Using strengths when you work

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What exactly does it mean to focus on using strengths when we work instead of trying to fix weaknesses? How does it change what we do every day? What's the first step to take? In terms of positive psychology tenets, "Use your strengths, is a close second to Chris Peterson's 3-word summary, "Other people matter." See Senia's article, Using you Strengths in a Job Search and my earlier posting, Positive Core and Strengths. It's a wonderful concept, but it's not so simple and obvious how to put it in practice.

Understanding Strengths and Weaknesses

I learned this from experience last year working with about 40 women in technical jobs who attended a series of workshops on using strengths at work. They took the Values-in-Action character strengths testand the StrengthsFinder talent themes test. Everybody found it very interesting to think about herself from these viewpoints, but the question still remained at the end. What do I do differently to base my job or my life on my strengths?

We came up with some interesting ideas that appear in my May column, Positive Core and Strengths. But they didn't seem complete. So I'd had this question rattling around in my head for over a year when I started studying Marcus Buckingham's new book, *Go, Put Your Strengths to Work*, and listening to his telephone lecture series. See also The Marcus Buckingham Company. Here are a few things I've taken away.

The results of a test like StrengthsFinder are not strengths. They are general talent themes that influence where you can develop strengths. Strengths come from talent combined with knowledge gained from study and skill gained from practice. So when StrengthsFinder says I have Strategy (creating alternative ways to proceed) and Individualization (being intrigued with the unique qualities of each individual) in my top 5 talent themes, that doesn't really tell me yet how to use my strengths more, though it provides some clues.

You are the best judge of what your strengths are because you experience yourself working. When you use strengths, you feel invigorated. When you use weaknesses, you feel drained. You look forward to activities that use your strengths and dread ones that use your weaknesses. You are more likely to be successful and to feel satisfied after using your strengths than after doing something that uses weaknesses. You find it a joy to learn new skills or information in service of your strengths, while you can't seem to get any better in your areas of weakness.

While talent themes are general and life-long, strengths are context specific and change as your circumstances change. When I worked for a large corporation, I felt that mentoring more junior people, particularly eager and open-minded people, was a strength. Now that I'm a self-employed professional coach, the terms of that strength are different, even though the StrengthsFinder talent themes of Strategic and Individualization are still evident. As part of the Summer of Development class, I recently wrote a new strengths statement for myself, "I feel strong when I coach an individual who is at an interesting juncture in his/her life and who truly wants assistance finding his/her way. I love the way insights come about in the space between us."

Strengths tend to be specific in terms of some or all of *why*, *with whom*, *when*, *where*, or what about. For example, I like to speak to groups, but I hate to argue or debate. So I have another Strengths Statement that reads, "I feel strong when I present on a topic that is important to me

to an audience that is receptive to new ways of thinking. I love to tell stories that resonate." But I also have a Weakness Statement that reads, "I feel weak when I have to sell an idea to a skeptical or recalcitrant audience." I can do it, but I dread it.

Actions for Individuals

Given these points, what do you do specifically to increase the use of your strengths? It's important to observe yourself to figure out what your strengths are in your current context. It makes sense to repeat your observation either annually or when the context changes. Buckingham describes a week-long self-observation process where you pause occasionally to jot down on an index card what you were doing, being specific in terms of when, where, why, with whom. He has green-rimmed index cards for describing activities you loved and red-rimmed ones for describing activities you loathed. At the end of the week, sort, select, play with the cards until you can come up with a few strength statements and a few weaknesses statements. Post those where you can see them frequently.

Once you have your strength and weakness statements, work to change your job or your life at home incrementally. Each week make plans to increase the time you spend doing activities that use your strengths and decrease the time spent on activities that use your weaknesses. Plan just a few changes to your schedule each week. Build on the changes you made last week. Swap tasks with another person if you can reach a better strengths alignment for both of you.

The last chapter of the book is titled, Build Strong Habits. This gets back to a message that has appeared in PPND numerous times – that is, build better behavior patterns through attention and practice, and eventually they become part of your life without requiring so much thought. See, for example, On Keeping a New Year's Resolution, Create New Habits: Self-Regulation, and Create New Habits: The Good Constraints.

Actions for Groups

It is very important for members of groups to understand that different people have different strengths and weaknesses. That sounds simple, but many times, people allocating work think of some tasks as "good tasks" and others as "bad tasks", usually based on their own strengths. They often try to allocate work to be fair with mixed results. It often turns out that one person loves doing things that others loathe.

 Ask. Get people to think about their strengths and then share the information. Talk about differences in strengths and how to allocate work so that people spend more time on tasks that make them feel strong. Also talk about how best to work around strengths that no one in the group has, but you think you need. Is there a way to grow that strength by building on any of the existing strengths in the group? Do you need to pull someone else into the group? Is there a way to bypass needing that strength? The same kind of thinking can go on in other contexts. How are you dividing work at home?; Does it play to the strengths of all involved to the extent possible?

Why should businesses worry about figuring out and exploiting the strengths of its members? People who can focus while at work and use their strengths tend to be vastly more productive than people who are discouraged, distracted, or struggling daily to overcome their weaknesses. They go home with a powerful sense of accomplishment that enables them to relax and come back the next day with renewed energy and optimism, both of which contribute to greater productivity. Maybe sometime in the future I can tell some stories along these lines.

I'd love to hear any of your stories about attempts to use strengths more and what you found worked best. I think this an area open for more discovery.

References

Buckingham, M (2007). *Go Put Your Strengths to Work: 6 Powerful Steps to Achieve Outstanding Performance*. NY: Free Press.

Buckingham, M. (2007). Summer of development. You can listen to recordings of his lectures posted here.

Linley, P. A. (2008). Average to A+: Realising Strengths in Yourself and Others. Coventry, UK: CAPP Press.

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