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Psychological Strengths at Work

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Introduction

In many ways, the topic of strengths is unique among all those that exist under the loose umbrella of positive psychology. Topics central to this emerging science, such as hope, subjective well-being, and resilience, are largely focused on specific psychological phenomena. In contrast, the topic of strengths is, instead, a category of phenotypes. Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2004) refer to strengths as "a family of positive traits" (p. 604). Thus, it is a large undertaking to write about strengths. A list of possible subtopics includes strengths assessment and identification, the correlates and consequences of strengths, and the notion of strengths development. Therefore, an in-depth discussion of these broad issues is beyond the scope of a single chapter. We will attempt here to highlight important points and offer practical suggestions, especially with regards to how strengths operate in work contexts.

An Overview of Strengths

We begin with a list of common scholarly approaches to understanding strengths. Most of these approaches are ensconced in formal assessment tools. The strengths approach that is the most researched and referred to in positive psychology journals and at associated conferences is the "character strength" approach embodied in the Values in Action (VIA) framework (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The VIA itself is a list of 24 universal character strengths with face-valid labels such as bravery and forgiveness (Biswas-Diener, 2006). In this framework, strengths are trait-like features of personality that are valued in their own right (i.e., irrespective of what consequences might emerge from their usage). These positive traits are embodied in thought, feeling, and behavior and, when used, increase the likelihood of fulfilling outcomes. The VIA assessment has been used by approximately 2.6

million people worldwide (www.viacharacter.org) and has been extensively studied. The foci of past research have ranged from self-esteem (Proctor, Maltby, & Linley, 2011) to academic achievement (Park & Peterson, 2009).

Another common approach has been developed by the Gallup Organization. Strengths, according to this approach, represent natural talents in combination with knowledge and skill (Buckingham & Clifon, 2001). The Gallup strengths framework is embodied in their assessment tool, the Clifton StrengthsFinder (Rath, 2007). The StrengthsFinder includes 34 strengths themes and is widely used in business and education with approximately 12.5 million people taking the assessment (www.gallupstrengthscenter.com). Although Gallup has published a technical report for this assessment (Asplund, Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2007) research on the correlates and consequences of this tool do not regularly appear in peer-reviewed academic journals. That said, Gallup publishes broad findings based on the StrengthsFinder in its self-published books (e.g., *Strengths based leadership*; Rath & Conchie, 2008).

A third approach to strengths, developed by Linley (2008), holds that strengths are "a capacity of thinking, feeling and behaving that allows for optimal functioning in the pursuit of desirable outcomes" (Linley & Harrington, 2007). Linley is the principal architect behind the R2 Strengths Profiler, an assessment that classifies 60 candidate attributes as strengths, weaknesses, or "learned behaviors" (Linley, Willars, & Biswas-Diener, 2010). The R2 Strengths Profiler has been more widely used as an applied instrument than as a tool of research. It is predominantly used as a tool for recruitment and placement, as well as for leadership development and teamwork (www.cappeu.com).

Despite differences in the vocabulary of strengths terms, these three approaches bear a common grounding in classic personality theory (see Table 3.1). That is, scholars generally agree that, to some extent, strengths represent personality traits that have a genetic component (they are "naturally occurring") and are associated with some degree of predictable

Table 3.1 Comparison of common strengths frameworks.

	VIA Institute/ VIA Survey	*Gallup/ StrengthsFinder 2.0*	*CAPP/R2 Strengths Profiler*
Key offering:	Common language	Talent themes	Performance categories
Intended domains	School, work, relationships	Work	Work
Relation to personality	Identity	Performance	Performance in context
Core question:	Who are you?	What do you do well?	What energizes you?
What is identified?	Core character	Talents/skills	Strengths, weaknesses, and learned behaviors
Basis for validity	Historical analyses, criteria, psychometrics	Polling	Criteria, psychometrics
Focus	Signature strengths, but all 24 matter	Top 5 only	Varying lists from 4 conceptual categories
Technical report available	Yes	No	Yes
Number of attributes assessed	24	34	60

Source: Author.

performance or cross-situational consistency. What's more, there seems to be widespread agreement that strengths represent a combination of acquired knowledge and a disposition to act that involves good judgment and the pursuit of human excellence (see Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006, for a theoretical discussion of this issue). Perhaps the most important aspect of strengths work, directly rooted in the personality theory, is the idea of individual differences. It is assumed by virtually all scholars and practitioners that people will vary from one another in their unique leanings toward and away from specific strengths.

