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## Debunking Strengths Myth #2

### Why taking a strengths-based approach isn't as easy as it seems

by Brian Brim

*This is the second in a series of articles on myths about strengths management.*

Building a strengths-based organization seems like it would be simple. The concept is so intuitive, the thinking goes, that embedding strengths in a company's DNA should be almost effortless. This is, however, one of the biggest myths about strengths management -- and about managing transformational change.

It's easy to understand why some managers would embrace and perpetuate this myth. As a consultant, I've had the opportunity to implement many different initiatives for

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“ Buzz on its own is not enough to  
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companies over the past 20 years, and I've never seen one that creates such an immediate, positive buzz as strengths. This approach honors individual differences and taps directly into people's core talents and beliefs, and that lends it tremendous energy and excitement.

But buzz on its own is not enough to create lasting organizational change. That initial burst of energy must be harnessed to generate a sustainable long-term transformation. If organizations don't begin this process with a purpose, a plan, and the discipline to carry it through, it can end up being just another in a long line of failed initiatives.

The problem is that in most companies, employees have seen too many initiatives come and go. Although many of them grabbed employees' attention at first, they didn't do much to improve individual or organizational performance. And when some employees think about the time and money their companies invested in programs that didn't change a thing, they can become wary of any new approach, even one as personally affirming as strengths.

When this happens, it's important to help employees understand the tremendous impact that a strengths-based approach can have on their workplace. It's like using a computer only to play solitaire. It can be fun, but it doesn't begin to capitalize on what a computer can do. The same is true of strengths-based development. Discovering your greatest talents is exciting, but learning how to use them gives you a tremendous source of power.

A strengths-based approach is ultimately about improving organizational performance -- whether that's enhancing individual achievement, employee engagement, customer engagement, or other important business outcomes. But building a strengths-based organization doesn't happen automatically or effortlessly. It takes work, and as I said before, it requires purpose, planning, and discipline to have maximum effect.

### **First why, then how**

The effort is worth it, however, because a strengths-based approach is vastly more effective and sustainable than its opposite: trying to fix weaknesses. Performance management processes often include appraisal systems that focus almost entirely on what's *wrong* with employees. (See "Debunking Strengths Myths #1" in the "See Also" area on this page.)

Business culture can be equally single-minded in its attention to eliminating defects. That approach may work well for improving manufacturing processes, but it consistently fails when applied to people. For one thing, a concerted attempt to fix a particular weakness can at best make people mediocre, but never excellent, in that area. And focusing on weaknesses can create the opposite of the intended result, making poor performance worse instead of better.

A 2004 Gallup survey examined what happens when a manager focuses on an employee's strengths, focuses on an employee's weakness, or ignores that employee. Gallup found that 55% of the employees who felt that their managers focused on their weaknesses were not engaged or were actively disengaged. (See "Strengths: The Next Generation" in the "See Also" area on this page.)

In one company that Gallup studied, research showed that among employees who didn't agree that their company was committed to strengths, only 6% were engaged, and 52% were actively disengaged. This compares to 83% engaged and 0% actively disengaged among employees who strongly agreed that their company was committed to building strengths. Company studies have also shown that salespeople who receive feedback on their strengths significantly outperform sellers who did not receive this feedback. (See "How Marriott Vacation Club International Engages Talent" and "How Ann Taylor Invests in Talent" in the "See Also" area on this page.)

Before implementing a strengths-based approach, it's important to define how it will help the organization improve. Often organizations focus the power of the strengths concept too narrowly; they position it with employees as a nice developmental approach rather than as a way to unleash human potential to meet specific challenges. For example, is workplace engagement suffering? Are you trying to cope with dynamic change? Do you need teams to work together more effectively? Is it all that and several other problems too? Articulating *why* your company is implementing a strengths-based approach then creates an opportunity for determining *how* it will happen.

And *how* encompasses everything you can do to connect the talents of your people to your company's challenges. Start by assessing what already works. What forms of education and communication are effective in your environment? What new innovations could you try in these areas? How could you change the

nature of your day-to-day conversations with people to start from the strengths development perspective? What if everyone posted their top themes on their doors? These are just a few ideas for how you can infuse a strengths-based approach into your workplace so it becomes a part of each employee's thinking.

Finally, think about sustaining the approach. How can you embed strengths into your organization? How can you encourage the one-on-one conversations, meetings, and everyday activities that keep the strengths approach working at full power? How can you revise your performance management system to reward employees for using their greatest talents to meet key outcomes with strength?

Like any transformational organizational change, building a strengths-based organization can seem like a lot of work. But don't forget, that work can be really fun and energizing -- and it can be rewarding too. A recent

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study, which included 90,000 employees in 900 business units from 11 organizations, showed that companies that invest in a strengths-based approach can reap significant financial returns. In addition to large increases in employee engagement, teams that had managers who received a strengths intervention had productivity measures that were 12.5% higher as well as 8.9% higher profitability after the intervention than teams with managers who received no intervention.

Few things in life come easy. But clearly, building a strengths-based organization is worth the investment.

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