

'The fast route to top performance. Highly recommended.'

SIMON CULMER, MANAGING DIRECTOR UK & IRELAND, AVAYA

THE STRENGTHS-FOCUSED GUIDE TO LEADERSHIP

**IDENTIFY YOUR TALENTS AND
GET THE MOST FROM
YOUR PEOPLE**

ENGAGEMENT

MOTIVATION

PERFORMANCE

RESULTS

MIKE ROARTY & KATHY TOOGOOD

FT PUBLISHING
FINANCIAL TIMES

Praise for *The Strengths-Focused Guide to Leadership*

“ Wow, a great accumulation of downright common sense packed into an easy to read and even easier to implement book about recognising and playing to your strengths, to get the best possible outcome in your professional life. The fast route to top performance. Highly recommended.

SIMON CULMER, MANAGING DIRECTOR UK & IRELAND, AVAYA

“ Strengths-focused leadership has transformed how my team works. This book brilliantly sets out the roadmap to game change team performance. Essential reading for anyone looking to inspire their team to reach new heights and be happier!

JERRY CLOUGH, CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, NORTHERN, EASTERN AND WESTERN DEVON CLINICAL COMMISSIONING GROUP

“ This book is a goldmine for readers who want to be the leaders they have the potential to be. It is bursting with useful content: frameworks, case studies, activities, references and resources. I can see the potential of this for individual development, for coaching scenarios and in team situations. This book has a spirit of hope, potential and possibility. As leaders, we all need some of that.

DR HELEN BEVAN, CHIEF TRANSFORMATION OFFICER, NHS IMPROVING QUALITY

“ This is a coaching guide in your pocket – Kathy and Mike’s considerable experience is distilled into practical steps to release the untapped potential that exists in every individual. Use it if you want to develop a more empowered and energised organisation.

ANNE WILSON, REGIONAL INNOVATION AND LEARNING DIRECTOR

“ A box full of tools that will revolutionise your leadership style.

NOAMAN HASAN, HEAD OF GLOBAL CHANGE DELIVERY, ASIA PACIFIC REGION, HSBC

Why develop my strengths?

Here's a reminder of the good reasons for developing your strengths as a leader, which are:

- you will gain more satisfaction from your work – increased energy and motivation;
- you will have a route for reaching even higher levels of performance in the most enjoyable way;
- your leadership strengths will have even more impact;
- you will improve the perception others have of your leadership effectiveness;
- you can invest your time and energy developing in areas that really make a difference.

How can I develop my strengths?

If you have identified your strengths using one of the methods outlined in the previous chapter, you will be ready to think about how you can actively develop these strengths so that they make a real difference to you and your leadership effectiveness. It is wise to focus on developing just a few strengths at a time, perhaps between three and five, and also to make sure they are the most important strengths for you to develop. These strengths can then become your significant strengths, which are strengths that make you stand out and contribute to your effectiveness as a leader.¹

Choosing the 'right' strengths to develop

In order that you select the 'right' strengths for development it is good to consider the following questions:

- Are you already good at this? Do others agree?
- Does the thought of using this strength more really enthuse and motivate you?
- Does your role, your team or your organisation need this strength?
- Will using this strength have a positive impact on you, your goals, other people or the organisation?

¹ Zenger, J. H., et al. (2012) *How to Be Exceptional: Drive leadership success by magnifying your strengths*, New York, McGraw-Hill.

If the answer to all the above questions is ‘Yes’ then you have a perfect opportunity to do some strengths development and explore the many different ways you can do this. Take a minute now to note the strengths you would like to focus on developing.



Exercise

What 3–5 strengths would I like to develop?

Eight ways to develop strengths

Developing a strength is not just about using it more often. Doing even more of what is working is certainly one option, but it might not always be what is needed. Remember that strengths overplayed can become a weakness. Others might think you are already applying this strength in the right quantity at the right times and in the right situations.

When you have selected the strengths you want to develop, this is a time to be creative and consider all the different options available to you and to select options that will have most benefit to you, your team and your organisation. The options that we will explore are:

- 1 Test the limits of your area of strength.
- 2 Ask others for feedback, ideas and suggestions.
- 3 Learn new skills or take on new tasks that will provide opportunities to apply the strength.
- 4 Practise and develop strengths that are complementary (cross-training).
- 5 Coach, or train others.
- 6 Learn to regulate strengths overplayed.
- 7 Incorporate strengths development into your development plan.
- 8 Find yourself a coach or mentor.

Test the limits of your area of strength

If you have done the exercise above and identified three to five strengths that you would like to develop, you can look at each one in turn. Ask yourself how you can stretch the limits of how you are applying the strength to see whether you can achieve an even higher level of competence, performance and fulfilment. It might be a simple matter of doing more of what is working in a given context, whilst checking that the strength does not become overplayed.

However, if high levels of performance are already being achieved, there might not be much scope left for further improvement. Doing more of what is already working in the same context often does not make all that much difference to levels of satisfaction and performance. So, another way to stretch the limits of a strength is to find ways to apply it in a different context.

In the real world . . .

Previously (in Chapter 3) we introduced an example of Mary and explored her many strengths. One of her strengths was Relationship Builder and this was the one that she chose to develop, realising that she could find different ways of applying this strength. She identified an opportunity to push for an even higher level of competence in this strength by setting herself a target of establishing links with the Directors with whom she hadn't previously built strong relationships. Although this was a challenge, it was one that she relished and, as you can no doubt imagine, stretching the limits of her strength in this way had several other payoff benefits for Mary.

