

Strength-Based Change Jumpstarts Performance

by Juan Riboldi



Key Point

You can achieve faster and lasting results when you build on what's already working, than by focusing on fixing what's broken.

Focusing on success breeds a sense of achievement, self-confidence and optimism. This self-reinforcing cycle can be triggered intentionally to jumpstart individuals and organizations to a higher level of performance.

You can achieve faster and lasting results when you build on what's already working, than by focusing on fixing what's broken. This is the fundamental premise behind the strength-based approach to leading change. But, how does it actually work? Growing evidence suggests that even when confronted with serious and difficult challenges, focusing on what we already do well can lead to powerful results.

Focusing on strengths is not habitual. We are trained to notice what is wrong, missing, or deficient, and do our best to correct it. In the rush to fix things, most people take for granted the vast majority of things that are working well, going nicely and steadily progressing. As we quickly brush aside what's going well, to

focus instead on correcting areas where we may be poor or mediocre at best. This natural response, though culturally ingrained, may not always be the best approach to improve. In fact, top performers in any field spend most of their energy on enhancing what is already working well. They practice consistently to maximize their strengths. Depending on their core competencies, they will ignore unrelated weaknesses almost entirely. Is this trait a fatal flaw, or the evidence of genius? Let's take a look at the case for building on strengths.

It is our strengths that got us to where we are, not the lack of weaknesses. We all have unique strengths that as we continue to develop, can become valuable traits. A competitive advantage is built on a distinctive set of core

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competencies. While improving on weaknesses may prove tedious and often marginally useful, our strengths may come naturally and improve rapidly. Practicing what we do well is energizing and fruitful. In the end, others tend to overlook our weaknesses if they respect our strengths.

Success is sticky. People will link a person's success in one area to an overall positive impression on the entire person. Success breeds a general sense of achievement, self-confidence and optimism. As we perform a task to our satisfaction, our actual ability to master that task increases. This self-reinforcing cycle can be triggered intentionally to jumpstart individuals and organizations to a higher level of performance.

Top performing organizations don't dwell on closing gaps. Instead, they focus on accelerating growth on proven areas. The following are ways they reinforce their strengths:

- Share their story of success with others
- Openly talk about their goals and plans
- Build strong teams and partnerships
- Train and model effective leadership practices
- Pay close attention to subtle performance details
- Recognize going above and beyond the basics
- Celebrate key achievements
- Track and report on progress

Top performing organizations are not perfect. In fact, they openly admit to their problems. When faced with a serious deficiency, they strategically recast it as an improvement target. Instead of working on weaknesses to close gaps, they simply remove barriers in pursuit of strengths. The difference is to correct only that which will keep them from reaching their full potential.

There are situations that call for closing significant gaps. In such cases, people may recognize the need for making a substantial change. Yet, even in such situations it can be more productive to take what seems the longer route to solving the problem. By ignoring the gap completely and working instead on what we are already doing well, we shift into a positive frame. Building on the momentum of a growing success, we can expand its influence to the point of diffusing the initial problem.

Those who seem to resist change are in effect avoiding the undesirable consequences—real or perceived—required to make a change. There is no such thing as resistance to change. There is only resistance to pain. When proposing a course of action, consider how it affects others. You can reduce the risks and maximize the gains by building on existing strengths.