchers had practice listening intently and drawing out stories and experiences as part of the interview method. The goal was to discover nuances in strengths-based leadership coaching that are not yet well articulated in current published literature.

Credibility in the qualitative, case study method is based on systemic reflection (Yin, 2010). Once the interviews were completed, the team closely followed Stake's (2006) method of reflection and analysis. In the first level of analysis each team member independently created a matrix of codes with a definition for each code. Next a master matrix was constructed and the team identified themes that were prevalent across the analyses. To prevent bias or a groupthink effect a triangulation of the analysis was initiated. A qualitative research expert who was also a practiced strengths-based leadership coach did an independent chart identifying codes and themes.

Dependability of qualitative research data occurred through having "multiple researchers independently code a set of data and then meet together to come to consensus on the emerging codes and categories" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 556). Four themes were verified by both analyses. The team then engaged in a reflective practice inquiry (Patton, 2011) to consider multiple interpretations of the findings. The most cogent quotes were gathered to illustrate the themes in the research report. Lowman and Kilburg's (2011) suggestions for evaluating case studies were also reviewed and the writers worked to ensure that the most compelling quotes from each interview were represented in the final report. A final process was used for verification of the interpretation of the qualitative findings. Member checking is a process that involves inviting participants to review the findings for accuracy and intended meaning (Shenton, 2004). All of the expert coaches verified the accuracy of the initial interview transcripts, and then there was also a second level of member checking to ensure that all experts interviewed found the final report to accurately represent what they intended to say and input was invited to ensure that the report was of strong quality.

Results

The four themes that resulted from the analysis are presented with quotes from the interviews that illustrate each theme. It should be noted that following the discussion of each theme, we have also included a second section that explores the theme in the context of the current literature on strengths-based leadership development. Implications for practice are then discussed along with questions for reflection.

Theme 1: Strengths Development Is Intrinsically Motivating and Energizing

The first theme is that a strengths approach makes leadership work easier and is naturally motivating and energizing. First, to understand the need for energy, several coaches pointed out the immensity of the leader's work. For example Dawna Markova conveyed, "All of the CEOs I'm working with right now get sometimes 600 and 700 e-mails a day and just the amount of input is vast and the amount of output that's expected of them is vast." And Maria Sullivan added that to help leaders find their way on a daily basis through much that is unknown and complex it requires the energy that comes from strengths work and from being purpose-driven. She said that with a complete deficit approach to leadership development "is like going to the dentist." Many people don't want to do it. Carving out time for capacity building on top of all that is required of leaders requires energy and is more likely to happen if there is some passion for leadership and leader development. She added "it is hard to engender passion around a skill deficit."

Coaches gave examples of how greater ease was found by introducing strengths work as a part of the leadership development equation. Marge Schiller illustrated with a story of a leader who went from swearing and expressing the feeling that he was in a battle to remarking that he never knew leadership work "could be so easy," when he began to focus on strengths.

Sara Orem gave an illustration from her own experience when recalling that she first learned the difference in a strengths-based approach while working for a bank as a change agent for top executives. She explained that, like in most organizations, it had always been part of the culture to find what was wrong and attempt to fix it. With each new change initiative she said, "I was inevitably met by people who would sit there silently and they would look at their shoes and they wouldn't look at me; and their arms would be folded in front of their chests." In contrast, when she started to use an appreciative and strengths-based approach as her philosophy, the potential for the group's success was realized much more fully. She could see this almost immediately. She said, "I was completely blown away by the difference in response in a room full of people when I would start with, 'I want to talk today about the things that we think we do especially well and how we might leverage that toward what we are envisioning.' There was a different tenor to the room. You could see people smiling and talking enthusiastically to each other."

Further remarks on the motivating effects from using one's talents were conveyed by comments such as learning "what you want to get out of bed to go do in the morning." Jessica Pryce-Jones went on to state that motivation in the workplace has really suffered over the last years. According to Gallup polls, it has gone down 30% since 2008. She emphasized that "you can increase your motivation just by turning to your strengths."

Dawna likened this work to looking for what lights people up. She said "you can always see when somebody lights up because when they talk about what they love no matter how grumpy or flat lined they are—you see them suddenly light up." She used neuroscience to discuss energy and the brain and said "it is necessary to tease out and discern, what are the actual ways of thinking that energize our brains and energize our lives."

Dawna also provided insights on reaching our potential—which she connected with arriving at a high state of energy. She quoted Timothy Gallwey's formula that "p = P – I," performance equals Potential minus Interference, and said the following:

> We create interference for ourselves or we create interference between ourselves and others and we know that interference is there the same way as if you're driving your car cross-country and you want to hear the radio, and you got a station but there's static. And so you keep tuning and tuning until the static disappears and you can hear the station. Well the interference is like static to this high state of energy; the lighting up that we have when we're using our gifts and talent on behalf of what really matters to us.

