

## **Effective Managers Pay Attention to Strengths**

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Why are employees sent to training sessions? Why do they get coaching? What do 'areas of development' in appraisals usually refer to? Exactly, weaknesses and shortcomings! For much too long HR professionals, managers and employees have had an almost obsessive fixation on repairing weaknesses. What does this lead to? Insecurity, frustration, waste of time and feelings of being under-appreciated.

### ***An Example***

*A CEO of a small company visited a management coach and told him that he seriously thought of quitting his job. The coach, who knew the director as a competent person, asked why. The CEO explained he had lately gotten the idea that a good CEO is always sociable and extraverted. And he wasn't, no matter how much he tried. The management coach asked if he did his job well, if he achieved good results and if others appreciated him. The wholehearted answer to each of these questions the answer was 'yes'. After an hour of talking the director came to the view that he did perform well as a CEO and that many people appreciated his qualities. They thought he had an excellent overview over his company, and managers. Employees and customers thought highly of him. They saw him as someone with dedication, intelligence and courage. He had always invested in the qualities that made him special, not in his weaknesses. At this moment, about one and a half years later, the CEO and his company are still doing fine.*

### **Fixation on deficits**

Most managers seem to take strengths of employees for granted and concentrate on identifying and eliminating weaknesses and shortcomings. They euphemistically talk about *skill gaps* and *areas of improvement*, and then send their people on a course to get these *defects* fixed. Also, the now so popular competency management systems are often used at identifying performance gaps and finding ways to bridge them. Often, employees get sent off to training programs and targets are agreed on eliminating these shortcomings. It *can* be done differently...

### **Effective managers pay attention to strengths**

Based on a large study from the Gallup organization, Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton in their book [Now, discover your strengths](#), say this kind of thinking is misguided. Buckingham and Clifton say that to excel in your chosen field and to find lasting satisfaction in doing so, you need to know and understand your strengths. The authors envisage an organization that is built around the strengths of each person. This theory is in accordance with Peter Drucker, who once said that in the organization of the future, people's strengths will be so well-aligned that weaknesses won't matter.

Buckingham and Clifton call this practice 'damage control'. From their research it appears that effective managers do it differently. These managers are guided by the following beliefs:

1. each person's talents are lasting and unique, and
2. for anyone, the greatest opportunities for development lie in the area of their greatest strength.

### **Strength is talent completed with skills and knowledge**

By the way, what is a strength? Buckingham and Clifton define a *strength* as a talent completed with skills and knowledge. They consider talents to be more important than skills and knowledge because skills and knowledge can be learned relatively easily but a talent can't. Discovering your talents is therefore of great importance.

### **80% focus on strengths, 20% on weaknesses**

The above pleads for a strategy of maximizing and developing your strengths and strengthening your weaknesses until they have reached an acceptable level. This seems to be yet another case where the 80/20 rule applies. Spend approximately 80% of your attention to strengths and about 20% to your weaknesses. To be sure, attention to weaknesses remains important.

A racing cyclist who gets a flat tire will have to change or repair the tire. But this won't be enough to win the race. No. In order to be able to do that, he will have to know and use his strengths. Does he think he can win on the basis of his sprinting power? Or does he have to escape early from the main body of cyclists? Or will it be a matter of clever co-operation and tactics? In short, in addition to eliminating blocking weaknesses or circumstances he, more than anything else, has to know and utilize his strengths in order to excel.

### **Identifying strengths is not that easy**

The lesson of the above for managers and employees is: if you want to retain or improve the performance of your employees (or yourself!) you have to pay a lot of attention to moments of good performance and try to identify strengths. This is not so easy as it might seem, by the way. In the words of Buckingham and Clifton: "*talents are so interwoven in the fabric of your life, that the pattern of each one is hard to discern. Hiding in plain sight, they defy description.*" But it is definitely possible to identify strengths.

### **Suggestions for managers**

Below you find a number of questions that you can ask yourself to help you identify an employee's strengths.

1. When does the employee perform exceptionally well? (Even if the employee's overall performance is below expectation, still look for moments of functioning well – situations in which performance was at or above expectation.
2. Which tasks activities does the employee enjoy and give him or her gratification? Things we like to do and feel good about often indicate a talent.
3. What new knowledge and skills does the employee acquire quicker than average? This too, often indicates a talent.
4. When does the employee talk with pride and enthusiasm about his/her work or performance? What made this performance so special? What were the circumstances? How can they be recreated?
5. Which other strengths that the employee seems to have might the employee use in his or her work?

And once you *have* identified strengths ask the following questions:

1. Which strengths could the employee use even more often? For what other tasks are these strengths relevant?
2. Which other tasks and challenges does the employee (considering his strengths) take on?
3. Of what colleague(s) could this employee be a good partner? How would their different strengths complement each other?
4. How can this employee further develop his main strengths?

Next, you can dedicate 20% of your attention to what does not seem to go right:

1. What would the employee want to or have to change that does not go well? How could it be, or would it have to be, different? How would this help? How could this be achieved?
2. With respect to the improvement area: was there a time or occasion when his performance already seemed to be better (or even slightly better?). In what sense was it better? How did s/he do it? How could this occasion be recreated?
3. What would have to be changed in the tasks or work context of the employee? How

would this help? What would be needed to make this possible?

### **Conclusion**

Paying ample attention to personal strengths can feel a little awkward at first but is extremely important. Excellent performance is based on discerning, using and developing strengths. Weaknesses and limitations play a role too, but a less important one. When employees are challenged and evaluated on their strengths they feel much more appreciated and they will do their work with more pleasure and gratification. After all, what is more fun than doing something you are really good at?

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