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Strengths-Based Goal Setting

by Jim Asplund and Nikki Blacksmith

First know, then make the most of, what you do best

Whether the economy is good or bad, most organizations are constantly looking for ways to increase productivity. For managers who are looking to do more with less, a key first step is for them to know their employees individually. This helps managers position workers for success, motivate them, and keep them focused on actions that are essential for the continued health of the organization.

Employees who intentionally apply their strengths to their work increase the odds of their success.

But it's difficult for managers to do any of this if they are not attuned to the strengths of the people on their team. And it's just as difficult for workers to use their strengths if their managers don't understand, appreciate, or maximize those strengths.

Knowing what's expected

Of the millions of employees Gallup has surveyed, just over half have a clear understanding of what's expected of them when they show up to work every day. This is particularly alarming. It's difficult for an organization to accomplish its goals if it doesn't help its employees understand how they can contribute to achieving those goals.

"One of the most important foundations of performance is determining what you're good at, what you have the potential to be great at, and bringing that [knowledge] to the work that you do," says Nicole Helprin, director of internal and employee engagement communications for

Hewlett-Packard. "When people feel like they're bringing their gifts to the workplace, they're more productive, they're more engaged, and they're going to be more successful in meeting their expectations."

A lack of clearly defined expectations is detrimental to the productivity of an organization. Worse, it's almost impossible for the organization to be credible in the eyes of its employees if it cannot clearly articulate what employees should be doing at work. So what is the best way to communicate expectations to employees?

1. Describe *what* each employee is supposed to accomplish, not *how* he or she is supposed to accomplish it. Don't explain expectations as a process or set of steps; explain them in terms of the outcomes the employee needs to achieve to reach organizational goals.

2. Get to know each employee's greatest strengths. Then, discuss how employees can use their unique strengths to achieve expectations. This also helps managers understand the specific ways an employee will produce exceptional results. There is rarely only one way to accomplish a task. Freeing employees to use their strengths to achieve key outcomes can help them find more efficient ways to meet expectations.

"It's so important to understand your own strengths and how you apply them to your job," says Helprin. "It helps you map yourself and your team -- someone may not be good at *that*, but they are very good at *this*, and it's really helpful in understanding how to divide up the work. That makes you less prone to put someone in the wrong job or to give them responsibilities that don't fall into areas where they excel."

Identifying strengths

Gallup asked more than 11,000 employees the following question: "Every week, I set goals and expectations based on my strengths." Only 36% of those employees could strongly agree with that statement. So it appears that the majority of employees either don't know their strengths or are unable to apply them in their current jobs. This is unfortunate, because employees who set their goals based on their strengths are more than seven times more likely to be engaged in their work and therefore much more likely to be high performers.

Identifying the strengths of each employee can be difficult, and often even individuals don't know how to describe what they do best. Gallup has developed an assessment, the Clifton StrengthsFinder, that provides a starting point for identifying specific personal strengths. But

employees need to know more than just what their strengths are. They also need to know how to use what they've learned about their strengths at work. And that's where strengths-based development comes in.

Strengths-based development programs offer significant financial benefits to organizations. In Gallup's work with clients around the world, it has become clear that these benefits hinge on whether employees can apply what they learn about themselves to their everyday tasks. The most basic and crucial aspect of this developmental process is learning how to set goals and expectations based on strengths.

Done correctly, a strengths-based goal-setting process clarifies what the organization means by success and whether each employee is achieving it. Employees who intentionally apply their strengths to their work increase the odds of their success. And when these employees are working at their best, they show their colleagues and managers what to expect from them.

This approach also helps build the positive emotional connection between employee and manager that is a necessary precursor to employee engagement. And it helps managers understand how to motivate their team members. It's one thing for employees to know what they do well; it's another thing entirely to do it to the best of their abilities every day.

Helprin has found that performance reviews that start with a list of strengths, rather than a year of notes and observations, are much more personal and accurate. This approach accomplishes more than helping her direct her team's performance. It also shows that she understands each person individually, which, says Helprin, "makes employees feel seen and understood. That level of specificity is helpful to me; [it helps me] guide my employees to use their talents and skills. But it's also great from an employee perspective to know that your manager gets you."

Learning about strengths is a journey. It may start with an individual, but it often becomes a team effort accomplished by employees, managers, and organizations. Once the journey has begun, everyone involved can learn about each other's capabilities and build on what they know. Then they can set the goals and reach the milestones that help organizations succeed.

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