Since the inception of modern positive psychology, circa 1998, scholars have investigated the relation between strengths and well-being. In one early investigation, Park and colleagues (2004) found that strengths were correlated with life satisfaction in a sample of nearly 4,000 adults (average age 35–40). These correlations differed in magnitude from small (humility, $r = .05$) to large (hope, $r = .53$). Although researchers have conducted investigations of the relation to a wide range of variables – social relationships, physical health, and financial and career accomplishments – these areas of study are minimal compared with the attention given to indices of subjective well-being.

Although some research has focused on the relation between strengths and various well-being variables, much of the research has been conducted on strengths interventions. Interventions typically involve identifying strengths, using strengths in a novel way, or using strengths in the service of a goal. In one of the first randomized controlled trials, Seligman, Steen, Park, and Petersen (2005) found that identifying personal strengths and using strengths in a new or different way both led to subsequent gains in happiness at one week, one month, and three months after the intervention period; and at six months in the case of using strengths in a new way. Proyer, Ruch, and Buschor (2012) tested a wide range of strengths interventions against a wait-list control group and found that people who "trained" their strengths showed greater levels of life satisfaction. Subsequent studies have found strengths identification and use to be associated with fewer depressive symptoms (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006), lower perceived stress (Wood, Linley, Maltby, Kashdan, & Hurling, 2011), greater self-efficacy (Govindji & Linley, 2007), and greater ability to achieve goals (Linley, Nielson, Wood, Gillett, & Biswas-Diener, 2010). In the most recent research publication to date, Proyer, Gander, Wellenzohn, and Ruch (2015) conducted a randomized placebo-controlled trial of "signature" versus "lesser" strengths. Using happiness and depression as outcome measures, the Proyer research team found that strengths-based intervention, in general, was associated with increased well-being. Further, they found that participants who saw themselves as virtuous benefited more from working with lesser strengths, while those who saw themselves as low in virtue benefited from working with signature strengths. Taken together, these findings are suggestive that the identification, use, and development of strengths are worthwhile undertakings.

Despite the potential benefits of a focus on strengths, there is much about this process we do not know. In a review of the strengths intervention literature, Quinlan, Swain, and Vella-Brodrick (2012) argue that many strength interventions emphasize their use in the service of some goal and scholars would benefit from disentangling the role of goal planning from the actual development of strengths. In addition, Quinlan and her colleagues point out that many strengths interventions have a social component – sharing strengths, group learning, or employing strengths in a social way – and the extent to which the benefits of these interventions are a product of strengths use or of social processes remains unclear. To this list, we add that asking people to use strengths in a new or novel way (e.g., Seligman et al., 2005; Proyer et al., 2015) may obscure, rather than clarify, the purpose and consequences of the intervention. It is unclear whether the effects of such interventions are related to strengths use, or the benefits of novelty (which has been shown to prevent hedonic adaptation; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012), or to strengths

use. To the best of our knowledge, no study has ensured that participants actually used strengths in a novel way (as opposed to simply using strengths in everyday life).