Further considering this theme of energy and intrinsic motivation, it is worth noting that when we reached out to interview expert strengths-based coaches, we purposely interviewed individuals who used different methods and would be likely to use differing strengths assessments. We found that regardless of the assessments used, they agreed that assessments are helpful to draw out what it is that is energizing for the leader. Alex Linley designed the strengths assessment he uses, the

Realize2, specifically featuring energy as one of the dimensions of the assessment (Linley, 2008). Dawna gave a personal example of how she considers energy a key to strengths. An assessment result indicated that she had a strength in "researching." She, however, does not consider this to be a true strength because doing research did not energize her or light her up. She stated that she may be skilled in research but if it is not energizing it is a skill and not a strength. It is worth noting that strength work is about working in a higher state of energy, and strengths assessments, either quantitative or qualitative, are one way the expert coaches help leaders gain insight regarding what will bring vitality to their work and that of their teams. Maria summed it up when she said coaches should "focus on strengths work from an energetic perspective."

Literature and consideration for practice #1: Find that which energizes you. Energy and intrinsic motivation are closely connected with strength work in the literature. Linley (2008) defines a strength as being "energizing to the user and enabling optimal functioning, development and performance" (p. 9). He has found through research that the "telltale sign of a strength" is that there is a "real sense of energy and engagement when using the strength" and a "yearning to use the strength" (Linley, Govindji, & West, 2007, p. 48). Peterson and Seligman (2004) indicate that signature strengths are those that you are intrinsically motivated to use. Spreitzer (2006) explains that with a strengths approach there is increased probability of sustained growth over time because resources are not used up and depleted. There is less struggle and more emotional and agentic resources which can lead to thriving in leadership.

Reflecting on the interviews and the literature Senge's (1999) first principle of leadership applies—the importance that leaders understand the self-reinforcing processes of growth. Senge uses a metaphor from living systems:

> Can you imagine a gardener leaning over his or her seedling and shouting "grow!" Gardeners understand that a seed has the potential to grow and the seed and its environment create a self-reinforcing growth process. As more water and nutrients are drawn into the seed, its root system extends further, drawing in still more water and nutrients, extending the roots even more. As in all of nature's growth processes, what is growing starts small and for some time most of the change is underground. If the self-reinforcing processes of growth don't operate change will not generate energy, it will absorb energy. This is why so many people who take on the role of change agents burn out (p. 81).

In summary, the expert coaches were speaking of growing an awareness of what it is that generates energy rather than absorbing energy.

In order to offer practical suggestions, we offer questions for reflection related to each of the four themes. These are questions which coaches could ask in a session, or you might ask yourself:

- As a leader, what do you do that lights you up, or gives you more energy?
- How well do you know what energizes, rather than depletes, others on your team or those who are your partners or clients?

Theme 2: Strengths Develop Through Relationships

A second theme that emerged from the research was the power of working on strengths in relationships. The expert coaches we consulted with did not all use the same strengths assessments to identify strengths. But what they universally described was going beyond simply learning from strengths assessments toward a focus on strengths development through relationships. This was a key to bringing out leadership potential.

Sara recommended taking strengths assessment results home to a significant partner or asking someone who knows you well what he or she sees to help illuminate strengths or blind spots. This can help you see your disowned strengths more clearly. She paraphrased Timothy Wilson (2004), "We can never entirely know ourselves and we are really dependent upon the reflection of other people to get the parts of ourselves that we can't see."

Dawna revealed the importance of mutual relationships:

> My research has shown me that when people are aligned with their innate gifts it literally reenergizes them. One of mine, for instance, is storytelling and I could begin this phone call really tired and hungry

> or whatever, however, if I start telling you stories I could probably tell you stories for hours and hours, and I just get more energy. . . . I feel like I just woke up. . . . You have a capacity to listen in a generative way. Since we have had this conversation it brings you alive and it brings me alive. It is like yeast in bread.

Yeast in bread is a metaphor that brings to mind the synergy that comes by combining two very different elements or two diverse talents. The interaction that happens may be subtle in the beginning, but over time there is a remarkable way in which we can combine our strengths to cause a leavening or rising up. This is in contrast to what often happens in teams and partnerships. Most leaders surround themselves with those who are like them and fight those whose strengths are very different. Dawna explained that we can end up with "a whole orchestra of violins." We often ignore, avoid, or underestimate the benefits of reaching out to others and thinking together with others who are most diverse and different from us.

Dawna offered us an illustration of her work with a Fortune 100 CEO. She said that once he recognized for himself how to recognize his gifts and talents and align them more closely with his daily tasks, their coaching work together very quickly became about valuing and respecting and developing those team members whose unique talents were different from their own. Dawna, the CEO, and the team used an assessment she created called Smart Navigator to assess the thinking talents of the entire organization and map the capacities of the team. She gave us this picture of how the team finds strengths through their differences:

> They all recognize their own gifts and talents and they understand like instruments in an orchestra that the violins do not tune up the same way the piano does. In recognizing diversity you get the very challenging, but high capacity, of resonance that only diversity can produce. Once you get a team that's diverse where people are aligned, their talents and their tasks are aligned, you can't stop them.

