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The Psychology Behind Strengths

Dr. Doug MacKie

Organizational & Business Psychologist, CSA Consulting;
Associate Program Director, Melbourne Business School

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Dr. Doug MacKie, Organizational & Business Psychologist at CSA Consulting and Associate Program Director & Executive Coach at the Melbourne Business School, joins Jack Zenger in this installment of the Zenger Folkman Leadership podcast series to discuss how to help people develop their strengths and recognize and build their unrealized strengths.

Dr. MacKie recently authored a new book, *Strength-Based Leadership Coaching in Organizations: An Evidence-Based Guide to Positive Leadership Development*.

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Fifty years ago, Peter Drucker talked about strengths and their importance to individuals and organizations. What's happened that 50 years later this has become such an important topic?

I trace it back even farther to Maslow, but the movement didn't get traction because there wasn't a sufficient empirical base for it to go forward. They weren't focused on building up the data; they were more focused on the ideas and the philosophy.

The movement didn't get real traction until Dr. Martin Seligman, former president of the American Psychological Association, gave that seminal address in 2000 in which he talked about positive psychology. That speech and the research he then promoted gave the empirical base the strength-based movement needed.

The movement has taken a while to get into organizations. Leadership development was doing OK. However, a study done in 2009 showed that some standard leadership-development interactions that looked at deficits in people and tried to improve them through training actually were getting negative results. People going through leadership interventions were getting worse. Contemporary leadership-development wasn't working. I think this opened the door for other methodologies to emerge.

Some people describe strengths as something you are born with. According to your research, where do strengths come from and can they be developed?

There is no current consensus around what a strength is. If you look at the leading research, you'll see strengths variously described as traits, abilities, potentials, capabilities, or characteristics. This lack of consensus is not uncommon for a field of emerging inquiry. The critical point is how you define a strength determines how you develop it.

If you define strengths as a trait, such as a personality trait, the literature says to raise awareness of the strength and do it more, rather than trying to develop it. I think there are real concerns with this approach in that it can lead to unregulated focus on strengths, which is called lopsided leadership.

The state-based model of strengths views strengths as much more malleable and developable.

Which model do you follow?

My reading of the literature suggests that we have overestimated the fixity of strengths and traits over time. I think the pendulum is swinging this way.

Thirty years ago, intelligence was thought to be something that had a very strong inheritable component and didn't change. Yet human-genome research has struggled to find any genetic basis for intelligence. The Flynn Effect suggests that IQ is significantly increasing with each generation. These studies suggest that the malleability of intelligence is much more than what we thought.

Other research suggests that how you label traits and your own learning style largely determines your level of performance. If you have a fixed mindset, you are going to struggle in difficult circumstances. If you have a growth mindset, which aligns with the state-based movement, you are going to flourish in difficult circumstances because you believe you can succeed and change. The concept of having a fixed level of intelligence, or any strength, can be detrimental to development.

We certainly side with you. We believe that strengths are not just discovered, but are capable of being developed. In your work, what are some of the ways people develop their strengths?

Looking at the links between traits and performance, you can have too much of a good thing. Confidence can become arrogance. Assertiveness can become aggressiveness. How you use your traits and how you moderate them is important.

Realized strengths and unrealized strengths is another important area of study. The biggest development opportunity is the development of unrealized strengths. We might be using our realized strengths to maximum effect, but unrealized strengths are often where we have lots of energy and capability, but just not the opportunity to use them.

Other studies suggest making weaknesses irrelevant. Some schools of thought say to ignore weaknesses and focus on the strengths. We know, however, that in some cases, weaknesses derail careers. I had a conversation yesterday in which the client stated, "If this person doesn't change, he'll be leaving the company." That's not an opportunity to ignore weaknesses. You can use strengths to address weaknesses, but you have to address them. Weaknesses have to be in the development plan.

We use the term "fatal flaw" to describe something that is so egregious that it drags the person's performance down. That leaves some things in the middle that might be distracting, but can easily be corrected. What do you tell people who want to work on things in this middle area?

Basing this on my own practitioner's intuition, I usually go with where the client's focus is, unless I think that's not an effective use of their time, my time, or the organization's resources. The development plan should be aligned to the expectations of all the stakeholders.

In my research, we deliberately picked three goals to work on. Two had to be strengths and one had to be a learned behavior or a weakness. Because we manualized that process, we determined that adherence to this protocol predicted improvements in transformational leadership.

Have you seen that people are becoming more comfortable talking about their strengths and not just immediately gravitating towards their weaknesses?

People are generally uncomfortable standing out. The way I get around this is by helping them understand that what they are good at provides a significant organizational benefit. It's not personal boasting or self-aggrandizing. It's thinking about how the organization can use you most effectively. The only way you can do this is by understanding your strengths and what you bring to the organization.

How can people get comfortable with the idea of building strengths, especially in cultures where it is not OK to stand out?

When I do team coaching, the first thing I do is get people to talk about their strengths and development areas. Often this is the first time they've done this publicly. And this is often the first time that the team has seen the collective capability in the room. The reason people can discuss their strengths in this setting is that they can clearly see the benefit to the team.

The podcast contains much more technical information. Listen to the rest of the podcast at zengerfolkman.com.

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