

## **Improve Your Strengths and Manage Your Weaknesses: Using the StrengthsFinder Profile in Team Development**

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### Abstract

Focusing primarily on an individual's strengths rather than weaknesses as a means to improve performance is new to the management and psychology literature. The Gallup Organization has taken the lead in this area through significant research that has produced concepts of strengths – based management and the StrengthsFinder Profile. This article presents a review of the “strengths” literature, an analysis of the class results using the StrengthsFinder Profile, and conclusions.

### Introduction

The introductory course MEM 601 in the Master of Engineering Management Program at Christian Brothers University utilizes group activities to facilitate learning and to develop team-related skills. In addition to homework and in-class assignment, students are grouped in teams to work on semester-long projects. Projects give these teams an opportunity to utilize leadership and management concepts, project management skills, and other principles and information presented throughout the semester.

The class of fall 2002 also read the book, Now, Discover Your Strengths<sup>1</sup> by Buckingham and Clifton, past chairman of The Gallup Organization and the current chair of the Gallup International Research and Education Center. The students then completed the StrengthsFinder Profile, an Internet based program developed by Gallup International Research and Education Center that is the product of a 25 year, multimillion dollar effort to identify the most prevalent human strengths. Upon completion of the program a report was generated that defined the five primary or “signature” strengths of each participant. The ultimate objective of this assessment was to provide information to increase the rate and extent to which the team members learned to know and understand each other and, thereby, have a positive impact on team performance and results.

### “Strengths” Literature

Since the 1940's psychology has been a science about healing or repairing damage to human functioning. As a result, this focus has neglected analyses of the fulfilled or happy person. The objective of positive psychology, therefore, is to change the focus from repairing problems to building positive qualities. Positive psychology addresses three types or levels of positive

behavior: valued experiences (contentment, optimism, happiness), individual traits (perseverance, forgiveness, wisdom), and the group level (responsibility, civility, tolerance). According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, psychologists are challenged to find a detailed understanding of the positive experience, the positive personality, and the positive community or institution.<sup>8</sup>

While the components of positive psychology are unclear, the benefits to a happy, optimistic, and content person or group are more obvious. People with a positive perspective tend to be more motivated and able to adapt to change. They respond to challenges with flexibility, creativity, and perseverance. Their personal relationships are gratifying and provide essential support. In addition, several studies have found that optimistic people live longer.<sup>6</sup>

Research in positive organizational behavior (POB) follows the recent interest in positive psychology. While the psychologists are focusing on strengths and psychological capabilities, management scholars are seeking specific criteria with valid measures that can contribute to leadership and human resources training, and ultimately to performance improvement. Self-efficacy, optimism, emotional intelligence, and well being/happiness are some of the areas that have been identified for analysis in this proposed POB approach.<sup>5</sup> The challenge to POB researchers is to generate more interest that will lead to more productive research, new theories, and applications.<sup>4</sup>

The concepts and objectives of positive psychology and positive organizational behavior (POB) are somewhat combined in the strengths – based management theory developed by the Gallup Organization. Although their theory is based on a general positive psychology model, measures of the effective application of strengths – based principles include individual and group performance improvement and increased job satisfaction. For example, Warren Buffet demonstrates how the strengths – based approach translates into success. At a talk with students at the University of Nebraska, he said, “I am really no different from any of you. I may have more money, but money doesn’t make the difference. . . . . If there is any difference between you and me, it may simply be that I get up every day and have a chance to do what I love to do, every day. If you want to learn anything from me, this is the best advice I can give you.” Buffet believes that his achievements are due to his ability to do the things he does well and utilize his strengths. Interviews with other people who are truly considered successful indicate that their successes are the results of identifying and using their strengths.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to strengths identification and application, management around weaknesses is also a part of this strengths – based approach. This is significantly different from accepted management practice where strengths or good performance are recognized, but the greatest opportunities for improvement come from identified areas of weakness or substandard performance.<sup>2</sup> Some argue that this focus on strengths puts limitations on organizational management. Needs of a company often require that employees deal with weaknesses. A balanced focus on strengths and weaknesses provides more growth and performance improvement.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps, this is a misconception of the perspective of strengths – based theory. Certainly people can fail when they do not address their weaknesses, but ignoring strengths can also contribute to failure.<sup>3</sup> Strengths-based concepts presented in the book, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*<sup>1</sup> and other Gallup publications provide a compelling approach supported by significant research.

A strength is defined as consistent near-perfect performance in an activity. It is the result of the combination of talent, knowledge, and skill. Talents, which are formed early in life and are more or less fixed, are based on reoccurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that provide positive results. A talent that is developed or enhanced by gaining knowledge and skills becomes a strength. The number of strengths is almost limitless and different for each person. According to the Gallup Organization and based upon feedback of over two million surveys and discussions, there are thirty-four prevalent strengths or themes that encompass the majority of the strengths.<sup>2</sup> The table below summarizes the strengths and themes:

Table 1. Strengths/Themes

Relating Themes	Impacting Themes	Striving Themes	Thinking Themes
-Communication -Empathy -Inclusiveness -Individualization -Relator -Responsibility -Positivity	-Command -Competition -Developer -Maximizer -Woo	-Achiever -Activator -Adaptability -Belief -Discipline -Focus -Restorative -Self-assurance -Significance	-Analytical -Arranger -Connectedness -Context -Deliberative -Fairness -Futuristic -Harmony -Ideation -Input -Intellection -Learner -Strategic

