

Advanced Project Research Paper

**Positive Psychology in
Professional Development:
Using Strengths-Based Development**

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1. Introduction and Goals

My goal for my Advanced Project is to gain and share insight into the role that positive psychology plays in our professional development. In particular, I strive to explain how “building on strengths while managing weaknesses” (Russo-Netzer & Ben-Shahar, 2011, p. 90) can help us propel forward with more self-confidence, a clear sense of who we are, and better use of our natural talents.

I personally discovered the significance of strengths-based in 2011 when I accepted my current position that turned out to perfectly suit my strengths. The position is in training and professional development, and I find myself succeeding by naturally utilizing my talents and interests. I have found that in spite of a much higher workload, I draw energy from work to my personal life instead of vice versa. However, it was not until our recent implementation of strengths-based development at training programs that I understood the psychology behind this effect. This sparked my interest in researching the topic beyond what was required for my daily work.

I believe that everyone has a calling, and that focusing on one’s strengths is the ideal way to find a matching occupation. I had access to a handful of research results on this topic at work, but it was mostly from organizations with a commercial interest in selling consulting services on the concept. When I started scholarly research to expand my understanding, I discovered gaps in the existing literature. Strengths concepts for everyday work had not been researched as well as I had assumed. This fueled my desire to research further and to create a bridge between positive psychology theories and strengths-based development in the workplace. My goal is introduce the strengths notion to a broad audience. I want to inspire leaders to strive for broader employee job satisfaction by introducing strengths-based feedback and related methods.

In this paper, I will introduce scientific evidence behind strengths concepts and introduce ways in which they have been applied in different fields. Specifically with my survey-based research, I aspired to understand and explain how employees **feel** about using strengths-based feedback and strengths-based task selection at work. Does it increase their self-confidence? Do they like the approach? What, if anything, is frustrating about it? With my research, I hope to better understand the impact of positive psychology at work as well as how it can be applied more broadly and successfully in the future.

2. Positive Psychology: From “What is wrong?” to “What is good?”

“Pathology-oriented clinical psychology has outlived its usefulness!” (Snyder & Lopez, 2001, p. 14). In their “Handbook of Positive Psychology”, the authors celebrate that psychology has evolved over the past several decades from the mere treatment of ailments to the prevention of illness and enhancement of well-being. This shift happened when clinicians went from diagnosing disorders and prescribing interventions to providing assistance in enhancing quality of life for their clients. While helping them manage their difficulties, they encourage them to discover their strengths and build on natural talents. By using one’s natural talents, according to Catell, Moore & Rifkin (2004), everyone can find their calling and live a happier, more purpose-driven life. The concept is to do what one naturally does well. Buckingham & Coffman (2009) add that people do not change much over the course of their lifetime and that time spent building on their talents is a worthier investment than trying to add skills for which they are not well equipped. In 2008, Martin Seligman, former president of the American Psychology Association (APA) spoke at TED (*Technology, Entertainment, and Design conference*, a non-profit conference devoted to spreading new ideas, www.ted.com) on positive psychology and illustrated this shift by sharing a personal story. As a psychologist, he says, those sitting next to him on airplanes in the 90s moved away from him after hearing what his profession was. “Quite rightfully so”, he says, “because psychology was about finding out what is wrong with you.” By the time of his appearance at TED, the public had a more flattering image of psychologists and strangers now “move toward me on the plane”, Seligman says (Martin Seligman: The new era of positive psychology, 2008).