Dawna explained that for this CEO it was how he became a Fortune 100 CEO by developing talent in his people. And she added, "And that's such a strong force in all of us, to have the conditions created where we can grow that which gives us energy."

In a second example of how this kind of synergy develops in strengths-based leadership work through relationships, Maria offered a process that is helpful in a variety of coaching situations she calls creating "an ecosystem of support." This model is helpful in many kinds of coaching situations; she said sometimes a dialogue with a coach might go like this:

> Tom is not behaving the way we want him to.
>
> Did you tell him?
>
> No.
>
> Okay . . . how would Tom know?
>
> Well, he should know.
>
> Okay. What kind of performance ratings have you given him?
>
> Top. Top ratings for the last five years in a row.
>
> Well, what is Tom's motivation to change?
>
> Well, if he doesn't, he's not going to be a partner anymore!
>
> Well, has anybody had that conversation with him?
>
> No.

Maria emphasized how Tom's stakeholders are playing a role in his performance by applauding behavior that they actually don't want. In every coaching situation, relationships are a key. Maria explained that what is much more powerful than simply going to work to coach Tom is to ask, "who might become a part of an accountability triangle?" This triangle is a group of three people, or sometimes more, involving Tom's participation. Key stakeholders might come together and ask whether the right things are on the plan or if there is movement and change in those areas, is there then a feeling of success. The goal is to develop mutual support. Maria said, "I'm actually looking not as much for accountability for results and behavior change—as accountability for support. Accountability for support will likely bring the strongest results. . . . The accountability triangle creates an avenue for continued feedback and support around the change the client is trying to make" and thus it becomes like an ecosystem of support. Like the biodiversity in a biological ecosystem, this image is a reminder that balance can be found within diverse partners and groups in a way that is sustainable and leads to a flourishing workplace environment, even within the harshest and most demanding conditions outside of the ecosystem.

These are illustrations that point to the insight that excellent strengths work does not happen in isolation. The sustainable work that helps leaders reach their highest potential comes through ongoing development through relationships and learning partnerships.

Literature and consideration for practice #2: Ongoing strengths development occurs in relationships. The expert coaches emphasized that strengths develop through relationships; there are longitudinal studies showing that moving beyond an initial honeymoon period toward long term sustainable leadership development involves developing relationships as a part of the learning process (Boyatzis, 2002). A seminal thinker in strengths work, Donald Clifton, said "a good relationship, at any level, is an ongoing process that allows your strengths to develop." (Clifton & Nelson, 1995, p. 151). Many texts recommend complementary partnering for strengths work (Rath & Conchie, 2008), but Clifton and Nelson ask us to think more deeply about synergy in the way we partner:

> Complementary partnering is not what you think—the matching of one person's strengths to the other person's weaknesses and vice versa. It is rather the combining of each person's strengths to achieve a goal. This will create a unique capability that could not be achieved by either person alone (Clifton & Nelson, 1995, p. 94)

There are many famous examples throughout history of this kind of partnering. One is expressed by Howard Schulz, CEO of Starbucks.

> If Howard Behar, along with Orin Smith, did not arrive at the time they did, the company as it exists today would be quite different. . . . To understand the dynamic between us, I think you have to start with the fact that I want to dream big dreams and dream bigger while Howard wants to dream big dreams but then take five steps back to see what could go wrong. . . . That dynamic, with all its creative conflicts, created a better footprint, a better blueprint for the company. . . . We bonded to form an entity which many in the company appropriately called H2O (for Howard, Howard, and Orin). We became an essential ingredient, like water is for coffee (Schultz in Behar, Goldstein & Schultz, 2007, p. xvi).

Certainly the idea that there is a kind of synergy, a way we can grow through creative conflict and lift each other up like yeast in bread is worth further exploration. In our fast-paced business world, it may seem difficult to spend time exploring how to develop relational connections and mutual learning processes (Lubatkin, Florin & Lane, 2001). However, there is a growing body of research on high quality relational connections (Dutton, 2003) and ways that mutually supportive relationships enhance results and can be a source of strength for leaders (Roberts, 2007).

This essential ingredient to developing unique and complementary talents should be explored further because developing learning partnerships is not often easy. It may seem rough, clumsy or unpredictable to reach out to those who are most different from us (Ringer, 2007). Yet through exchanging ideas about strengths over lunch or finding a mentor or coach we may find a way to begin to reap the benefits of developing potential through strengths. The investment of time can create a leverage point for ongoing support. It can be worthwhile to consider ways to set up mutual

learning processes to facilitate long-term development of strengths. Otherwise, a strengths-based leadership development initiative may be short lived. Bradbury-Huang, Lichtenstein, Carroll and Senge (2010) discuss ways to set up mutual learning processes through inquiry and a dialogic stance for learning, rather than the traditional quick fix advice that can shut down learning. Coaching others with compassion can invoke a psycho-physiological state that enables a person to be open to new possibilities and learning (Boyatzis, Smith, & Beveridge, 2013). Additionally, the Reflected Best Self (Roberts et al., 2005) is a process known for developing relational connections while helping one to discover strengths.