Among the most important issues related to strengths intervention – and one specifically relevant to work contexts – is the question of how much attention and energy a person should allocate toward strengths at the expense of focusing on weaknesses. Initial evidence provided by Rust, Diessner, and Reade (2009) suggests that concurrently addressing both personal strengths and weaknesses is as beneficial as working on strengths alone. van Woerkom and Meyers (2015) investigated potential differences between strengths versus deficiency interventions. They found that people who worked to develop strengths and those who worked to correct deficiencies both showed gains in personal growth; nonetheless, the strengths development group appeared to reap greater benefits. In another study conducted in 2012, researchers found that when treating clinically depressed adults, use of an intervention that capitalized on people's strengths outperformed an intervention that compensated for deficits (Cheavens, Strunk, Lazarus, & Goldstein, 2012). As for how these benefits manifest, these researchers found that people in the strengths-based intervention experienced a faster drop in depressive symptoms in the first three weeks compared with people in the deficits-based interventions, and this improvement continued to widen over the course of the next 12 weeks. These studies provide an important reminder to those wanting to apply positive psychological science in general, and strengths specifically, at work. Namely, individuals may not need to focus exclusively on strengths to experience performance benefits or psychological benefits. More data is needed on the utility of strengths-based versus deficits-based versus combined interventions, and for whom each of these interventions works best. Importantly, practitioners who articulate their intention to attend to both strengths and weaknesses may be better received by both organizational and individual clients.

Strengths at Work

Of all possible topics related to positive psychology it is strengths, perhaps, that is the most relevant and applicable to work and organizations. In fact, there is a long history of attention to strengths in the workplace that pre-dates the advent of modern positive psychology (e.g., Clifton & Nelson, 1995; Drucker, 1967). One possible reason why the topic of strengths is seen favorably by people in organizations is the language associated with this concept. Unlike "forgiveness" or "happiness" – two examples of positive psychology topics – strengths is a familiar word in business culture and dovetails with longstanding workplace concerns like performance management and personnel selection. Strengths also suggests behavior and it might be that a focus on behavior is viewed in a more positive light in organizations because it is easier for non-psychologists to notice, evaluate, and train.

Research suggests that a strengths-oriented culture is directly associated with enhanced work performance (van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015). In a study by Dubreuil, Forest, and Courcy (2014) the researchers found that self-reported strengths use was significantly associated with and explained 16% of the variance in work performance. Subsequent analyses indicate that the personal strengths lead to healthy work outcomes by promoting increased vitality, concentration, and passionate dedication to work-related tasks. Other researchers have arrived at similar conclusions regarding the potential benefits of a strengths focus at work. In a review of Gallup work performance and strengths intervention data, Hodges and Asplund (2010) report that strengths interventions, compared with a waitlist control group, predicted enhanced engagement, lower turnover, higher productivity, and greater profitability. In a similar review, managers who focus on strengths have been shown to be nearly twice as likely to produce above median performance in their team as those

who focus on weaknesses (Clifton & Harter, 2003). The findings regarding turnover dovetail with results from large organization case studies (Stefanyszyn, 2007). Finally, in a sample of over 7,000 Americans, the more that a person self-endorsed certain character strengths – most notably curiosity, zest, hope, gratitude, and spirituality – the greater their sense of work satisfaction (Peterson, Stephens, Park, Lee, & Seligman, 2009). Taken together, these findings on a strengths focus at work are suggestive of the potential of this approach for employee well-being, performance, and bottom line indicators.

One example of a "business friendly strengths oriented intervention" is appreciative inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008; Cantore & Cooperrider, 2013). AI involves asking intact teams and work units to focus on what they do exceptionally well and to leverage this performance for a variety of goals: increased team cohesion, enhanced motivation and self-efficacy, and strategic planning for future goals. This facilitated conversation uses a variety of general positive psychology techniques (although not explicitly under that umbrella) to facilitate healthy work-related changes. Techniques embedded in this approach include an emphasis on affirming language, capitalizing on past success, stock-taking of strengths and resources, and the transformation of abstract values into concrete goals and behavioral efforts directed toward those goals. Case study research suggests that AI has been useful in helping organizations reach business performance milestones (Cooperrider et al., 2008).