The idea of reinventing psychology to focus on what works rather than what doesn’t derives from criticism of the “reductionist epistemological traditions” (Sheldon & King, 2001, p. 216) –

diagnostics that skip straight to the bad without pinpointing the good first. Good things like a well-functioning social support system can provide solutions to the problem without necessitating clinical intervention. However, skipping straight to the problem had been the heart and soul of psychological training for decades. The hunt for abnormalities, the race to codify newly discovered illnesses, and the interests of the pharmaceutical industry made those who sought the help of a clinical professional feel like they were most certainly ill. Their perception was that something about them was broken and needed to be fixed. While some patients do require immediate clinical intervention with standardized treatment and medication, others benefit most from reflecting on what is going well in their lives first. The idea that their key to health may lie in discovering natural gifts has greatly enhanced psychological practice over the past few years (Snyder & Lopez, 2001). As human beings in today's perfection-driven society, this can feel counterintuitive. "Never change a running system", is the saying that counteracts the positive psychology movement. If we just need some anti-depressants and are otherwise content with what we are doing in life, why tamper with it? It is important to note that positive psychology does not seek to tamper with our routine – it seeks to build on it. We naturally gravitate towards doing things we enjoy – so why not identify and emphasize them?

In other words, positive psychology simply seeks to put no more than what is really needed into repairing and maintaining our weaknesses while building on our strengths. As a result, we utilize the unique combination of skills in which we excel. These skills are lovingly known as "spikes" in the world of talent management. We reinvent ourselves and build a profile. Instead of being average at many things, we identify at what we are good and choose tasks that allow us to become great at those things. The mantra "Select, Optimize, Compensate" can be helpful in this context. In their 2012 article, Gross et al demonstrate how focusing on the good and giving up or minimizing the bad can work to your advantage. Picking your battles can be a relief – we acknowledge that we do not need to be perfect at everything because we are great at a few things. My recent attempt to finally become a runner may

serve as a real-life example. Living today's on-the-go life and spending much time traveling for my job, running has always appealed to me in terms of how much exercise and fresh air it can give me in a short time. My plan was to slowly build up to running 5 kilometers in 30 minutes each morning. I used an app that had me alternate between running and walking, slowly increasing the running portion until I reached my goal of running 5 kilometers in 30 minutes. Was it easy? It was hard. Did I reach my goal? It took a lot of determination and 5 months instead of the expected 6 weeks. Did I like it? I hated it. While the exercise and fresh air were great benefits, the act of running exhausted me. I did not enjoy it. So I did not do it as regularly as I had planned. The positive side effect? Every other task suddenly looked appealing. Whatever gave me a reason to procrastinate running, I did it. Chores? Gladly. Write a paper? I'm on it. I found myself skipping exercise on long work days, leaving me tired and restless at the same time. One day, this restlessness led me to take a long walk in Long Island where I happened to be for work. I put on my sneakers, plugged in my iPod, and just started walking. I walked at a fast pace for 90 minutes, enjoying the scenery, exercise, and fresh air. I did feel the exhaustion of exercise that I had experience when running. The epiphany hit me when I returned to my hotel room and sat down feeling great: I am not a runner. I am a walker. I had discovered my strength – I was good at walking, I enjoyed it, and I could not wait to go back outside the next morning to walk. That's what discovering a strength looks like when it happens by accident. I will discuss more purposeful approaches in the next chapter.

Strengths: A Brainchild of the Positive Psychology Movement

"Everyone is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid." These words of wisdom are commonly attributed to Albert Einstein whose famously low performance in school stands in stark contrast to the mastermind of physics for which he is known. Countless authors have based books, blogs, and articles on their understanding of how we discover and use our talents. Their purpose is to help readers feel like fish in the water rather than incapable human beings who fails to accomplish simple tasks like climbing a tree. The message: If you're

not meant to climb trees, try swimming. And low and behold, swimming might be the task at which you excel, for which you are admired, and from which you can make a living. Let others climb the trees. This notion is the strengths concept, supported by a wealth of research and, among others, greatly publicized by the Gallup Organization, a research-based consulting firm specializing in performance management. In various polls examining employees' perception of the meaning of strengths at work, they found that:

- 99% of those surveyed felt engaged at work if their managers focused on their strengths vs. 78% of those who felt that their managers focused on weaknesses.
- With a strengths focus, 84% of those surveyed planned to work in the same place a year later vs. 37% of those without the strengths focus.
- With a strengths focus, 74% intended to recommend its organization's products and services vs. 29% of those without the strengths focus. (Gallup Poll data of U.S. working population aged 18 and older, April 2004)