We offer the following questions to evoke further thinking about strengths through relationships which coaches could refer to in a session, or you might consider for yourself:

- Consider whether you, as a leader, might be discounting or ignoring people who are different from you rather than learning about the strengths of those who are different.
- What energizes, rather than depletes, others on your team or those who are your partners or clients? Is there more you could learn about what helps a partner's strengths flourish?
- How could you work with one or two partners to further develop ways to mutually support each others' gifts and talents?

Theme 3: Expert Strengths Work Does Not Ignore a Leader's Blind Spots or Shadow Side

A third theme from the synthesis of the findings relates to obstacles to the development of leader potential. Strengths work is about focusing on talents and gifts rather than dwelling on one's deficits. A potential concern of the approach is that it might lead to ignoring one's weaknesses or blind spots. Wherever we probed with questions on weakness or shadow, we found that the expert coaches do not ignore, but rather welcome working on a leader's blind spots and shadow. Three subthemes became clear in our analysis of their stories related to the shadow of strengths.

Strengths are often misidentified as weaknesses or problems. They are often disowned and therefore in the shadow. Many times our true talents and gifts are first misidentified as shadow or problems. The coaches shed light on the connection between strengths and shadow in quotes like these:

> The labels people put on their gifts result in seeing them as strengths or problems.

> The experience of whether the individual's gift is experienced as an asset or a shadow may depend on someone's perception and how they construct the story.

> Quite often we see shadow or stuff that we want to fix in ourselves . . . . When I see something as shadow, I am aware that there's also a strength side and something good.

There is a way that our perception or labeling can operate such that what appears to be a problem may actually be a strength unrecognized, misunderstood or misused. Alex Linley provided insight further into what happens when a strength is misperceived by an entire team when he gave this illustration:

> I think of a leader that I worked with and this particular person had counterpoint and persistence as his top two realized strengths on the Realize2 assessment. Counterpoint is about bringing a different perspective—challenging, debating, having a different viewpoint to other people, and persistence is obviously about sticking with things and keeping going.

Linley explained that these two strengths in combination led him to be seen by the rest of the team as really argumentative because they were overplayed and were leading him to express his shadow side. He then described the coaching conversation that ensued:

> So we talked about the concept of a volume control that you turn things up or down according to what is appropriate for the situation and need. And once the leadership team recognized that this wasn't him

> being a difficult character but was actually him using his strengths they'd say, "there goes your counterpoint again" and he would take the cue to dial back a bit.

Viewing the very same propensity through a strengths lens, this leader could see when his use of persistence was truly helpful to others and also when alternative views would be valuable to add. And, using Kaplan and Kaiser's (2007) metaphor of a volume control, he could choose to adjust the use of these strengths up or down based on the context or need.

Expert coaches actively welcome conversations on both strengths and shadow. This idea of dialing back, or turning the volume up or down on strengths to fit a specific context was a repeated theme from the interviews. Marge shared that one of her strengths is that she is an articulate person. The shadow side of that can be overtalking.

> I was at a meeting yesterday and I was being interrupted and I wasn't feeling that well so I didn't have a lot of patience and each time I was interrupted I said "excuse me I want to finish this thought." Now when I make that decision . . . I may be seen in the meeting as bossy or cutting off enthusiasm.

Marge said there is a cost that can come if we choose not to adjust the use of a strength, based on the situation. She observes that the very same strength that often served us well can work against us when a strength is misdirected. This can lead to the shadow side of a strength and that can take a toll on relationships.

Jessica paraphrased some questions from an article by Biswas-Diener, Kashdan and Minhas (2011), "What is the impact of your strengths on others? What feedback are you getting that tells you when to use your strengths more and when to use them less or differently in certain situations?"

Expert coaches are most interested in helping widen the lens through which leaders see themselves. Some told stories of actively raising awareness through processes designed to discover those parts of the personality that might be disowned or in the shadow. In each case the story illustrated how this led to greater discovery of true self for the leader.

For example, one story came from Maria, who described the raising of awareness that occurred first through the use of the Hogan assessment, which is known for helping to bring to light the dark sides of one's personality (Hogan & Hogan, 2001). For this leader she said, "The feedback indicated the he was being inauthentic. He really thought of himself as a good schmoozer." The challenge he had was that he was overrelying on this one strength instead of developing a full spectrum of capacities. At first the assessment results did not seem to help him see how he was limiting himself. But then Maria explained,

> He happened to tell me a story about taking his son to his new high school and he was talking about how at that new high school he was chatting it up with the neighbors and his son rolled his eyes said, "Dad! Why do you always have to do that?" And I said, "Isn't that interesting? Your son is giving you the same feedback as your coworkers but he just happens to be a little more candid about it."

And the mirror of awareness led to an a-ha moment and immediate change.