So, try this yourself and answer the following questions to capture some initial ideas for things you can do to test the limits of your strengths that you want to develop.



Exercise

Which strengths would you like to test the limits of?

What ideas have you got for doing this?

In what other contexts could you use these strengths?

Ask others for feedback, ideas and suggestions

There is huge value to be had in seeking feedback from others on how they see you applying your strengths and the impact it has had. However, whilst feedback has value, you cannot go back and change what you have done in the past, so it can be much more useful to get ideas and suggestions from people about what you can do in the future in order to utilise your strengths.

Marshall Goldsmith² developed the very effective process of Feedforward. This involves selecting a small number of trusted colleagues and saying to each of them: 'I am working on developing a strength of mine (name the strength). Can you give me two or three ideas for what I could do to

² Goldsmith, M. *FeedForward*. www.marshallgoldsmithfeedforward.com Accessed 21.7.14.

use this strength even more effectively?’ You then note the ideas, thank your colleague, and go on to the next colleague. You decide what you want to do from the long list of undoubtedly very useful suggestions. The process continues with you going back regularly to ask for feedback on how you are doing and ask for further suggestions.

In the real world . . .

In our example, Mary decided to take this approach to help her understand how best she could apply her strength of Creativity. Her colleagues gave several suggestions, including encouraging her to share more readily her ideas at meetings, even if they weren’t fully formed. They also suggested that she could get involved in some Think Tanks that were about to happen within the organisation. One of the most useful suggestions that she was given was to consider using her interest in creative thinking to help others explore and develop their ideas, rather than always being the one putting forward ideas.

Once again, try this yourself and answer the following questions.



Exercise

About which strengths would you like to get feedback from others?

About which strengths would you like to get Feedforward suggestions?

Who will you ask?

How often will you ask, in order to check progress?

Learn new skills or take on new tasks that will provide opportunities to apply the strength

You can develop a strength by finding opportunities to learn a new skill or take on a new task that will give you scope to practise and stretch your existing strength. For example, if you have a strength in Analytical Thinking, what other duties could you take on that would help your department and your organisation at the same time as giving you the opportunity to do something you love and also allowing you to develop your strength?

You might identify an untapped strength that you do not get enough opportunity to use in work. If it is possible to find a way of utilising this strength at work in a way that is of benefit to your role and organisation, then this is an ideal outcome. However, sometimes that strength is just not needed, or at least, developing the strength to be a significant strength is not going to make a huge difference to your effectiveness as a leader.

Not being able to use a strength can have a dampening effect on your motivation – it feels like something is missing or that your needs are not being met. In these situations, what can work well is finding a way of applying the strength to a new skill or task outside of work. In that way, the need to use the strength is met, and energy from doing so is derived outside of the workplace, leading to a very positive feeling towards work–life balance. You may also want to consider what this says about your current job and your future career options.

So, here are some questions for you to consider in order to identify some actions you can take.



Exercise

What new skills could you learn in order to develop your strengths?

What new tasks could you take on that would allow you to develop your strengths?

What could you do outside of work that will allow you to develop and play to your strengths in a way that would not be appropriate or possible at work?

Practise and develop strengths that are complementary (cross-training)

Zenger, Folkman and colleagues³ have recently discovered something very interesting in relation to strengths: that in many instances ‘cross-training’ can have a far more powerful impact on the development of a strength than the more ‘linear’ route to development we are used to, i.e. finding ways to apply the strength more. To illustrate their idea, I (Kathy) was training to prepare myself for a challenging trek in the Andes. Part of my training involved a few walking weekends in the UK, but this was only one option available to me. I realised that my walking practice needed to be supported by compatible activities, such as swimming to maintain stamina and support my joints, running to build my aerobic capacity and so on. All this ‘cross-training’ had a noticeable impact on my ability to complete my trek much more successfully than if I had only practised my walking skills!

Taking the cross-training approach, when you have a strength that you want to develop further so that you can really maximise its potential, you

³ Zenger, J. H., et al. (2012) *How to Be Exceptional: Drive leadership success by magnifying your strengths*, New York, McGraw-Hill.

can think about which of your other strengths might be complementary to it. The idea is that when you apply this complementary strength to the strength you want to develop, then you really get the chance to stand out for this strength.

In the real world . . .

We will give you an example of this in practice. Mary decided that she would like to develop her strength of Relationship Builder, because she realised that this was paying dividends for her at work. She struggled to think of many more ways she could build more relationships per se, beyond what she was already doing, and her idea, mentioned earlier, to build relationships with the directors she didn't know so well. However, when her coach challenged her to think of related strengths that she could work on, which were complementary to Relationship Builder, the path became clearer. Mary decided to focus on the competency of Developer (an untapped strength) because of the fact that many of the activities that are involved in developing others require a good rapport and good working relationships to be built. She decided to be more meticulous with her mid-year review conversations with her team members, spending more time discussing their personal and career development and listening to their needs. She also offered to facilitate some short training sessions as part of induction training offered to those new to the organisation, which also gave her the opportunity to build early relationships with these people. So, both of these activities, although they were fundamentally about the strength of Developer, allowed her to further develop her strength of Relationship Builder.

Now it's your turn to think about how this could work for you.



Exercise

Which strength(s) might be complementary to the strength(s) you want to develop?

What could you do to develop in these complementary strength(s)?

Coach or train others

An effective way to develop a strength is to teach, train or coach somebody else to be good at that strength. When we want to train others, we have to pay attention to what we ourselves are doing when we are doing things right, so that we can show others how to do it well. When we train other people it heightens our understanding of an area of competence, such that we become more of an expert.