An argument can be made that a strengths focus is most beneficial when it is *not* positioned as a one-off training or intervention (Linley, 2008). Specifically, strengths can best be seen as part of a larger philosophical mindset – what Linley calls the "abundance scenario" – that can guide the implementation of strengths in the workplace. Linley suggests that strengths can – and should – be plugged in to every aspect of the business cycle – recruitment and placement, team building, performance management, leadership development, and even outplacement. Finally, Linley admits that the abundance approach differs from traditional notions of management and that responses to strengths approaches fall on a continuum ranging from advocates to those who are undecided to those who are active resistors.

It is here that there is reason to offer caution to those hoping to apply positive psychology in general, and strengths practices specifically, in organizations. While these approaches can be useful, they lack attention to the larger cultural context and social dynamics. It seems likely that comprehensive strengths interventions that are embedded into the strategy and culture of a business will attain greater sustainability in their effectiveness. In the section below, we offer practical guidance regarding the actual use of strengths in the workplace, using a simply acronym – AID – which stands for Attitude, Identity, and Development.

Strengths Practice: The AID Method

In the past, we have discussed the most common strengths approach used by those who align themselves with positive psychology as "identify and use" (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011). As the name suggests, individuals are encouraged to first identify and then use personal strengths in an effort to enhance their performance or well-being. There is, in fact, some evidence that simply identifying strengths does lead to greater happiness (Seligman et al., 2005). Despite potential short-term gains, many practitioners are frustrated with the absence of a longer-term strategy for working with strengths.

We believe this concern can be ameliorated, in part, by using the AID (attitude, identification, development) approach to strengths intervention. This method treats strengths as capacities for excellence rather than personality traits and thereby assumes the possibility of ongoing development (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011). It also has the advantage of appreciating the ways

that context can affect the use of strengths; even if strengths are of natural types, using them across situations is learned. Accordingly, AID begins with one's "attitude" about the very nature of strengths. According to Dweck (2008) people harbor self-theories in which they view their own personal qualities as either fixed (entity theories) or malleable (incremental theories). People who hold incremental theories – those attitudes that are the most conducive to ongoing strengths development – have been shown to be better at some business tasks such as negotiation (Kray & Haselhuhn, 2007); and in simulations they show high levels of self-efficacy and organizational performance (Wood & Bandura, 1989).

Further evidence for the potential benefits of seeing strengths as malleable rather than as being fixed comes from a study by Louis (2011). In it, Louis assigned 388 undergraduate students to either a talent identification group, a control group, or a strengths development group. Participants in the talent identification condition focused on labeling and using their own strengths while their counterparts in the development condition emphasized the cultivation of strengths. Louis found that a focus on talent identification (rather than development) led to significant decreases in growth mindset. Although this study was conducted in the context of higher education, its findings offer a preliminary caution for the workplace. Louis offers the following insight: "certain types of strengths interventions – specifically those focusing primarily or exclusively on labeling – may actually lead to unfavorable psychological or behavioral outcomes" (p. 212). Attitude, therefore, may be a precondition (and source of intervention) for effective strengths-based practice.

One of the most interesting and useful approaches to strengths development in organizations is provided by Meyers and van Woerkom (2014) in their discussion of attitudes toward talent. Although there may be conceptual differences between strengths and talent, we believe that there is sufficient overlap to warrant speaking about them as relatively interchangeable here. According to Meyers and van Woerkom there are beliefs about the source of talent (it is innate or malleable) and spread (it is exclusive or inclusive). Consider the simple 2×2 model shown in Figure 3.1 that illustrates the implications for talent development strategy. Interestingly, there is no suggestion that any one of these four
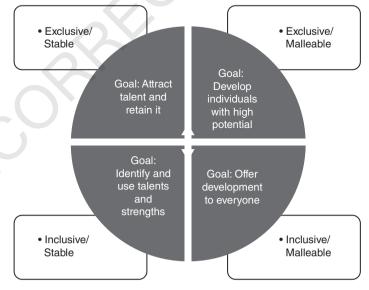

Figure 3.1 Common theories of talent. *Source*: Author.

common attitudes to talent is "correct." Rather, there is the suggestion that an individual's attitudes influence how they go about bringing strengths and talent into the workplace.