Just as Maria discussed an approach to identifying shadow, Jessica discussed a model that helps her identify shadow. She explained that according to Ofman's (2004) core quality model anytime you have a core strength, there will always be an allergy. She provided this example as to how she stays aware of the shadow side of her own strengths:

> My allergy is to people who display no energy and who feel lethargic to me. I will react badly to that. And the people who have much lower energy than me, they will experience me in a room as turned up too much for them. So for them I will seem to be running them over. So that which is my core strength, turned up too much, turns into running somebody over.

By understanding our allergies, we can understand our own triggers when people irritate or challenge us. Just like with a physical allergy, we may react and feel provoked, and the response may be so automatic we may not even notice. Yet the solution is not avoidance, but rather to realize the opportunity to take on a reflective practice looking at our own reaction with less judgment and

more openness. Thus, we see that when we choose to be less reactive we often find these are people who often have strengths that are different from, and therefore potentially complementary to, our own.

The allergy process is one of several discussed that can help uncover leader shadow. In summary the expert coaches take an integrated approach to strengths development. As Alex Linley put it, the approach includes looking at "the positives and negatives, the strengths and weaknesses the shadow side and the light side need to go together for coaching to be really effective."

Strengths can provide energy and motivation to deal with shadow, weaknesses, or developmental challenges. Several coaches cautioned that exploring weaknesses or shadow in the absence of strength work would likely lead to forms of resistance. Strengths work helps leaders reduce defensiveness to change and gain the creativity and energy and confidence to face blind spots and work differently with that which would have been a potential derailer. They promoted using strengths to bring to bear on challenges and shadow.

There were several stories of exploring difficult development opportunities through the lens of one's innate gifts or talents. Jessica gave this simple illustration to explain how she could apply her strength of curiosity to a potential challenge. "I'm not a very patient person. But if I were called upon to go live in a Buddhist monastery and I had to develop patience, I would call upon my curiosity strength." Curiosity is one of the VIA character strengths in which one can focus attentional resources in a way so that something uninteresting becomes exciting to learn about. Curious people can create a rich environment for themselves wherever they go, and this strength leads to cognitive growth and develops by learning to focus attention. Jessica was describing how to increase the use of a strength while pairing it with a challenge. That is one of many stories of pairing strengths with challenges.

The tone that was conveyed in every coaching story carried a level of respect and a way of looking with less bias and more curiosity upon anything that appears to be difficult, problematic, or in the shadow. Our research team began to see that strengths work is a way to remove the monocular focus on deficits which becomes a blinder in many workplace environments. This is looking on weaknesses, shadow, and strengths with a wider lens. One's vision expands through increasing respect and valuing with an expectation of finding gifts within difficulties.

There were many conversations in the interviews that related to leader blind spots, and there were a range of discussions about a leader's dark side, resistances, and personal fears. Overall, what was common and clear is that for these coaches the focus of a strengths approach is not positive over negative, but more about authenticity, integration and discovery of true self. The word authenticity came up many times in the interviews and as Jessica put it, "strengths work helps you become your authentic self."

Literature and consideration for practice #3: Working with the shadow side of strengths. Weaknesses, flaws, blind spots, and the shadow side of strengths are all a part of the equation in strengths work. Although there may be a myth that working with strengths could lead to ignoring areas of weakness, there is nothing that says we should not look at weaknesses as a part of strengths work. In fact, some assessments such as the Realize2 (Linley, Willars, Biswas-Diener, 2010) are designed to help uncover weaknesses, realized strengths and unrealized strengths.

The stories the expert coaches told in this study often reflected situations in which strengths were overused or misused in a given context. Research going back to the original derailment studies (McCall & Lombardo, 1983) has shown how "strengths can become weaknesses" through overuse, and not only cause performance problems but also can potentially end a promising career. More recent empirical research and applications in coaching senior leaders by Rob Kaiser and colleagues has produced some simple techniques for helping leaders gain insight about strengths overused along with strategies for tempering a tendency to overdo it:

- Asking a coworker or someone we are leading some classic questions from Peter Drucker (1967) such as the following: *What should I stop doing? What should I start doing? What should I continue doing?*
- "Asking coworkers or friends, 'Do I go overboard? Am I out of balance on any dualities like tough/tender, take charge/delegate, expansive/conservative?'" (Kaiser & Overfield, 2011, p. 106).

- Remember "not everything has to come from you. A counterweight can help when you are about to go overboard—provided that you allow the other person to influence you. A counterbalance can compensate for your weaknesses provided that you come to value the thing that you don't do well" (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2007, p. 17).

Research shows leaders who overdo one strength will often neglect an opposing and potentially complementary strength (Kaiser & Overfield, 2010). There is a way in which opposites can become complementary and synergistic instead of competing. So rather than a choice to either fix weaknesses or invest in strengths it is helpful to consider how to be more integrative in one's approach. The integration of seemingly paradoxical qualities leads to a more versatile approach to strengths-based leadership development.

