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Building Strengths Accelerates Company Engagement Everywhere

A Q&A with Kelly Bacon, Gallup Partner

Employee engagement globally is alarmingly low. Here's how executives worldwide can attack this problem by building strengths-based cultures.

Only 11% of employees worldwide are engaged in their jobs, according to Gallup. That's an alarmingly low number and suggests profound problems for workplaces in almost every corner of the world. Low engagement results in lower productivity and profitability -- and damages a company's future prosperity.

One significant, tangible way to boost engagement is to help employees know their strengths.

Of course, smart, forward-thinking senior executives, leaders, and managers know that engaging employees is crucial to improving business performance. Gallup's research shows that one significant, tangible way to boost engagement is to help employees know and apply their strengths at work. In fact, this increases and even accelerates engagement significantly. Gallup works with companies to accomplish just that, as one of the organization's partners, Kelly Bacon, explains.

Gallup Business Journal: Tell me how Gallup helps businesses build a strengths-based culture.

Kelly Bacon: Gallup's behavioral economics practices are grounded in our fundamental philosophy of focusing on the strengths of individuals, teams, and organizations. It's an approach with an emphasis on what's right with people -- or building on their strengths -- rather than on what's wrong with people -- trying to fix their weaknesses.

This strengths-based approach puts the focus where it belongs -- on every business "owning" the strengths of its employees, its teams, and its entire company. This approach helps businesses build on the individual and collective strengths of their people to manage their culture more effectively.

Many companies have attempted to do this on their own. Why have these efforts failed?

Bacon: Many businesses have purchased Gallup's books, such as *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, so their employees could access the Clifton StrengthsFinder, our online assessment that reveals a user's top five talent themes from a list of 34. [Talent themes include Achiever, Competition, Learner, Strategic, and Relator.] Often, this happened haphazardly or just in pockets of a company, when one or more teams or departments got excited and started a grass-roots effort around strengths. But these attempts to build a strengths-based culture failed without a real integration effort or a best-practice approach to cascading and sustaining the language.

An effective strengths solution is about more than taking the Clifton StrengthsFinder and talking about your top five themes. That's just the beginning. Companies that use strengths in the best possible way continue to teach their managers and leaders about running a business from a strengths-based perspective. And they support their managers taking a strengths-based approach when managing employee performance.

What really works for large organizations? What are some best practices?

Bacon: The best way to build a strengths-based culture is to start with an understanding of a company's business challenges, then look at how to use a strengths-based approach to overcome them. This solution should be deployed appropriately and paced to address those business challenges.

The education strategy applies all of Gallup's best practices and focuses on developing a community of certified coaches and champions who help "own" strengths in your organization. They support initial launch efforts and help sustain those efforts throughout your organization's strengths journey.

Gallup's model includes full access to your organization's strengths data, certification for coaches, support for internal champions, education and toolkits for leaders and managers, and learning content for employees. But companies really own the entire process, so the result is a customized approach to applying the language of strengths that fits your own culture and business needs.

Strengths for Small Businesses and Coaches

Many businesses are passionate about building strengths in their organizations, but not all are ready for a fully integrated strengths approach. Gallup has just made strengths a lot more accessible for them -- and for thousands of coaches worldwide -- through the [Gallup Strengths Center](#). "Any company, big or small; any organization, from a church, a book club or a rodeo club; any nonprofit or government -- any individual or group can now set themselves up with the Gallup Strengths Center," says Jim Clifton, Gallup's chairman and CEO.

Coaches and strengths enthusiasts previously had to buy *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, *Strengths Based Leadership*, or another Gallup book to take the Clifton StrengthsFinder, Gallup's online assessment that reports a person's top five talents out of 34 themes. Now, individuals can purchase and take the assessment through the Gallup Strengths Center. In addition to their top five talent theme report, individuals can get strategies on how to make the most of their strengths. Company and organization leaders, managers, and coaches can also buy codes that employees, clients, and others can use.

For the first time, coaches and strengths advocates can also obtain a complete talent profile that lists all of their 34 themes in order, as well as learning materials to help them make the most of their talents and strengths.