Looking at the 2×2 model of theories of talent, it is easy to see that whether a person believes that strengths are fixed or malleable must impact their strategy for bringing them into the workplace. People who are inclined to view strengths along the "fixed" side of the continuum are likely to emphasize the use rather than the development of strengths. This may be why a large number of practitioners who use the VIA (explicitly associated with personality; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) often focus on the use of strengths (e.g., Gander, Proyer, Ruch, & Wyss, 2012; Mongrain & Anslemo- Matthews, 2012; Seligman et al., 2005). People who see strengths on the "malleable" side of the continuum, on the other hand, are more likely to emphasize the development of strengths (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011).
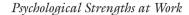
A discussion of the malleability of strengths requires consideration of how we think and behave in the moment. That is, due consideration needs to be given to the powerful effects of situational influences and current circumstances. Take the example of courage: each of us has moments where we will be courageous and moments where we will be wary and unwilling to act in the presence of fearful thoughts, feelings, and sensations. When a claim is made that someone is a courageous person, what someone with a malleable attitude toward strengths is claiming is that during moments of fear, a person tends to default toward courageous acts (Fleeson, 2007). This does not mean that they never avoid or disengage when afraid, but rather, the bulk of their moments tilt toward an approach-oriented, courageous response. An individual can learn about strong situations that pull for particular behaviors over others. That is, an individual can learn what personal and environmental factors increase or decrease the probability that courage will be exemplified in a moment. In addition, with a malleable view of strengths, there is the belief that someone can be trained to engage in non-default behaviors in one context, and then another, and then soon the distribution of moments reaches a tipping point such that courageousness as a strength has been cultivated into their identity. Note that this entire chain of events is initiated by the theories held about strengths.

The second aspect of the AID method is "identify." Here, we focus on methods for identifying an individual's (or group's) strengths. It is necessary to identify strengths before one can appreciably use them as a means of intervention. There are both formal and informal methods of identifying strengths. Formal methods are principally embodied in strengths assessments such as the VIA, Gallup StrengthsFinder, R2 Strengths Profiler and similar instruments. Formal methods have the advantage of being able to be administered in larger scale, creating a common language for strengths, providing normative data for comparison purposes, and a greater emphasis on psychometric rigor (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Asplund et al., 2007; Linley & Stoker, 2012). Indeed, formal approaches are, arguably, the most common methods of identifying strengths and frequently serve as the centerpiece of organizational trainings, team-building exercises, and management conversations.

There is also an informal method of identifying strengths known as "strengths spotting." Strengths spotting is an open-ended method of looking for strengths and using a wide range of potential labels for identifying them. Because strengths are associated with increased enthusiasm and physiological arousal, there are a wide range of physical and voice cues associated with strengths (see Table 3.2) (Linley, 2008). It is possible for managers, coaches, and others to pay close attention to these cues and use them as a potential signal indicating that a strength is being discussed. At this moment the observer can offer insights or ask questions about the potential strength at hand. This method has the advantage of being more organic, linked as it is to natural conversations. It can,

Table 3.2   Cues associated with strengths.

Physical
Better posture
More fluid hand gestures
More dramatic hand gestures
Leaning forward
Facial
Raised eyebrows
Eyes widening
Increased smiling
More sustained eye contact
Voice/Speech
Rising infection in voice
More rapid speech
Increased use of metaphor
More rapid speech or verbal fluency

Note: These cues vary by individual and by culture.
Source: Author.

therefore, be integrated into many business conversations ranging from job interviews to performance reviews. There is an advantage in going "off-script" from the language of formal assessments:

> some coaches prefer to use more open-ended approaches to the identification of assessment of strengths. The advantage of doing so is that the language and construction of the strengths is grounded firmly in the lived experience of the client, thereby feeling potentially more authentic and owned by them. (Linley, Garcea, et al., 2010, p. 167)