Versatile leaders are able to get the volume right on both sides. "Nothing in their mind-set, no arbitrary bias in favor of one side or prejudice against the other side, prevents them from reading the situation's requirements accurately" (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2007, p. 18). A key is to learn the ability to modulate. "Modulation is removing the excess, the wasteful part, the part that gets in the way; it is anything but a wishy-washy, middle-of-the road response" (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2007, p. 17). In other words we want to stay aware of the cues for when overuse or misuse of strengths could occur in a given context or with a given person. And at the same time we don't want to back away from getting to know and using our unrealized strengths. When strengths are unseen or underused we may need to focus on a way to "overcome resistance to positive feedback and get the strengths to sink in" (Kaiser & Overfield, 2011, p. 106).

Versatile, agile leadership requires that we go beyond what Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, and Minhas (2011) call an "identify and use" level of strengths work to develop more nuanced practices. Part of the work involves reflexive practices (Fitzgerald, Oliver & Hoxsey, 2010) which can help us to reduce our bias, become less narrow in our focus, and more open-minded. This helps us to disengage from what Argyris (1990) calls defensive routines. Drake (2012) calls it "maturing our use of strengths" when we find the learning edges where we can relax our defenses and apply reflective practices. He says that when we are in a reactive mode, we can either habitually overuse one of our strengths or activate our defense to ease our anxiety when things are not working as we had hoped. However often we do not see other choices besides these reactive patterns. "When we learn to pause and check in as to whether we overplayed a strength or did not consider our own needs, we can integrate more of our shadow" (Drake, 2012, p. 12).

In the literature there are assessments like the Leadership Versatility Index (Kaiser & Overfield, 2010), which can be used to learn to modulate use of strengths and learn to apply them well in different contexts. As we develop versatility and agility we learn to become better at aligning with our true nature as individuals with unique gifts and strengths, limitations and blind spots. We can examine feedback with less resistance and more curiosity. We can ask ourselves better questions and get curious about how our strengths can operate in combination or complementary ways, and grow as Avolio and Hannah (2008) put it, "more true to who we are and who we can become" (p. 341).

Here are some questions for self-reflection which coaches could ask in a session, or you might ask yourself:

- As a leader, what do you tend to overdo or underdo, and what are the signals that you may want to adjust your use of your strengths?
- How can you examine feedback with less resistance or self-criticism and more respect and curiosity?
- How might the "glaring weakness" of someone you work with actually be a strength overdone?

Theme 4: Helping Leaders Develop Hinges on a Coache's Attitudes About His or Her Own Development

Expert strengths-based coaches have a commitment to their own authenticity and self-development. These coaches had decades, sometimes more than four decades, of experience with a strengths

approach to development work. They had won awards and written inspiring books and regardless of their level of mastery they were all dedicated to their ongoing self-development and particularly a path of authentic self-development. When we asked advice on how to prepare for helping leaders grow their strengths they replied:

> It's really important to grow your own strengths, to know what they are, to be able to find opportunities to use them.

> The more self-awareness you have, the better you can coach.

> You have to be on a path of self-development in order to convince other people to join you.

We noted that they not only promoted these ideas about self-awareness, self-development, and growing one's own strengths—but they demonstrated it first by their dedication to continuing to learn, and second, by the way they told their stories of their own experiences with growing as people and as coaches throughout the interviews.

Jessica not only told stories of learning about the shadow side of her own strengths; she also discussed how she regularly engages in strengths practices with colleagues. She said that just the week before our communication, she encouraged a colleague to write out and exchange a list of strengths. She wrote 12 of her colleague's strengths on a piece of paper and he did the same for her. She exclaimed:

> We had a good laugh, because sometimes you need somebody else to tell you what you are good at because if it's something that seems so natural for you, you can't perceive it as a strength. It is just part of who you are. And so that's why it's really wonderful to interview colleagues. So find 3 or 4 people who know you well and ask, "what do you see as my strengths?" and you might have some lovely conversations which you wouldn't otherwise have had. And what you'll find is that creates enormous levels of trust and connection. It's a very empowering conversation to have and it's a very bonding conversation.

Sara discussed the importance of peer coaching exchanges including an exchange she had in a program called Reciprocoach, which will match up coaches for peer coaching opportunities.

Marge expressed her dedication to learning when she said, "If you want to grow your capacities to help leaders develop their strengths, apprentice yourself to a great coach." She exclaimed: "I believe in the apprentice model . . . . Right now I have a coach; 87 years old; and I talk to her an hour a week and what continues to enliven me is her coaching comes from being exquisitely present."

This focus on a coach's presence being as important as knowledge and use of techniques was another contribution to the theme of how personal growth is an important capacity for the coaches, since presence develops through knowing oneself.

Alex contributed further to the importance of self-knowledge and understanding your own strengths when he advised that to coach leaders well it is important to make sure you understand your own strengths and that you can tell your own strengths stories. He offered an illustration as to why this self-awareness is important.

> If we don't know our own strengths, we could be tripped up by not knowing them, because we could find ourselves going to the things that we are interested in and drawn to by virtue of our strengths rather than going where the client needs to go. So I'm aware that I naturally pay attention to things that are to do with legacy, one of my leading strengths which is about leaving things for future generations. I'm naturally drawn to things to do with strategic awareness. I'm naturally drawn to things to do with innovation.

