

# The A&DC Thought Leadership Series

## Focusing on Strengths for Development

Focusing on Strengths as a means of Developing Individuals, Teams and Organisations



## **Focusing on Strengths for Development**

### **Focusing on strengths to develop individuals, teams and organisations**

In an unpredictable economic climate, effective talent management is key. Organisations must ensure that they not only attract the right talent, but also use this talent to best effect in order to secure and strengthen their competitive advantage.

Commonly termed the 'war for talent', recruiting and retaining talented employees has become a familiar challenge. Over 40% of organisations now rely on Occupational Psychologists to assist them in recruiting the right people using a job-centred approach based on the core competencies required both in the role and those which guarantee 'cultural fit' within the wider organisation.

However, there is often little focus on developing talent once it has been recruited. Employers who fail to recognise the value of personal and professional development initiatives will find that the same employees in whom it invested time and money in hiring, may leave in search of greater development opportunities. It is therefore essential that organisations spend more time and effort thinking about interventions that will determine who their current high potential talent is and how to offer all employees a meaningful and rewarding career path within their organisation.

A 2007 CIPD talent management survey showed that managers currently believe there is a lack of talent within the workplace, with a substantial gap between employees' current behaviour and the behaviour that is expected of them. A number of potential reasons for this were offered including a lack of understanding of talent management within the business and that most organisations' definition of talent is too narrow, therefore focused only on the 'discovered' talent.

Many Occupational Psychologists are now imploring organisations to take a more positive view. There is also a growing interest in the area of 'Positive Psychology' which "studies the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive" (Wikipedia, 2008). Positive Psychologists advocate that recognition of strengths within the workplace will help to tackle the existing 'war for talent' which will lead to a highly profitable organisation ably led by a workforce that is both happy and satisfied. This can help to identify the competitive advantage that organisations desperately seek.

## **What are Strengths?**

Buckingham and Clifton (2001) first stipulated that the “greatest room for growth is in areas of greatest strength” and that growth is often undermined by focusing on rectifying individual weaknesses. This implies that if you focus on improving areas of weakness, then motivation to do so will be low. In addition the likelihood of this ever becoming an area of strength is low. In contrast, by focusing on improving areas of natural talents into strengths, people (or employees) can develop to their full potential. This does not however, mean that individuals should be allowed to be deficient in areas that are performance-critical as these areas should be addressed as well.

Strengths-based psychology advocates that organisations turn traditional people strategy on its head and focus not on what is wrong or lacking but what is right and is thriving, and to do this by recognising the strengths that exist in the people within an organisation. Strengths are “pre-existing capacities for a particular way of behaving, thinking or feeling that enables optimal functioning or performance and are authentic and energising to the user” (Carter and Page, 2007).

Everyone may have natural talents that can be developed to become key strengths, but not everyone understands what these talents are or how to use them within the workplace. Even more worrying, managers are unable to identify their staffs’ strengths and are not always clear how to unearth and develop them. By focusing on and determining individuals’ strengths you can significantly improve individuals’ performance and business performance whilst increasing employee engagement and motivation.

## **The Strengths-Based Formula**

1. Play to strengths – ensure that individuals have a good job fit
2. Develop competencies – ensure that individuals are at least effective in all job critical areas
3. Manage weaknesses – redesign jobs and reorganise allocation of tasks accordingly to create strengths-based, team-working.

Utilising this formula allows awareness of what individuals are strong at and what they are not so strong at. Such knowledge should also allow for better management of those individuals by their line managers and upwards. Considering that a reported 68% of people leave a job because of their manager (Linley and Page, 2007), it is crucial that line managers are able and willing to reinforce and reward positive behaviours and tackle underperformance where appropriate. This information can also be used to determine what the organisation-wide strengths gaps are and where they exist.

In addition to improving individual and business performance, employee engagement and motivation is said to be greatly enhanced when using the strengths-based formula. Studies show that only 3 out of 10 people are currently engaged with their job and this figure drops when focusing on the population under 35. As high employee engagement results in increased retention, discretionary effort or ‘flow’, wellbeing, quality, customer satisfaction and loyalty, profitability, shareholder return and business growth (Dempsey, 2007), it is vital to attempt to create an environment that will foster engagement and motivation. Strengths-based psychology helps to increase employee engagement as it energises people to peak performance, allowing them to be at their best and to be rewarded accordingly for this.

## Current Concerns

Using strengths to help motivate and engage your workforce to increase performance seems like a sound proposition. Some however, believe that Positive Psychologists could be in danger of being overly optimistic, given that there is an alarming lack of research to date on the commercial success of such an approach within organisations.

