

Article from Surrey University's MOLIE Southeast Leadership Academy Newsletter, September 2008, Volume 1, Issue 7

10. Playing to Strengths Results in Engaged Employees and Better Performance

Author: Gail MacIndoe, Associate, written on behalf of VI International

Companies, CEOs, managers and individuals are being pressurised to do more, with less. How can companies get more out of their employees? Likewise, how as an employee, do you become more engaged and deliver your own best performance? Research by Gallup and others show that when people play to their strengths at work they are more likely to be engaged.

Over the past decade Gallup surveyed 10 million people worldwide about employee engagement. Only one third strongly agreed with the statement, 'At work I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.'

But the epidemic of active disengagement we see in workplaces everyday could be a "curable disease," writes Tom Rath in Strengths Finder 2.0, "if we can help the people around us develop their strengths.

"When I was at Aviva we wanted to introduce a new focus to leadership development that would inspire and produce tangible benefits for the organisation. Through strengths coaching one director realised she had focused on fixing what was 'wrong', resulting in her losing confidence, rather than playing to strengths she had been hired for. She introduced the approach to her team who found they could be more effective and motivated by reallocating staff to different tasks. Another found that after many years spent focusing on his development needs on weaknesses, it felt much more natural to focus on the things at which he was good at.

“Becoming mindful of the activities that inspire or drain me has helped me plan my time so that I can be more effective,” said Craig McKinlay, head of channel and sales development at RAC.” Tangible business benefits were achieved by the strengths coaching programme, including one individual making cost savings of £100,000, another creating £250,000 in additional potential revenue.

What is a Strength?

A strength is an activity that energises us - something for which we have a natural talent, not necessarily what we are good at. Real strengths leave you wanting to do more. They provide a sense of being in the flow. We often find ourselves drawn to doing them and can do them repeatedly, happily and successfully. By developing those natural strengths rather than focusing on weaknesses the greatest benefits can be achieved.

Enjoyment is the key. An example is Warren Buffet who in 2007 was listed among Time’s one hundred most influential people in the world. Whilst speaking at the University of Nebraska, he said the only difference between the students and himself was that every day he gets a chance to do what he loves - and if they wanted to learn anything from him that was the best advice he could give them.

Buffet is different from most people. Firstly, he became aware of the need to enjoy his work when most wouldn’t know how to take the first step, deliberately playing to his strengths. Significantly, he chose not to focus on rectifying his weaknesses.

It is human nature to strive to improve ourselves, and commonly thought that the greatest area for development is in fixing our weaknesses. Research has shown there is more headroom for development in areas where people possess natural strength. True weakness remains so – no matter how much effort is put into development it will never become strength. This is not to say

we ignore weaknesses, we manage them and focus on people's natural talents.

Take golfer Tiger Woods. He knew his bunker play needed attention so worked on it just enough so as not to undermine his strengths but to minimise the impact of weakness. Then having reached an acceptable standard he and his coach turned to refining and perfecting his most dominant strength – his swing.

Self-discovery is key if an individual is to capitalise on how they work with others and find ways to carve their role to play to their strengths, thereby making the greatest contribution. People learn quickly and excel at a strength. However most do not recognise their natural strengths, if they do, talk in general terms: 'I like to work with people'. But what type of people? At what level? In what industry sector or department? Doing what exactly?

Of 10 million people surveyed only one third strongly agreed with the statement, 'At work I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.'

A big part of our coaching is helping people discover, develop and leverage their strengths. As strengths come naturally to us, it is assumed that it is the same for everyone else.

Clients often feel there might not be enough 'stretch' in developing a strength so we help them think creatively on how to raise the bar, spending more time playing to their strengths.

An employee may be a good project manager but be totally bored by the role. To break away from this weakness spiral and to replace it with a strength revolution, changes need to be made. "As managers, we have a responsibility to work with our employees to identify and develop their strengths and steer them towards roles where there is more opportunity to do more of what they do best and so have the greatest chance of success", says Katrina Roberts,

Vice President – International Payment Technologies, Strategy & Solution Definition, American Express.

Peter F Drucker sums up the rationale for playing to your strengths: “It takes far more energy to work to improve from incompetence to mediocrity, than it takes to improve from first rate performance to excellence.”