Crucially, Linley and colleagues (Linley, Garcea, et al., 2010) developed a strengths-spotting scale, a 20-item self-report assessment that parses strengths spotting into specific skills. These include (1) the ability to spot strengths, (2) the emotional reward when spotting strengths, (3) the frequency with which a person is vigilant for and spots strengths, (4) the motivation to spot strengths, and (5) the ability to apply the knowledge of a strength in real-world situations. All five dimensions are significantly correlated with higher optimism and positive affect, while higher rates of ability, application, and frequency predict lower negative affect. Therefore, strengths spotting may be a tool that is beneficial for the spotter as well as the spotted.

One final important note here with regards to identifying strengths. When using formal strengths assessments, but especially when using strengths spotting, it is crucial to check in with people to find out the extent to which they, themselves, identify with a particular strength. Key inquiries include questions about the specific strength language (Does this particular label make sense to you?), questions about accuracy (Can you point to examples of this strength in your own life?), and questions about evolution (How has your ability to wield this strength changed over time?). By checking in with a client or supervisee, strengths interventionists are better able to guard against possible assessment errors and increase buy-in and comprehension. We believe that strengths identification without a conversation regarding the degree to which a person incorporates strengths into their own identity is an incomplete intervention.

The third and final aspect of the AID approach to working with strengths is the development of strengths. As mentioned before, when strengths are viewed as malleable

potentials there is the possibility of developing them. This stands in contrast to the view of strengths as personality traits. Dweck (2008) argues that that people's views of their own abilities – as either fixed traits or as developable potentials – affect performance. Unfortunately, there is a lack of research attention to the ways that Dweck's findings bear on specific strengths such as creativity or courage. Preliminary evidence suggests that it is advisable to proceed with the attitude that strengths can be developed, but further research is needed on the topic.

Crucially, the idea that strengths can be systematically developed is the answer to the "what now?" question that plagues many strengths interventionists and organizations for whom the initial excitement of strengths gives way to uncertainty about follow-up actions. We have argued that strengths are best viewed as existing in context, and that this view is suggestive of development strategies (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011). Specifically, we have pointed to the social context, situational context, and psychological context as three fruitful and distinct areas for exploration.
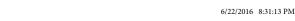
With regards to the social context, strengths development largely centers on honing the ability to deploy strengths in a way that has a net positive social impact. Because strengths and values are closely related, not everyone shares an equal appreciation for all strengths. People with a strength in planning and organization, for instance, sometimes find it difficult to appreciate or harness spontaneity, while those who are strong in the latter can find the structure of planning stifling. Developing strengths in a social context can be critical for team performance. This example cannot be understated because in American culture there is a greater appreciation of joviality, optimism, and sociability. For these reasons, people who are somber, defensive pessimists, and less interested in social attention (i.e., the core element of extraversion; Ashton, Lee, & Paunonen, 2002) are often underappreciated for their strength contributions to a team/organization. Defensive pessimists, unlike optimists, brace for the worst while simultaneously hoping for the best (Norem & Chang, 2002). Their tendency toward vigilance and anxiety, when harnessed, leads to superior problem-solving skills. This prevention-focused mindset, to avoid errors and failures, is crucial to organizational success. A culture that puts too much emphasis on positive emotions and optimism can ferret out defensive pessimism and other strengths. This example returns us to the importance of a flexible, inclusive attitude toward strengths to obtain the best possible individual and organizational outcomes (Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2014).

Cross-Cultural Research

There is a small research literature specifically addressing strengths across cultures. Research suggests that there are certain strengths that are more widely endorsed and more highly valued in certain countries and cultures such as religiosity (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2006) or modesty and self-control (Biswas-Diener, 2006). Several studies surveying people from different parts of the world including Western, European, Middle-Eastern, African, and Asian nations have found that that all of these cultures have areas of strengths-focus and development and that they are valued and assessed similarly to the United States (Park et al., 2006; Biswas-Diener, 2006). Until there is greater research attention to culture as a possible factor in the use and development of strengths at work, it is advisable to attend to local cultural norms – both those of the organization and of the larger society – when creating strengths-based programs.

