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How Strengths Boost Engagement

by Jim Asplund and Nikki Blacksmith

A strengths-based organization is more engaged, and engaged companies are stronger, according to Gallup studies

In an office building in downtown Manhattan, two companies specialize in international law. They both do excellent work and have roughly the same number of clients. At first glance, these law offices seem much the same. But actually, they have little in common.

Managers must know the strengths of each employee, then create opportunities for employees to use them.

Law Office A has state-of-the-art technology; spacious offices; and well-educated, experienced attorneys who update their résumés weekly. Law Office B has outdated computers and is using storage closets as offices, yet it has some of the most engaged employees in the city. Law Office B also has 25% fewer people on its payroll than Law Office A, though it bills the same number of hours.

How can this be? Are Law Office B's lawyers working around the clock? Does luxury somehow make lawyers lazy? No. This kind of variation isn't unusual -- it occurs from company to company and between different departments in the same company. This variance has nothing to do with ability, focus, or office space. It has everything to do with management.

The variation between the two law shops can be explained like this: Law Office A is run by 26 people who think workers are replaceable. Law Office B is run by 10 people who believe that the more employees feel engaged and the more they work from their strengths, the more work

they will do -- and the better that work will be.

Both theories have their adherents in all kinds of offices all around the world. But the first theory leads to mediocrity while the second leads to sustainable productivity and success.

The benefits of engagement and strengths

In the 1990s, Gallup concluded a decades-long study into employee engagement. One of the key findings was that employees need 12 essential elements from their workplaces. These elements -- measured by the Q¹², Gallup's 12-item assessment of engagement -- reflect a sense of belonging, growth, and contribution. They are also deeply emotional. Though workers do need to be paid -- and though they do like status symbols such as corner offices -- they also need emotional fulfillment. If workers' emotional needs are met, they become engaged with their companies, and their productivity, profitability, retention rate, and safety rate increase. They even get sick less often. (See sidebar "The 12 Elements of Great Managing.")

Gallup later published its groundbreaking work on strengths. In Gallup's terminology, a strength starts with an innate talent -- a tendency to think and behave a certain way -- to seek harmony among group members, for instance, or to enjoy learning for its own sake. A talent becomes a strength when it's refined by skills, knowledge, and practice then consciously applied to something that needs doing -- such as practicing international law.

If companies want to increase productivity, they must deliberately manage their employees toward engagement and help them use their strengths with knowledgeable intent. Most companies don't. Law Office A certainly doesn't.

Engagement starts with managers. To manage toward engagement, leaders must understand the 12 elements and apply them to every worker every day. Strengths, however, are a little different. Strengths develop from innate talents and look different in different people. To develop and work from their strengths, employees must know what their talents are and learn how to hone them into strengths. To make the most out of employee strengths in an organization, managers need to know the strengths of each employee. Then they must create opportunities for employees to use them.

THE 12 ELEMENTS OF GREAT MANAGING

To identify the elements of worker engagement, Gallup conducted many thousands of interviews in all kinds of organizations, at all levels, in most industries, and in many countries. These 12 statements – the Gallup Q¹² – emerged from Gallup's pioneering research as those that predict employee and workgroup performance.

1. I know what is expected of me at work.
2. I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right.
3. At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
4. In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.
5. My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.
6. There is someone at work who encourages my development.
7. At work, my opinions seem to count.
8. The mission or purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important.
9. My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work.
10. I have a best friend at work.
11. In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.
12. This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow.

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Recently, Gallup concluded another study that looked at the effect strengths and engagement have on each other and on the workplace. As part of this study, we administered the Q¹² to 896 business units. We separated the units into two groups. The first served as a control group. In the second group, managers received coaching on their strengths and on developing the strengths of others. The units with managers who received strengths feedback (typically a one-hour coaching conversation focused on understanding one's strengths) showed significantly more improvement on their Q¹² scores than the units with managers who received no strengths feedback. We also administered the Q¹² assessment to the employees -- 12,157 of them. The units with managers who received strengths feedback also had improved engagement scores.

Everyone wants to be part of a successful team. Success increases engagement.

We have found similar results again and again in our studies of strengths and engagement. In a study with 1,874 workers, most of them salespeople, those who received strengths coaching had productivity rates that were 7.8% higher than those who received no strengths coaching. In a study of 65,672 employees, those who received strengths feedback had turnover rates that were 14.9% lower than those for employees who received no feedback (controlling for job type and tenure). And in a study of 469 business units in companies ranging from retail stores to large manufacturing facilities, units with managers who received strengths feedback showed 8.9% greater profitability post-intervention. What's more, non-managers didn't receive any strengths coaching, yet in units with managers who did receive strengths coaching, the profitability of non-managers jumped as well.

Support, experiences, and reinforcement

So engagement improves productivity and profitability. Strengths development improves productivity and profitability. Engaged workers who know and use their strengths have improved productivity and profitability. And a strengths-based approach to management is one of the best means of improving the employee-manager relationship that Gallup has found. But how does it all work?

We found clues in a 2010 study of college students; two researchers identified three constructs they deemed necessary for students to successfully capitalize on their strengths: continual social support, experiences of success, and reinforcement of personal strengths. They also found that these three constructs "represent phenomena that are interrelated, overlapping, and circular," not sequential.

In companies like Law Office A, where leaders perhaps don't know about -- or care about -- strengths development, workers don't get continual support, experiences of success, and reinforcement of their strengths. In companies like Law Office B, they do. And that affects workers' engagement.

In onsite observations and interviews with employees and managers who used a strengths-based employee development approach, we found variability among workgroups, especially in employees' ability to apply what they learned. Some of this was no surprise -- strengths are different from person to person, as is the capacity to learn, integrate, or apply any insight.

Along with variability among workgroups, we found variability in social support for applying strengths science in business settings. Some of this variability was due to organizational impediments. Some was due to resistance to the idea of individual strengths.

It seems clear that if workers don't get continual social support, experiences of success, and reinforcement of personal strengths -- even when their bosses have received coaching on how to provide these constructs -- those workers probably aren't getting the emotionally engaging experiences they need either. They likely don't have managers who focus on employees' strengths. And those employees probably aren't encouraged to learn the strengths of their colleagues and how to use that information in their everyday interactions.

It's also possible that disengaged workers aren't interested in their strengths or those of others. They probably have a long list of reasons for that: Strengths aren't as relevant if workers don't have opportunities to use them, if employees don't care about their company's success, or if the success of their coworkers doesn't matter to them. Strengths aren't as relevant for workers employed in companies like Law Office A, for example, where employees know they are replaceable.

A win/win combination

Strengths, engagement, and success work in a feedback loop, the research suggests. Everyone wants to be part of a successful team. Success increases engagement. It also frees up more time, resources, and goodwill to talk about and do something productive with strengths. The more a workgroup succeeds, the more it can succeed -- and it will succeed more often if the employees are engaged and working from their strengths.

Too often, engagement and strengths can be viewed as separate entities. However, the science shows that engagement and strengths are far more powerful when managed and supported in tandem. Because engagement feeds strengths development, and developed strengths boost engagement, the greatest potential to maximize both lies in simultaneous attention to both. That's where companies will find the most productivity, profitability, and retention -- simply put, the most success.

Additional Reading

Bowers, K.M. & Lopez, S.J. (2010). Capitalizing on personal strengths in college. *Journal of College and Character*, 11, 1-11.

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