The Gallup Strengths Center removes the barriers that used to prevent coaches and individuals from getting this information -- namely, that they *had* to buy books with codes to access the Clifton StrengthsFinder. "Now, Gallup can say yes to everybody," as one company executive puts it. "We have solutions for organizations, solutions for coaches, and solutions for individuals."

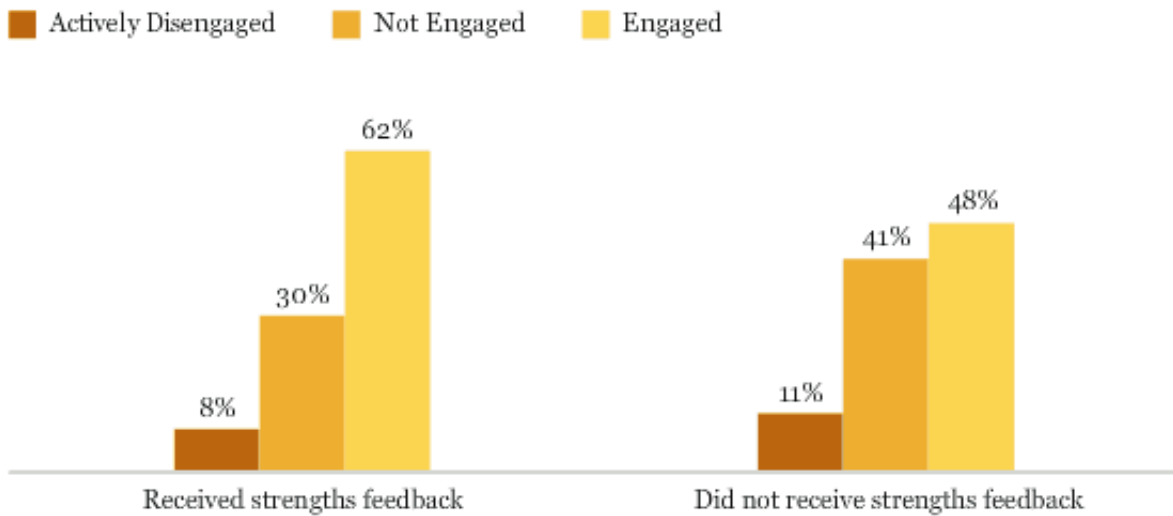
What's the business impact of a fully integrated strengths-based approach?

Managers are responsible for knowing the strengths of the people who work for them and for coaching them toward achieving great performance.

Bacon: Engaging employees is crucial to improving business performance. Gallup's research confirms that when employees know their strengths and apply them in their day-to-day work, their levels of engagement increase significantly. Strengths application can be such a great accelerator of engagement. Our leader, manager, and employee applications help support any organization's efforts to influence engagement.

Building Strengths at a Major Retailer

Gallup worked with a major retailer to improve organizational and store performance through a strengths initiative. During the most recent phase of this effort, more than 18,000 employees -- from front-line workers to managers to executives -- participated in a strengths intervention. Employees who received strengths feedback showed significantly higher levels of engagement compared with employees who did not receive strengths feedback.



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What role do managers play in successfully implementing a strengths solution?

Bacon: A manager's role is critical for driving engagement and business success. Managers are responsible for knowing the strengths of the people who work for them and for coaching them toward achieving great performance. A strengths solution provides a common language that helps employees understand their talents and how to apply them in their jobs every day. The language of strengths offers a new framework for coaching efforts and performance management. It helps managers use what's great about their team members to get the most from them.

How can managers use strengths when working with their team members?

Bacon: As managers get to know their employees' strengths, they can increasingly look for opportunities for employees to use their strengths in their work and to help employees find opportunities to do what they do best every day. So employees as well as managers benefit from this approach.

Why should a company make the move to building a fully integrated strengths-based organization?

Bacon: Because it's the right thing to do for their people, it has a positive effect on their business, and it makes the strengths language their own.

-- Interviewed by Jennifer Robison

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