We also argue that strengths interventionists ought to pay special attention to situational contexts. It could be that the unique conditions have ramifications for *how* strengths

should be deployed. Although counter-intuitive, it is possible to both over- and under-use strengths depending on situational requirements. When considering situational contexts it is helpful to ask "how can this strength best be used *right now*?" Even people who are proficient in a given strength can deploy it in a sub-optimal way. This can be seen in the example of humor: attempts at humor "work" to the extent that they are appropriate to the time and audience. Even people who are naturally funny will occasionally miss the mark with a joke. This does not mean that the strength is a weakness, but that it has simply been misused.

Finally, strengths exist within a psychological context. They are part of an internal framework that includes personal values, goals, attitudes, and preferences. Strengths and interests interact, for example, by guiding the way that a particular strength will manifest over time (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011). A person who is high in courage, for instance, may become a mountain climber if she also has a specific interest in nature, whereas she might be equally likely to become a legal advocate if her interests lie in the direction of social justice. There is also the issue of failure: occasionally people fail when deploying their top strengths and this typically carries more psychological sting because the failure happens in an area that is more closely associated with core identity. People who view strengths as malleable potentials are more likely to show resilience in that they assume, to some degree, that taking risks and occasional failure are not just unavoidable but are central to the strengths development process itself.

Creating a Strengths Context

Building on the idea that contexts of all sorts are important to the identification and development of strengths at work, it makes sense to spend time focusing here on issues related to creating a context favorable to strengths intervention. Importantly, some scholars have argued that strengths should not be a footnote in organizational culture but should, instead, be integrated into all aspects of business (Linley, 2008; Linley et al., 2010). By making strengths a central focus of business processes including performance reviews, succession planning, leadership development and recruitment – to name a few – interventionists are more likely to interact with people at all levels of the organization who are sympathetic to the potential of this focus. We argue that, while buy-in to a strengths focus is necessary at all levels of an organization, it is particularly important to have leadership model an openness to exploring and developing strengths.

This is consistent with the notion of culture as a meta-intervention that provides the context that supports or interferes with the effectiveness of specific strengths interventions. Biswas-Diener and Lyubchik (2013) suggest that "micro-cultures" – those that are temporary and involving a small number of people – can be engineered to support strengths interventions. Typically, this is done by having a conversation in which local roles and group norms are mutually agreed upon. For instance, teams whose weekly meeting includes a "positive 360" in which members receive small recognition for using strengths are more likely to be able to talk effectively about social impact, development, failure, and related strengths topics.

An emphasis on the way that cultural considerations might affect strengths discussion and development is especially germane to the broadest and most common conceptualization of culture; namely, culture as a shared set of norms held by members of a society. In particular, there are many cultures, such as those labeled as "collectivist" in which social harmony is the explicit norm (Triandis, 1993). As a result, these cultures are more likely to emphasize humility and de-emphasize uniqueness. It is here, in the context of such

cultural leanings that many individuals have a resistance to a focus on strengths. In fact, Wierzbicka (2008) argues that the language of positive psychology in general and – by extension – strengths concepts specifically are not easily translatable to other languages and have no common cultural ground. It is for this reason that care must be taken to be sensitive to cultural contexts when applying a strengths focus to the workplace. There are a number of ways to side-step the downsides associated with humility and similar reservations regarding strengths. For instance, strengths conversations can be held in private, can focus on collective (group-level) strengths, or can be prefaced with the disclaimer that attention to strengths is understood not to be synonymous with bragging or superiority.