Alex added that at times his own strengths combine with those of his clients and benefit them, but at other times he might need to park the use of one of his strengths so it does not "get in the way of what the client needs to do." Having this self-awareness allows one to have greater choice in using strengths to be truly helpful.

Alex underscored the idea of knowing and telling your own strengths stories; this sums up something the coaches did universally in every interview. They each shared at least one personal strengths story, modeling the way that they help leaders through their own development.

Dawna described something else worth noting that is important to her own continuing growth and those of her clients. She said:

> Many of the senior leaders that I'm working with were educated for the predictable world. But these times require them to ask the question, "What can we make possible?" And they get caught in this argument between optimist and pessimist. It has nothing to do with that. It has to do with literally being able to open your mind and go through the chaos of the unknown, and shift your thinking to a very different kind of thinking where your brain is generating possibilities . . . and then come back to discern which of those ideas are most applicable.

This combination of possibility thinking and discernment involves asking yourself questions that are not easily answered. Concentrate your attention and thoughts, the most powerful force in the human system, on a question such as *How do I use my talents for these tasks that are in front of me right now, instead of the carrot and a stick?* You want to align the tasks on your lists with those tasks that only you can do, those tasks where you can use your best self, your talents, and your gifts.

Dawna revealed her own inner work and a commitment she makes to this kind of time. She described entering silence to ask herself questions that aren't easily answered. She explains that these questions are like having a compass, and one of the main challenges for all of us is just to take extended periods of time with questions, rather than always seeking quick answers.

Whether you are coaching people who work for you or with you, or whether you are working on your own leadership self-development, reflection is an important capability. The expert coaches we interviewed emphasize the presence that develops through knowing oneself. As Alex summed it up:

> Learn the tools and use a framework for strengths work, and then spend lots of time making sure you understand your own strengths and that you can tell your own strengths stories because that is all part of being an authentic and integrated coach.

Literature and consideration for practice #4: Self-awareness. The expert coaches all stressed the importance of self-awareness; they all were willing to share a narrative of their own strengths experiences and stories. They are not only lifelong learners; a fundamental part of that learning is internal learning about oneself.

In literature on self-awareness, good leadership has as much do with knowing oneself as does good coaching. Research shows that self-awareness is associated with high levels of leader competence and performance (Church, 1997; Moshavi, Brown, & Dodd, 2003). Leaders who demonstrate high performance are extremely self-aware and conscious of how to use their presence in an organizational change process (Higgs & Rowland, 2010). Seminal thinkers on leadership such as Robert Greenleaf (1977) describe how any process of change starts "in here," in the individual leader. Leaders must be keenly aware to lead in a way that passes the best test of servant leadership in which others grow stronger and wiser (Greenleaf, 1977), and self-awareness is a prerequisite of leadership that is authentic (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). When it comes to the literature on developing as a coach, it is important to develop personal knowledge, maturity, and wisdom through reflective practices (Drake, 2012). Part of the way we assist leaders is by standing beside them and growing ourselves (Cavanagh & Palmer, 2009).

When considering how to go about developing the self-awareness that the expert coaches and the literature describe, the implication for practice is to consider finding time for your own authentic self-development. We are all vulnerable to getting too busy or disregarding the importance of self-awareness, which can leave us with blind spots and a lack of awareness of the strengths that could emerge if we take time for development (Pienaar, 2009). Scharmer (2007) conducted interviews with 150 thinkers and practitioners of innovation and leadership and found that they all practice something in their everyday lives that helps them access their best source of creativity and

self. For example, some may rise early to use the silence of the early morning hours to connect to their own purpose or essential self. Others use the evening. They create a place of deep reflection that helps them to connect with what is most essential for their own nourishment. Scharmer (2007) adds that if you fail to keep up the practice "Correct your course instantly when you deviate from it. . . . The busier your life is, the more mileage you may get out of short periods of intentional silence" (p. 404).

This mirrors a point made by Avolio and Gardner (2005) that "self-awareness is not a destination point, but rather an emerging process where one continually comes to understand his or her unique talents, strengths, sense of purpose, core values, beliefs" (p. 324). Others also address the ongoing practice of developing lifelong learning habits and suggest practices such as organizing your calendar to include time for reflection, integration and recharging of your energy (Cheung-Judge, 2012).

Self-awareness specific to reflecting on strengths. Within the literature specific to reflecting on strengths, one barrier mentioned is that it can feel countercultural to focus so much on our own strengths (Quinn, Dutton, Spreitzer & Roberts, 2003). Culturally, we do not want to be too self-focused and sometimes will therefore lose momentum in developing ongoing awareness of strengths. However, reflection on personal stories is highly related to growing in self-awareness in leadership, and there are important practices in use of story that should be considered (Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Mirvis & Ayas, 2003; Bushe & Fry, 2012). Although there is little we could find in the literature that is more specific on use of strengths stories, it is clear that taking time to explore stories can help us rid ourselves of an old story that might not be true or serving us well (Senge & Flowers, 2009). The process of reflecting on experiences where we were highly energized and our strengths were in use can help us understand our histories and the implications for future use of strengths. Awareness of the stories we tell ourselves can help us discern what is serving us. As Drake (2010) points out, some of the old stories are no longer salient or defining, and others take on a more defining nature as we come to know ourselves better. Some stories can be brought forth as they better represent more of who we want to be and how we want to react to the world now.