Contrasting these responses, another Gallup survey revealed that most of those surveyed in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, France, Japan, and China still believe that knowing and working on your weaknesses can help you improve more than knowing and building on your strengths (Hodges & Clifton, 2012). Since these results contradict what studies have shown, one may conclude that awareness of how much more effective we are when we operate from strengths has yet to spread. Evidence from empirical studies clearly shows the positive effects of strengths-based development, including a significant rise in productivity as well as customer loyalty and employee retention, as shown

by Harter, Schmidt & Hayes (2002, figure 1).

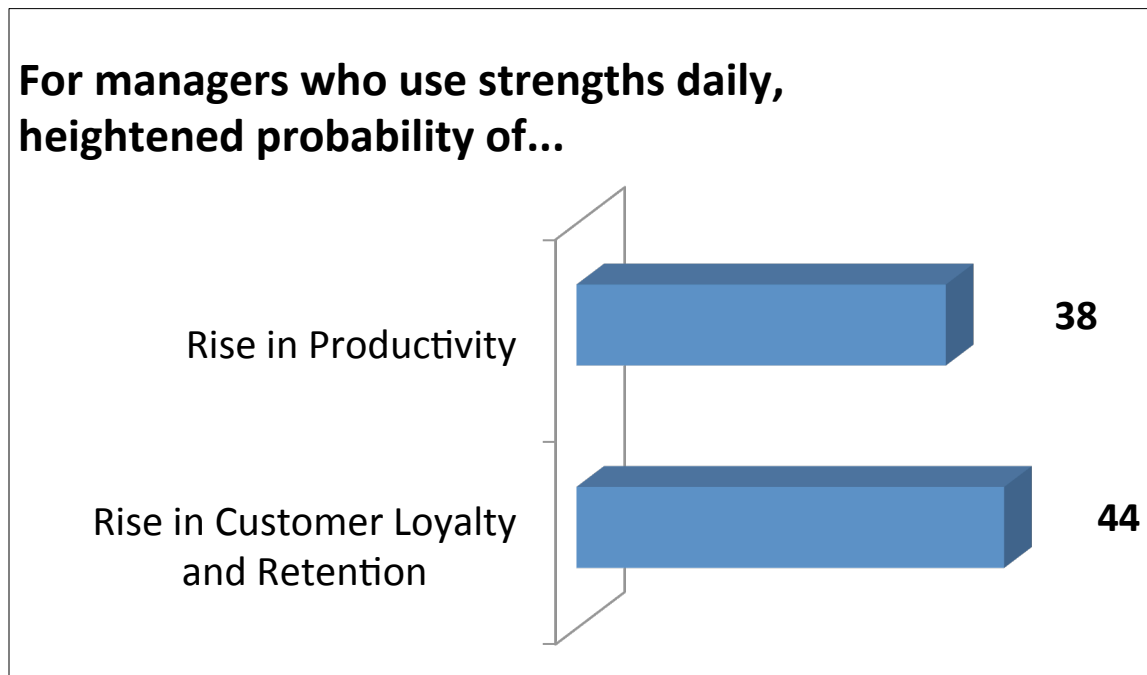


Figure 1. Source: Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes (2002)

Apart from the business world, strengths concepts have set foot in numerous other fields. In the following sections, I will explore their use in social work and education.

Implementation in Social Work

Various versions of the strengths concept have found application in social work since the 1940s when social worker Bertha Reynolds disputed her occupation's tendency to borrow psychoanalytical approaches from their colleagues in psychology. She felt that her purpose as a social worker was not to diagnose glitches in clients' health. She did not support the notion of digging into what is wrong until a "cause" was found. In the 1980s, Charles Rapp and others began to formalize these approaches as they gained popularity. By the time Rapp et al published their book about the *Strengths Model* in 2006, the concept had been used in practice for years. Literature suggests that it is mostly used to tackle

substance abuse and trauma. Considering current events in the Middle East and the dramatic increase of post-traumatic stress in returning soldiers, I am going to use this chapter to examine in more detail the use of strengths-based development in veterans as they transition into civilian life.