Future Research

Although there is evidence that a strengths focus is a potentially beneficial approach to management and leadership, we should not treat it as either faddish or as a panacea. As with any helpful aspect of business – authenticity, strong communication, emotional intelligence, compensation – we should not assume that any one topic, alone, is a "secret" to success. Where strengths are concerned there are several considerations that ought to be taken into account. First, there is a certain danger that a strengths focus, if taken to an extreme, could lead people to overlook weaknesses, threats, or vulnerabilities. Indeed, some skeptics will use this more extreme position to argue that a strengths focus is by its very definition limited. For this reason it is important to state that we do not advocate the focus on strengths exclusively and believe that some attention should be given to weaknesses. Where a strengths focus stands apart, however, is in its emphasis on marshaling and developing strengths, side-stepping weaknesses where possible, and managing them where it is not.

There is also a certain danger in "pigeon-holing" people with strengths labels. Although strengths labels are often well intended, they can have the unintended consequence of creating fixed perception of individuals. Workers can come to be known as "the creative" or "the smooth talker" or "the planner" in ways that do not allow for more nuanced appreciation of other strengths or how these strengths fluctuate. In particular, so-called "top 5" approaches which take an artificial and myopic view of a narrow set of strengths are more likely to create the impression that strengths are traits and, therefore, less open to possible development. It is possible to guard against these rigid brands by occasionally opting for the informal method of strengths identification known as "strengths spotting." Here, it is possible to identify literally dozens of strengths using a wide range of locally appropriate and creative labels.

A third potential pitfall of a strengths focus is one particularly associated with stronger views of positive psychology; namely, there is a danger of too much positive reframing. Just as people are fond of reframing failures as "learning opportunities" there can be a tendency to filter all personal characteristics through the lenses of strengths. For example, chronic dissatisfaction can be recast as "improver," inappropriate risk-taking can be seen as "courage," and wasting resources on sunk costs looks shinier when labeled as "persistence." It can be difficult to distinguish between a strength misused and a weakness. In general, we suggest that people consider the following questions when determining whether a personal quality is actually a strength: Do I have a history of receiving positive feedback and compliments about this quality? Do I enjoy the quality and seek out opportunities to use it? Is my success directly attributable to this quality? When the quality is a legitimate strength there is a far higher likelihood of answering in the affirmative.

The final danger of a strengths focus lies in doing only those tasks at which you excel or clinging to processes that may have outlived their usefulness. Ibarra (2015) refers to this

as the "competency trap" and argues that it is especially dangerous for leaders. She writes, "like athletes and companies, managers and professionals overinvest in their strengths under the false assumption that what produced their past successes will necessarily lead to future wins" (p. 29). She suggests that greater care needs to be taken to consider strengths in changing contexts and rapidly shifting business environments. This attitude leads to a fundamental shift in conversations – coaching or managerial – regarding strengths. Instead of asking "what do you do well?" there is an emphasis on "what is being called for right now?" and "how should you use your strength in this particular circumstance?" This is in line with the argument that wisdom is a meta-strength in that it can be used to optimally wield all other strengths (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006).

Because strengths have long been a focus of workplace concern they may be viewed, as a topic, as less centrally the "property" of positive psychology than are other topics such as happiness or optimism. Even so, it should be noted that with the advent of positive psychology research, attention on strengths has experienced a renaissance. Positive psychological research has, inarguably, provided new theories, assessments, and interventions that are of use to professionals working in and with organizations.

The last two decades have seen a sea-change in focus on strengths. More traditional approaches to performance management are giving way to a more positive focus and an emphasis on employee engagement. As these trends continue, research must necessarily keep pace. Our field currently suffers from a lack of investigation on several important topics related to strengths. Future researchers should attend to potential cultural factors in strengths assessment and intervention. Similarly, more research is needed on the way that attitudes – especially "growth mindset" – might affect the effectiveness of strengths intervention. Finally, there is a need to parse apart specific strengths such as charisma, creativity, and emotional intelligence and investigate the unique roles that they might play in workplace success across roles and industries.

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