This awareness of who we are, of who we can be, and understanding this through stories is described by Shamir and Eilam (2005, p. 399):

> First, we believe the leader role is a highly challenging role, which requires a high level of energy, resolve and persistence. To lead effectively . . . people need to overcome resistance, deal with frustrations and setbacks, sometimes make personal sacrifices, recruit support, and energize others. Dealing with such challenges requires a source of inner strength. To find the motivation to lead and the energy to persist in the face of obstacles and setbacks, leaders need to operate from strong convictions and a high level of self-concept clarity.

The literature suggests that we can grow in self-concept clarity through awareness of our experiences and stories and what they mean to us as one approach to growing self-awareness.

Here are some questions for self-reflection which coaches could ask in a session, or you might ask yourself:

- Am I carving out time for self-awareness and my personal growth?
- How might I further build those capacities?

Discussion

Limitations and Future Directions

We chose to conduct this study with six executive coaches widely acknowledged to have deep expertise with the strengths-based approach to development. Our multiple case study method with in-depth interviews was intended to provide rich qualitative insights into how they do their work. However, there are certain limitations to this methodology that may limit the generalizability of the four themes we identified.

One limitation is the small sample size of expert coaches. Although support for each theme was also found and presented through other sources in the literature, it remains to be seen how

widespread are the practices contained in these themes. Moreover, further empirical work is needed to understand how necessary and sufficient these themes are to effective strengths-based coaching. Another potential limitation attributable to the restricted sample is the fact that all six coaches were from the United States and United Kingdom. It remains to be seen how well these principles apply in other cultures, especially non-Western cultures. For instance, Asian cultures tend to be more collectivistic and less individualistic than Western culture, and it is possible that this may affect how the individualistically oriented strengths-based approach works. For instance, it may be that relationships play an even stronger role in collectivistic societies. Clearly further work is needed to explore these boundary conditions.

In terms of additional future research, we believe two things from our work are particularly in need of further exploration. First, the importance of strengths development through relationships found in the study leads to the recommendation for future studies to explore the nature and dynamics of strong coach-leader relationships. A key finding emerging in the broader coaching literature is that this relationship, what is referred to in the clinical literature as the "therapeutic alliance," is central to the effectiveness of coaching (e.g., de Haan, Duckworth, Birch, & Jones, 2013; McKenna & Davis, 2009). It appears to be especially potent to the effects of strengths-based coaching, and it would therefore be useful to better understand how coaches can cultivate strong relationships with their clients. Finally, as we concluded our research, with most findings coming out of the many insightful stories our coaches provided, we realized that an overarching theme was in fact the power of story. Future studies could also investigate strengths stories and how and in what ways stories are useful to enhance strengths-based leadership development. Of particular interest is how these stories both illuminate strengths and their role in development, and also how the sharing of these stories may strengthen the relational bond between leader and coach.

Conclusions

In this study expert coaches provided stories of their experiences in helping leaders reach their greater potential through strengths-based coaching. The four main themes that developed from a rigorous content analysis are presented to provide insights about how to best utilize the strengths-based approach in coaching. Our hope is that these insights provoke deeper reflection, questions, and experimentation among fellow coaches interested in the strengths-based approach.

The four themes we identified are not assumed to be comprehensive, but rather are offered as central aspects of doing good coaching work within the philosophy of strengths-based development. Surely there is more to applying this method in coaching, and we encourage further elaboration of how to apply strengths-based coaching.

Finally, in the spirit of the relational nature of strengths work, the research team appreciates the way the expert coaches called forward our own strengths and we wish to thank them for generously sharing their experiences and insights.

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Appendix

Interview Question Guideline

The guiding questions for the interviews included the following:

1. How long have you been doing strengths-based leadership coaching?
2. Please tell the story of when you began to do strengths-based coaching and/or anything about why you have grown in that direction in your coaching work with leaders.
3. What have you learned in your experience of a strengths based leadership coach that might help those who are newer to this kind of work?
4. What do you consider the most challenging aspect of strengths-based leadership development coaching? What kinds of things have you done to help with the challenges?
5. When you think of leaders you have worked with who have developed their potential through strengths work, who have become more authentic, or more able to use their strengths, does any particular story of working with a leader come to mind that you would share?
6. What is your experience working with leaders on what they might see as their "shadow side?"
7. How does work with strengths connect to the leader's work with his or her shadow side?
8. What does it take to prepare as a coach to do strengths-based leadership development work? In what ways does your own work to grow your strengths and face your shadows support your work as a strengths-based coach? What other experiences with your own self-development can you share?
9. What, if any, strengths assessments tools do you use? Why?
10. What else might you like to add before completing our interview?

Received February 14, 2014
Accepted February 26, 2014 ■