This lack of research has left some poignant questions still to be answered:

- Do organisations need to embrace a strengths-based approach for all HR related practices? If so, where should they start?
- Is this just another Psychology fad that will die in the passage of time?
- Is the UK culture too modest for a strengths-based approach; will individuals be reluctant to discuss their strengths?
- Can organisations determine the difference between areas which are not key strengths for an individual, versus areas of low motivation? Are they one and the same thing? Should organisations force individuals to develop areas where they have the ability to improve yet low motivation eg attention to detail?

## Case Study - Standard Chartered Bank

Despite the lack of research to date, several organisations have embraced this approach and have found it to be very successful. Two good examples of this approach are Standard Chartered Bank and Norwich Union. Standard Chartered Bank use online self-assessment tools to determine an individual's strengths and the findings from this are then supported by 'strength coaches'. These coaches help individuals to develop action plans and understand what their talents are and how to develop the knowledge and skills to turn these talents into strengths. Standard Chartered Bank have been using this approach since 2000 and have since seen a 25% increase in profit, which they attribute to becoming a 'strengths-based organisation'.

Organisations can use a strengths-based approach not only for developing their existing, internal talent, but also for finding and recruiting additional, external talent eg by using a strengths based interview which focuses on finding individuals who are 'made for the job' by discussing their strengths, rather than the more traditional competency based interview, which focuses on finding people who are 'able to do the job' by discussing past experiences and achievements.

Organisations such as Norwich Union and Standard Chartered Bank have shown that a strengths-based approach can be adopted and utilised, resulting in an impressive increase in business performance and therefore a return on investment. Although it is still a relatively new concept and it is tempting to remain cautious for a little while longer, the question is; can organisations afford not to adopt a strengths-based approach given the current climate?

Overleaf are some tips for thinking about how to build a strengths-based organisation. For more information please visit the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology.

## Building a Strengths-Based Organisation

1. **Identify where the organisation currently is.** What are the current people strategies and talent management practices - how far away are they from adopting a strengths-based approach?
2. **Identify whose buy-in and commitment will be needed.** What do key people know and/or think about positive or strengths-based psychology? What information will be needed in order to get their commitment? How will this information be best presented?

3. **Gather the appropriate information.** What interventions or actions could the organisation realistically make, who needs to be involved, what will it cost in terms of both time and effort and what should be done first? Such information can be gathered by talking to specialist Consultants such as A&DC, or alternatively, by reading some of the free information on the internet; looking for case studies, positive psychology or strengths-based papers, books or tools.
4. **Start on a designated population.** The majority of successful strengths-based organisations have started with a discrete population. Starting with the Executive Leadership team is a good place to introduce the concept and to ensure buy-in to the idea. It is also typically a smaller population which means time and effort can be spent with each individual ensuring that it is done right. Try to think about how the success of the intervention(s) will be measured. Lessons learnt can then be fine tuned before being disseminated to other levels and populations.
5. **Tap into unused talent.** Ensure that all individuals benefit from the strengths-based approach by encouraging a shift in mindset from 'high potential' talent to all organisational talent. Only using such an approach on a few selected individuals is likely to be highly demotivating for the rest.
6. **Look to develop people's Flexibility and Openness to Change.** Adopting a strengths-based approach should help to create a broader mindset for all within the organisation. A true understanding of how this approach can benefit both individuals and the organisation is likely to create a positive and flexible attitude towards work and an openness to change, which will allow the workforce to adapt and grow with the organisation.
7. **Look at how to use strengths within teams, departments and across the organisation.** Once individual strengths are recognised within populations, skill sets within different teams, departments and the organisation as a whole can be analysed. This information should be used to guide operational decisions such as how to allocate project work to teams and tasks within teams. It should also be used to guide people strategy decisions around recruitment and what skill gaps need to be brought into the organisation and what skills exist within the succession plan pipeline etc.
8. **Encourage diversity.** Adopting a strengths-based approach is very much about celebrating and promoting the diversity that individual difference brings to the organisation. Of course it has to be the *right* diversity for the organisation to grow and prosper. This way of thinking allows everyone to understand each others strengths and contributions to the organisation. Rewarding employees on this basis fosters an understanding that they are a valued asset within the business.

## References

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## About A&DC

Founded in 1988 by Nigel Povah, author of 'Assessment and Development Centres', A&DC is one of the leading experts in the Assessment and Development field. We combine our expertise in business psychology and behavioural change to create and deliver end-to-end solutions to HR issues across the talent management spectrum.

We work in partnership with our clients to unlock human potential, using best of breed processes to enable them to select, promote and develop talented people who can contribute effectively to business growth and cultural enhancement. Always, we apply recognised best practice, putting our clients in a position where they can minimise risk and optimise return on investment in these critical areas of people strategy.

Based in Surrey, our Consultants operate across the UK. Through our international partners, we ensure that our comprehensive portfolio of products and services is delivered through specialists with a high degree of local cultural and business insight.

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