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Identifying Your Strengths – What are you really good at?

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This second article on playing to strengths focuses on how you can identify your strengths and leverage them.

Playing to your strengths is an activity that energises us, something for which we have a natural talent. By developing natural strengths both in ourselves and in others, whilst managing, not focusing on weaknesses, the greatest benefits can be achieved.

The Gallup Organisation says natural strength is made up of talent plus knowledge plus skill. But there is another key factor - enjoyment. Talent plus enjoyment allows you to pick up knowledge and skill very easily. People can get more satisfaction out of their life if they learn to identify which character strengths they possess in abundance and use them as much as possible. Maybe you have good empathy, lots of common sense or excellent writing skills. You may be a critical thinker, results focused or known for your creativity. Once you know your strengths and have an idea of how they work together, start thinking about the extent to which you use them in your current role and develop strategies for reinforcing and leveraging them.

Many don't find their strengths, partly because they are not used to thinking about what's good about them, partly because they discount them, partly because they're used to focusing on weaknesses. They think anything that comes easy can't be worth much and don't recognise it as a skill. For example, putting a report together in half-an-hour may not feel an

achievement to you, though it may take a colleague two days to complete. It is not always easy to tell what you're really good at. But there are ways of identifying your strengths.

One of the simplest approaches is to keep a diary for a fortnight of key things you loved doing. Take time to identify the activities that energised you, and how, when and where you applied them. Go into detail. What activities do you always volunteer for or pick up quickly? What made you feel energised and positive? What you are looking for are trends and patterns that have run throughout your life, about successful activities you've been involved in - thinking back over times you've performed at your best, where time has flown by, where your confidence has increased.

Telltale signs of a strength are what you find yourself drawn to repeatedly, activities that you do with ease, learn quickly and deliver more A's than B's and C's, and time flies by when you do them.

Talking to people who know you well can help identify your strengths. Ask them for examples of times when they have seen you playing to your strengths. This raises awareness of something you may have discounted but is a key strength - and a way of taking it to the next level.

Working through a series of questions using online strengths tools is a good alternative for identifying strengths.

Real strengths provide a sense of being in the flow, which is being in a state of complete immersion with the activity and in the optimal state of motivation. These times are characterised by a feeling of enjoyment, fulfilment and skill during which, time stands still. Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, says people are most happy when they are in a state of flow: "To achieve a flow state a balance between the challenge of the task and the skill of the performer must be struck."

Personal development has traditionally focused on overcoming weaknesses. With the Strength approach we want to increase your strength, building on who you already *are*, not on who you *are not*. It is essential not to become complacent or overplay your strength as it could tip you into weakness and undermine your performance. For example, if you are a person great on detail you could begin to overplay, by dotting every 'I', crossing every 'T', ending up in analysis paralysis.

When you are given an insight into your strengths, you are better able to manage your weaknesses, which can be identified in a similar way. Keeping a diary for a fortnight is useful, looking at negative rather than positive aspects. At the end of the week identify the ones that provoked the greatest negative emotion. What were the key things you loathed doing? What left you feeling weak? These are the tasks you need to actively manage.

If you do find real weaknesses, key strategies for dealing with them are reducing the time you're engaging in the activity, and teaming up with someone whose strength is your weakness. Use your strengths to help cope and to find creative ideas and options to overcome or work through them. One client hated admin work but she used her strength of 'results focused' to complete the task.

Of the 10 million people Gallup interviewed, only 20% said they were able to put their strengths to work every day. Top to high performing individuals build their lives around their strengths and use them more than 75% of the time. Companies where strength-based coaching has been introduced have shown a direct return on investment.

There is so much scope for you to play to your strengths and reap the benefits of more motivation, engagement, confidence, and better performance. We're not talking about taking massive steps - it's about taking small ones, making small changes, one step at a time on a regular basis.

Have you checked your Strengths barometer recently?

