

OCTOBER 24, 2016

Why Aren't All Organizations Strengths-Based?

ENGAGED EMPLOYEES WHO SAY THEIR
MANAGER FOCUSES ON STRENGTHS

67%

GALLUP

by Simon Cooper

"Everybody is a genius, but if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid."

This rather obscure quote attributed to Albert Einstein (a true genius) exaggerates the challenge of identifying the innate qualities that each of us possesses and applying those qualities to our careers.

Rugby coaches have an easy time assessing their players because physical attributes dictate the position for which players are best suited. The 6-foot-6 players will be in the second row leaping for a line-out ball, and the 5-foot-10 player who can run 100 yards in 11 seconds will be a line-breaking center back. Our physical attributes are no secret, but what about our abilities that cannot be seen?

Gallup and other organizations have made enormous advances over the past few decades in developing tools to dramatically improve our ability to see the unseen. [CliftonStrengths](#), which catalogs individuals' talent themes, provides leaders with insight into themselves and their teams in a way that was never possible when I began my career.

Given this knowledge, there is no reason why all workplaces could not be strengths-based. In a [global study of companies](#) that have implemented [strengths-based management practices](#), 90% of the groups Gallup studied had performance increases at or above the following ranges:

- 10% to 19% increase in sales
- 14% to 29% increase in profit
- 3% to 7% higher customer engagement
- 6% to 16% lower turnover (in low-turnover organizations)
- 26% to 72% lower turnover (in high-turnover organizations)
- 9% to 15% increase in engaged employees
- 22% to 59% fewer safety incidents

Nonetheless, some leaders prefer to focus on weaknesses. I find that debilitating, and it consumes a huge amount of what I call *negative management time* because time spent trying to "fix" weaknesses almost always results in negative outcomes for the individuals and the organization.

In fact, I would argue that trying to change our innate qualities and behaviors is a futile exercise.

Focusing on strengths improves companies, management and leadership. Gallup found that 67% of employees who strongly agree that [their manager focuses on their strengths](#) are engaged in their jobs. When employees strongly disagree with this statement, the percentage of engaged workers plummets to 2%.

When I worked at Marriott, I was a strong proponent of 360-degree feedback -- a process in which employees receive confidential, anonymous feedback from their peers and leaders. The quality that had the highest correlation with a leader's long-term success was the ability to "inspire and motivate." If inspiring and motivating a team is the primary goal of a great leader, then talking to employees and team members about their strengths is the best way to start.

Gallup's research has found that people who focus on their strengths every day are six times more likely to be engaged in their jobs. This should be no surprise. We all prefer to do what we're good at, and the role of the leader or coach in a strengths-based workplace is to target employees' talents where they can be most effective -- yes, square pegs in square holes.

In the global hospitality business, we employ tens of thousands of employees around the world, and many of them are doing repetitive and mundane work for relatively low wages. Yet these ladies and gentlemen -- which is how employees at Ritz-Carlton, where I was president, refer to their coworkers -- are amazingly creative and talented.

I recall attending an important dinner at the Ritz-Carlton in Shenzhen, China. The menu was printed on a fan, and one had to open the fan to read it. The Chinese calligraphy wove in and out of the folds of the fan -- it was beautiful. I insisted on meeting the artist with whom the hotel had contracted to create such an exquisite work of art. It turned out that the artist was a gentleman responsible for cleaning the public toilets in the hotel.

We should not be surprised to find such extraordinary talent hidden in our employees. There is a piece of genius in all of us -- the skill is to find it, develop it and use it. Companies are more successful when they look for those pieces of genius in their people. So, the question for companies that don't is, *why not?*

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