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Embedding Strengths in Your Company's DNA

by Jim Asplund and Nikki Blacksmith

You can't create a strengths-based organization unless your company is totally committed to doing it. Here are three steps executives and managers must take.

If you want to build a strengths-based organization -- and enjoy the benefits of reduced turnover and greater productivity and profitability -- you can't go halfway. If you really want everyone in your company talking about their talents, sharing them, and living and breathing the language of strengths, you've got to be all in, or it just won't work.

This strengths-based approach is both simple and effective, yet too few companies have implemented it.

This means that you must significantly shift your company's language; you must change how managers interact with their employees and how employees interact with their peers. What's more, these changes must go deep into your company's DNA.

But not enough companies understand this. Gallup asked more than 105,000 employees from 14 different companies to rate their agreement with the statement "My organization is committed to building the strengths of each associate" using a 5-point scale where 1 is

"strongly disagree" and 5 is "strongly agree." The employees gave this item a mean rating of 3.87, meaning that not enough employees believe that their company is committed to building their strengths.

For those companies that want to demonstrate their commitment to building their employees' strengths, here are three steps executives and managers can take.

Help coworkers know and understand each other's strengths

Employees spend much of their time interacting with colleagues through email, phone calls, meetings, and teamwork. These interactions can be more effective if employees understand their coworkers' talents and motivations and if they share a common language, such as the talent themes described by the Clifton StrengthsFinder, to discuss them openly and honestly. Relationships become stronger when employees fundamentally understand each other -- when they trust their coworkers and feel comfortable voicing their thoughts and opinions.

Imagine a team that has learned to work together based on how the team members' talents complement one another. One team member with Activator and Strategic among her top five talent themes would be able to kick-start a project plan and operationalize the ideas of two other team members whose top five talents include Ideation and Learner. Another team member who has Communication in his top five takes on writing the final report and presenting it to the team's manager. Think about how effectively that group would collaborate.

This strengths-based approach is both simple and effective, yet too few companies have implemented it. Gallup asked more than 8,900 employees in three organizations to rate their agreement with the statement "I can name the strengths of five people I work with" on the same 5-point scale. The employees gave this item a mean rating of 3.78, which means that too many employees do not know their coworkers' strengths.

There are many ways to facilitate a shared knowledge of coworker strengths. Talent themes could be posted publicly or shared someplace where other employees could search for their coworkers' top themes. Team meetings could start with introductions that include listing each team member's top talents. Employees should be encouraged to share their themes and have conversations with their coworkers about how they can use their talents to work together more effectively.

Have conversations with employees about their talents and strengths regularly

Supervisors and managers should be talking with their employees about strengths frequently; Gallup has found that this is linked to employee engagement and business performance. For example, a study of 1,874 individual employees, most of them in sales functions, found that productivity improved by 7.8% after a strengths intervention. And in another study of 469 business units in organizations ranging from retail stores to large manufacturing facilities, business units with managers who received strengths feedback showed 8.9% greater profitability.

But when Gallup asked 19,347 employees to rate their agreement with the statement "In the last three months, my supervisor and I have had a meaningful discussion about my strengths," the average score was 3.71 on a 5-point scale, indicating that this is not happening as often as it should. Supervisors and managers need to make sure to include discussions about strengths not only in the formal performance review process but also in ongoing conversations they have with employees about their performance.

Too often, when supervisors or managers have conversations with their employees, those interactions are focused on tasks. While it's helpful for managers to understand the tasks each employee is working on, a constant focus on fixing immediate problems can sabotage long-term productivity.

By explicitly acknowledging the uniqueness of each employee, companies energize their workers' independent thinking and creativity.

A more effective way to develop an employee is to center performance conversations on the employee's strengths, which in turn leads to improved morale and employee engagement. People who use their strengths every day are *six* times more likely to be engaged on the job and *three* times more likely to be happier with their lives in general. Focusing more conversations on employees' strengths helps them develop their natural talents and improve their work because they are able to emphasize how they naturally excel and how they're uniquely equipped to get the job done. This also enables them to transfer how they have used their strengths from one task to another and to repeat the process.

For example, if a retail employee has natural relationship-building talents such as Woo or Relator, his manager could encourage him to focus on building relationships with customers to facilitate sales and encourage customers to return to the store. For another sales associate who has Strategic and Arranger in her top five themes, the manager could coach her to sell clothes to customers by showing them how to mix and match items to get the most out of their purchases.

Give ongoing feedback, and build employee trust

As we mentioned above, companies should encourage employees to talk with each other about their strengths, and managers should have ongoing conversations with their employees about using their talents in their role. But to embed these changes deeply into a company's DNA, executives must also align performance management systems to reinforce strengths-based behaviors and to ensure that managers provide accurate, ongoing feedback to every employee.

Many performance management systems, for example, focus on the processes employees use to complete their tasks, treating employees as if they were cogs in a machine. Typically, these conversations happen every six months or annually during a formal performance review. A strengths-based approach, in contrast, encourages managers to reframe these conversations to focus on how employees can use their talents to consistently perform their tasks at excellence -- and to have these conversations much more often than every six months.

Perhaps the most significant company commitment is an extension of trust: By explicitly acknowledging the uniqueness of each employee, companies energize their workers' independent thinking and creativity. This in turn tends to make those activities more productive. Gallup has found that strengths-based development interventions have led to teams increasing their productivity by 12.5%.

Engaged employees are better at understanding the long-term and short-term goals of the employee-customer encounter and their roles in making those interactions productive and profitable. This is why highly engaged teams have 12% higher customer service scores. In Gallup's experience, engaged employees are also far more likely to care whether they meet their goals, are more motivated to learn how to apply themselves, and are more likely to know how far (and when) they can stretch business rules when the situation warrants it.

Strengths development can accelerate engagement and the benefits it brings by helping employees learn to be more intuitive and creative within the context of who they are. This is something everyone can learn to do better and to apply in ways that produce extraordinary financial returns.

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