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The Secret of Higher Performance

by Jim Asplund and Nikki Blacksmith

How integrating employee engagement and strengths boosts both

Here are some secrets we know about you: To be engaged, you need to identify with the mission and purpose of your company. You're great at some things and won't ever be very good at others. If you have the materials and equipment you need to do your job right, you'll care more about the fate of your organization. You are naturally inclined toward success at some things, and by adding skills, knowledge, and practice, you'll be much better at them.

People who are engaged are more successful, and success helps people engage in their work.

To some people, these don't seem much like secrets. In fact, they might appear so obvious that they go without saying. But you might be surprised at how many people don't know these things or haven't given them much thought.

That's a shame, and it's all too common. If everyone knew and understood these secrets -- which are more properly called elements of employee engagement and strengths -- they'd be much more successful at everything they do.

Better and better

Gallup discovered the first secret years ago: Employee engagement boosts organizational performance. Our research has found that work units scoring in the top half on Gallup's Q¹² employee engagement assessment essentially double their odds of success compared to work units with scores in the bottom half. We've also found that improving employee

engagement links to improvements in crucial business outcomes (customer ratings, profitability, productivity, and quality) and reductions in others (safety incidents, shrinkage, and absenteeism).

The second secret came from subsequent Gallup research: People who know and use their strengths -- and the companies they work for -- tend to be better performers. In one study of 65,672 employees, Gallup found that those who received strengths feedback had turnover rates that were 14.9% lower than for employees who received no feedback (controlling for job type and tenure). A study of 530 work units with productivity data found that teams with managers who received strengths feedback showed 12.5% greater productivity post-intervention than teams with managers who received no feedback. And in a study of 469 business units ranging from retail stores to large manufacturing facilities, Gallup found that units with managers who received strengths feedback showed 8.9% greater profitability post-intervention relative to units in which the manager received no feedback.

Gallup knew that companies with engaged employees outperform those with less engaged employees and that employees who use their strengths at work outperform those who don't. What we didn't know initially is what happens when companies nurture engagement and strengths simultaneously.

Big boost

To examine the relationship between strengths and engagement, Gallup studied workgroups that were using a strengths-based intervention and that had Q¹² assessment engagement metrics. In a study of 896 such business units, Gallup found significant improvement in employee engagement after the units' managers received strengths feedback -- typically a one-hour coaching conversation focused on understanding one's strengths -- relative to work units with managers who didn't receive strengths coaching. The results were notable because the increase in engagement occurred for employees as well as for their managers, although only the managers received feedback on their strengths. We found a similar pattern in a study of 12,157 employees who received strengths feedback: Their engagement also increased after they received the feedback.

Our conclusion -- based on these and other studies -- is that a strengths-based approach to managing is the single best method of improving the employee-manager relationship that Gallup has observed in many years of working on employee engagement. That leads naturally to these questions: Why is a strengths-based approach so effective? What's the secret formula behind strengths plus engagement? How do they enhance each other?

Without help, many of us wouldn't necessarily know what our talents are.

Gallup research has shown that engagement creates a positive feedback loop: People who are engaged are more successful, and success helps people engage in their work. We have also seen that strengths-oriented teams improve engagement and team cohesion; thus, they have less turnover -- creating conditions that improve the likelihood of success. So it seems that both engagement and strengths orientation create a culture that fosters performance.

For example, we worked with a manager named Elaine, whose top five Clifton StrengthsFinder talent themes include Relator and Individualization. These talent themes help Elaine understand and engage the people she works with and supervises. She is exceptional at understanding and managing relationship issues, so she's an ace at getting people who would prefer to work alone to work together. She has forged a cohesive team from a group of dedicated individualists. Thanks to her leadership, the team gets a lot more done together than they could alone.

Furthermore, it's possible that employee engagement and strengths potentiate each other. For example, one of the Q¹² items asks employees if they have the opportunity to do what they do best every day at work. And having such opportunities is the very essence of a strengths-based approach. So if doing what you do best is essential for engagement -- and knowing what you do best is essential for using your strengths at work -- then it seems logical that there could be a relationship between strengths and engagement and performance.

We also suspect that a key to the engagement-plus-strengths equation is that **together, engagement and strengths enhance relationships and trust**. Gallup recommends that team members discuss their workgroup's Q¹² survey results and find ways to improve them. The most engaged and effective teams know what they need to do to improve their performance because they talk about it openly. (See "What to Do With Employee Survey Results" and "You've Gotten Employee Feedback. Now What?" in the "See Also" area on this page.)

Employees in organizations that take a strengths-based approach to management acquire a degree of self-knowledge. That's because the Clifton StrengthsFinder gives them a "talent map" of their top five talent themes. This map shows them the areas where they can shine if they work toward adding the skills, knowledge, and practice required to build their talents into strengths.

Without help, many of us wouldn't necessarily know what our talents are. Understanding how to maximize them could remain a secret, even from ourselves. However, knowing our talents enables us to develop and use them intentionally -- and to tell others about them. In turn, we also can learn the strengths of our colleagues. That knowledge helps us collaborate more effectively with our coworkers. It also gives managers an advantage in working with their team members. Those insights can help managers and employees achieve greater performance, more success, and higher engagement levels.

In the end, the secret of strengths and engagement is that there is no secret at all. Strengths-oriented team members know their talents and those of their coworkers, which helps them perform at increasingly higher levels. When engagement and strengths are combined, they blow the lid off the secrets that prevent achievement -- and tell us some truths that spur success.

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