Most can identify some of their strengths from this table; for others identification is more difficult. To make this information more understandable and effective, the Gallup Organization developed an instrument, the StrengthsFinder Profile that identifies a person’s five primary (or signature) strengths or themes.<sup>1</sup> These can be further explained as follows:

Relating Themes (working with people)

- Communication - finds it easy to put their thoughts into words
- Empathy - senses the feelings of other people
- Inclusiveness - is accepting of others.
- Individualization - is able to identify the unique qualities of a person
- Relator- finds deep satisfaction in working hard with friends to achieve a goal
- Responsibility - takes psychological ownership of what they say they will do
- Positivity - has enthusiasm that is contagious

Impacting Themes (influencing people)

- Command - takes control and makes decisions

Competition - measures their performance against the performance of others  
Developer - recognizes and cultivates the potential in others  
Maximizer - focuses on strengths to encourage superior performance  
Woo - loves the challenge of meeting new people and winning them over

Striving Themes (working hard)

Achiever - takes great satisfaction from being busy and productive.  
Activator - makes things happen by turning thoughts into action.  
Adaptability - prefers to "go with the flow"  
Belief - have certain unchanging core values that define their purpose  
Discipline - likes routine and structure  
Focus - takes a direction, follows through, and stays on track  
Restorative - is good at figuring out what is wrong and resolving it  
Self-Assurance - feels confident in their ability to manage their own lives  
Significance - is independent and wants to be recognized

Thinking Themes (working smarter)

Analytical - searches for reasons and causes  
Arranger – organizes items and resources to maximize results  
Connectedness - has the belief that all things are linked and that there are reasons for most events  
Context - understands the present by researching its history  
Deliberative - is serious and methodical in making decisions or choices  
Fairness - tries to treat everyone with consistency by setting up clear rules and adhering to them  
Futuristic - inspires others with their visions of the future  
Harmony - searches for consensus  
Ideation - finds connections between seemingly unrelated information and events  
Input - wants to know more and often collects all types of information  
Intellection - is introspective and values intellectual discussions  
Learner - has a need to learn and continuously improve  
Strategic - creates alternative ways to proceed

The StrengthsFinder Profile is an on-line assessment tool. Through a secure Internet connection, the user is presented 180 statements. For each statement the user is asked to indicate how he/she relates to or feels about each statement. Twenty seconds is allotted for each response before the system moves to the next item. Once the assessment is completed, a report of the results is generated. If the user is aware of other possessed strengths, he/she is encouraged to add them to the list. Through a better understanding of their strengths, a person may look for ways to utilize these strengths in how they approach their jobs and their life. This raises two interesting questions: What if you had the opportunity to do something you like every day? What if you could do the things you do best all the time?

As previously stated, weaknesses certainly cannot be ignored. If a person gains the necessary

knowledge and skills without significant performance improvement results, then the talent is missing. Without talent, superior performance in a particular area is most likely impossible. So rather than continuing to put effort into improvement, a person must learn to manage that weakness.<sup>2</sup> Learning to manage or eliminate weaknesses in performance provides more time to do the things a person enjoys and does best. Some recommendations for overcoming weaknesses are<sup>1</sup>:

- (1) Develop an acceptable level of performance (but do not continue to invest time in trying to get better); or
- (2) Design a support system to reduce the effort required to complete those dreaded tasks (i.e. productivity tools and/or software, checklist or defined procedures, process templates); or
- (3) Use a strength to accomplish the task differently; or
- (4) Find someone to partner with (let them do it) and take advantage of combined strengths; or
- (5) Stop doing it (perhaps the task can be delegated or transferred to another person; it may be best to seek a position where strengths can be better utilized).

Strengths – based management is a very appropriate area of study for engineering management. A positive approach to performance management in the classroom and business/industry provides educators with concepts and methodology to benefit students and also provides research opportunities in a relatively new area.

#### Class Results

In the fall of 2002, students in MEM 601 – Engineering Management at Christian Brothers University completed the StrengthsFinders Profile and evaluated their five primary strengths both individually and in groups. A lecture and discussion of the book, Now, Discover Your Strengths,<sup>1</sup> were also conducted. The objectives of this assignment were to (1) introduce students to strengths – based management concepts; (2) aid students in better understanding themselves and the members of their project teams; and (3) facilitate the progress and performance of the student teams in completion of semester long projects.

Team members who knew one another and their abilities understood how their time and strengths could be effectively applied to team responsibilities and assignments.<sup>9</sup> The semester projects gave teams an opportunity to utilize leadership and management concepts and project management skills, and the projects also allowed them to utilize their strengths in completing the requirements and objectives of the projects. Positive results were evident in team papers and presentations as well as in observations of team meetings and overall student interaction.

A survey conducted at the end of the semester indicated that the majority of students agreed with the results of the StrengthsFinder Profile and found the assessment process and content very easy to understand. The majority of students stated that the benefits of strengths – based management were: (1) better understanding of team members and in the assignment of team activities; (2) enhanced communication and team dynamics; (3) utilization of complimentary strengths facilitated

team objectives; and (4) beneficial to the class as a whole.

## Conclusions

This classroom experience with strengths - based management is an indication of the value the theory and concepts presented. For the students, the benefit of strengths identification and use can extend well beyond the classroom. For the instructor, there is personal benefit and a different perspective on performance management and job satisfaction.

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Note: In addition to the references, the web site at [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com) has more information regarding the StrengthsFinders Profile and other management topics.

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