

Creating a Strengths Based Organizational Culture

In today's top organizations, the business environment has shifted from one of autocratic management that oversees workers to one of engaged leadership that nurtures team members. This transformation is taking place on many fronts and for many reasons. While a good number of these evolved workplaces can be found in the start-up landscape populated by millennials, others are large multi-national corporations that have made this shift in organizational culture in order to survive and continue to thrive.

At the core of this alternative organizational culture is a transference from focusing on and fixing weaknesses to identifying and developing individual strengths. It sounds simple, even intuitive, but for many organizations this shift is very difficult.

Unfortunately, our western culture, over the centuries, has developed an obsession with finding weakness and attempting to fix it. In medicine the focus is on illness rather than wellness. In K-12 schools the focus is on the remediation of all areas of weakness rather than the identification and enrichment of areas of strength. In business, the focus is on filling the competency gaps to create a well-rounded employee rather than building a team of strong individuals.

Over 40 years of research bears out the benefit of the strengths approach. Gallup research, for example shows that:

Less than one third of American workers are engaged with their work and the cost of those disengaged employees is \$300 billion in lost productivity each year.

However, their research also shows that:

Employees who have the opportunity to focus on their strengths every day are six times as likely to be engaged in their jobs and more than three times as likely to report having an excellent quality of life.

When this cultural predisposition towards weaknesses and the disengagement it produces is acknowledged and addressed, then the process of transforming a workplace into a strengths based organization can begin...

Getting Started

Creating a strengths based organizational culture must be approached with active buy-in from the executive and leadership levels of any organization. When the strengths approach is understood and embraced by leadership, it is more likely to be accepted and to flourish throughout.

The fundamental process for building a strengths based workplace involves the identification of strengths, consistent company-wide communication, the development of coordinated management practices, and the implementation of strengths based evaluation methods.

- **Identification**

The identification of each individual's strengths is, in itself, a multi-step process. The initial step involves the use of a tool such as StrengthsFinder 2.0™ or StandOut™ to identify each individual's talent themes or roles. These tools help to describe and give a name to the patterns of behavior that are most dominant in a person. After these talents or roles are revealed, the next step involves working to discover how these patterns of behavior translate into true strengths: those behaviors that when focused upon allow an individual to be their most productive, effective, and engaged.

- **Communication**

When all employees share a common language of strengths, and a deeper understanding of the strengths of others and how they differ from their own, a new level of communication evolves. This strengths based conversation must be consistently encouraged among all stakeholders. During one-on-ones, supervisors and direct reports should openly discuss how and when strengths are being used in the employee's role. Colleagues should have ways to share with each other how they have successfully played to their own strengths, as well as acknowledge the strengths they see others bringing to their work. Most importantly, executive leadership must engage in the conversation of strengths while promoting and supporting this emerging shift in cultural priority.

- **Management**

The traditional top-down, silo based, micro-management approach is completely incompatible with a strengths based company culture. The adoption of strengths based management practices is imperative, and without their implementation the shift in organizational culture will stall or altogether fail. These strengths based management practices must be articulated, taught, practiced, and modeled by executive leadership. For many managers this shift is a difficult one because it gives new control to direct reports. When individual employees are empowered with the knowledge and understanding of their own strengths -of what they do best- they should, and will, seek out opportunities to do those things more often. These strong team members are now the drivers of their own productivity and value. Because this can be threatening to some managers, explicit training is necessary to ensure the success of this shift in culture.

- **Evaluation**

Interestingly, the evaluation of employee performance becomes a much more natural and authentic process when a strengths based approach is taken. Employees of a strengths based organization know what their strengths are, they are volunteering those strengths to the team whenever possible and are noting weaknesses and seeking ways to manage around them. One-on-one conversations between supervisors and direct reports are infused with the language of strengths and, so, naturally stay focused on how each team member can be put in a position to do what they do best most of the time. When an employee is clearly not being successful, a strengths based "fit test" will be the first and best way to finding a cause for the lack of performance. Formal employee performance evaluation systems themselves will need to be evaluated and adjusted to mirror this cultural shift toward strengths.

Next Steps

As important as active buy-in from the executive and leadership levels is at the beginning of a strengths initiative, it becomes even more critical as the culture continues to evolve. A dedication to change and a vigilance against regression to old patterns is essential to the success of this shift.

For a strengths based culture to flourish, it must be infused with consistency of message, continued opportunities to share strengths, the inculcation of new employees, and the development of strengths based practices involving all stakeholders.

- **Consistency**

The importance of consistency cannot be exaggerated. Employees who identify inconsistency or a lack of dedication to an emerging strengths based culture will doubt its efficacy or necessity. Because all organizational change is difficult, opportunities to regress to the old and familiar can be enticing. However, consistency in message and practice from both leadership and management provides the necessary momentum to sustain the transformation.

- **Opportunities**

Once a strengths based approach is fully embraced, all employees need to be given opportunities to share and to develop their strengths. The sharing of strengths can be through whichever media fits an organization. For example, employing the company intranet, creating a "strengths wall" in the office, or creating opportunities for the volunteering of strengths in project meetings are all ways to create occasions for the sharing of strengths. These mechanisms for sharing should be customized to fit each company's structure.

- **Hiring and Onboarding**

Adding a strengths component to an organization's hiring process is a vital part of sustaining the culture in several ways. First, understanding the strengths of an individual candidate moves the process of hiring beyond a simple match of skills and knowledge for a specific role to a keener awareness of the individual talents this candidate can bring to the team. This strengths lens can add clarity to an often complex process: finding the right person for the job *and* the right person for the team. It is also important that all new employees understand the importance of strengths and what that means for them. A candidate should be clear on what joining a strengths based organization means, and be comfortable with that. Finally, all new employees should be fully trained and supported in adopting the strengths approach in their new role as well as working in a strengths based culture.

- **Company-Wide Practices**

By infusing the strengths philosophy into all areas and processes of a company, the cultural shift is allowed to flourish. Critical to this universal integration of strengths is the examination of all aspects of an organization with respect to supporting the culture. From the management of people to the organization of projects and processes, all facets of a company's functioning should be aligned with the strengths approach. This big-picture evaluation of the organization through a strengths lens will ensure the preservation of a culture that encourages people to do what they do best each day.

Conclusion

The research is clear: employees who have the opportunity to do what they do best each day are more engaged at work and engaged employees are more productive and happy. Having these highly engaged and productive team members should be the top priority of any organization. Creating a culture of strengths elicits the highest potential of achieving that goal by steering a company beyond the days of fixing gaps and correcting weaknesses into the world of tapping talent and bringing out the best in each of their own.