

Strengths Based Leadership and Management

At the core of a strengths based organizational culture are several fundamental management and leadership principles. These ground rules that are focused on individuals' strengths within an organization allow managers and leaders to guide and support a vibrant team of strong individuals through meaningful work lives which contributes to organizational success.

Unfortunately, our western culture, over the centuries, has developed an obsession with finding weakness and attempting to fix it. All too often we see in management a focus on filling competency gaps to create a well-rounded employee rather than building a team of strong individuals. Managers often expect team members to just do "whatever it takes" to get the job done without really understanding which team member is the best fit for the job.

Strengths based leadership and management is founded on an understanding that a strong team member volunteers his or her strengths to the team most of the time.

In a strengths based organization, managers and leaders must approach their jobs with a different lens, one that focuses on what each of their direct reports does best and how they can help that team member do what they do best *most of the time*.

Getting Started

Cultivating a strengths based management and leadership style requires both awareness and execution at the leadership and management levels of an organization. When the strengths approach is both employed and modeled by management and leadership, it is able to flourish throughout an organization.

The fundamental process for fostering a strengths based management and leadership model involves the development of individual leadership strengths, a deep understanding of one's team members' strengths, and the implementation of specific management and leadership practices including the use of strengths based evaluation methods.

- ***Development***

There are many great leaders to whom we can point who have very different leadership styles. There clearly is not one *right* style of leading or managing. It is important, then, that after participating in foundational strengths

identification activities using tools such as StrengthsFinder 2.0™ or StandOut™ the leadership and management teams focus on their own leadership strengths. Whether one leads through executing, influencing, thinking, or through relating, the development of one's own leadership strengths is essential to leading in a strengths based way. Additionally, the practice of cross-training one's leadership strengths by tapping complimentary talents enhances even further the power of an individual's leadership ability.

- **Understanding**

Beyond understanding and developing one's own leadership strengths, a strong leader must also have a deep understanding of the strengths of those team members for whom he is responsible. Strengths based managers must work as a catalyst for their direct reports' daily work and this can only be accomplished if they are able to match talent and passion to work opportunities within the team. Managers must engage direct reports and openly discuss how and when strengths are being used in the employee's role and how those strengths can be maximized within the team. As well, by mapping strengths across a team, managers and leaders can better track talent, nourish productivity, and execute the organization's vision.

- **Implementation & Evaluation**

Upon this deep understanding of the strengths of one's team members rests the implementation of strengths based management practices. Specific management practices must be tailored to the organization taking into consideration factors such as size, management structure, and logistics. One essential action is the use of regular one on one meetings that are focused on strengths. Another aspect of strengths based management is the understanding of individuals' motivators as well as how individual team members are most effectively recognized for their work. An insightful understanding of the team's strengths allows for a more fluid plan for catalyzing the work that the members of that team is undertaking. One further practice, one that is critical to the successful execution of true strengths based management, is the utilization of an employee performance measurement approach that embraces these organizational practices.

Next Steps

The growth and development of a strengths based organization depends upon the continued training and nurturing of these leadership and management skills and practices. Changes across the culture of the company must be led and managed carefully and consistently.

For a strengths based leadership and management model to flourish, it must be

infused with consistency of practice, continued development of leadership strengths, and the continued development of strengths based practices throughout the organization.

- **Consistency**

While it is vital to recognize and respect the unique leadership strengths exhibited in individual leaders across an organization, it is equally as important to ensure consistency throughout the organization with respect to any new strengths based management practices that are employed. All departments, groups, and teams within an organization must experience a consistent level of implementation and follow through with new practices and, so, these changes must be monitored and supported. Feedback from all stakeholders is an valuable metric to use when measuring the consistency and success of a strengths based leadership model.

- **Development**

The practice of growing as a leader and as a manager should be an on-going one. Because leaders and managers are so often focused on the development of their direct reports, the continuous development of an organization's managers and leaders must always be encouraged. Whether it be through one on one coaching, individual practice, group trainings, or other forms of professional development, the enrichment and cross training of the strengths of each manager and leader is critical to the success of a strengths based organization.

- **Expansion**

The strengths based leadership model will be strengthened by infusing the strengths philosophy into all areas and processes of a company. From top to bottom, a strengths based culture that is encouraged to take hold allows this new management approach to succeed. By infusing projects and processes with strengths based management principles, a cultural shift occurs that truly encourages people to do what they do best each day.

Conclusion

Creating a culture of strengths begins with the strengths of individuals but is only sustained with a team of leaders and managers who understand how to maximize those individual strengths. The identification and communication of each team members' individual strengths is a transformational step, but an organization must know the answer to "What's next?" Without leadership and management that is grounded in the development, understanding and implementation of strengths based principles, the foundation of talent will be wasted.