In a 2009 interview with the knowledge forum “Big Think” (www.bigthink.com), Positive Psychology Professor Tal Ben-Shahar talks about post-traumatic growth, in a reference to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which has become one of the most commonly diagnosed illnesses in soldiers returning from war, according to the United States Department of Veteran Affairs. While war and other trauma can decrease the affected person’s ability to experience success in life, Ben-Shahar claims that actively looking for positive outcomes of the stress-inducing event and opening up to new experiences that complement our strengths can result in post-traumatic *growth* instead (Ben-Shahar, 2009). Simply put, if we learn to draw positive meaning from a bad experience, we are much better equipped to defeat obstacles. Translated to application with soldiers returning from war, this means that a strengths-based approach would greatly improve their obstacle-ridden re-integration after deployment (Bragin & Wheeler, 2007). Veterans often face a difficult journey after the military: Navigating education, employment, health care, mortgages, and other issues that were often not relevant during their time in the military. Adding the burden of PTSD and/or physical injuries, this transition creates a massive obstacle for the thousands of service members who leave active duty in the United States each year.

According to a 2007 report by the U.S. Department of Defense, post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury and physical disabilities such as loss of functional limbs are among the most commonly occurring conditions in returning soldiers. The associated symptoms are difficult to isolate and require seamless “biopsychosocial” care which, unfortunately, is only slowly becoming available (Bragin & Wheeler, 2007). This is a heavy loss, as literature suggests that soldiers acquire essential strengths and skills in combat which make them an invaluable resource to solve current issues economy and society.

Their potential goes unused without the proper care (Scurfield, 2006). What makes providing proper care more complex is the fact that a returning soldier's psychological difficulties do not need to be at clinical levels before significantly impacting their lives personally and professionally, according to Ford et al (2001). Hence, care providers must be able to deliver appropriate measures of psychological support that appeal to a person who is not diagnosed with a disorder and may reject treatment tailored to their peers who are clinically categorized as needing help. Fortunately, strengths-based approaches offer the kind of help that does not operate on the assumption of a diagnosed illness. They simply aim to maximize the opportunity for veterans to transition to civilian life as contributing community members by identifying their strengths and skills (Basham, 2008). It helps the returning soldiers adjust to their new self and succeed in post-trauma life (Blais, Thompson, & McCreary, 2009; Doyle & Peterson, 2005). Studies show that while traditional treatment of war-related psychological issues has not lost its effectiveness, using Strengths approaches for psychiatric ailments can reduce twice as many of the symptoms, compared to traditional programs (Barry, Zeber, Blow, & Valenstein, 2003). Using the Strengths model of care stands in contrast to the traditional model that solely aims to bring relief from individual discomfort (Rapp & Goscha, 2006).

Implementation in Education

Purnell School is an all-girls boarding school in New Jersey that has become well-known in the world of Positive Psychology for its strengths-based approach to education. The school is introduced in the video "Go Put Your Strengths To Work" (Brandmeier, 2008) as a place where students receive another chance to thrive after failing to perform at the lowest expected level of the public school system. The concept is simple yet genius and the Head of School, Ayanna Hill-Gill, describes it on the school's website as an opportunity for students to "discover their strengths, explore their talents and live their passion" (Hill-Gill, 2012, p. 1). In the Buckingham video, class president Ashley reports that coming to Purnell was her final try to succeed in education before dropping out. She compares the

journey of discovering her strengths to finding money in your pocket that you didn't know you had. Purnell's approach is to identify one talent in each student, and help them build confidence by presenting their art, music, speeches, analyses, or other product of God-given talent. Students draw energy and self-confidence from the recognition that comes with presenting their talent. This energy is used to help them manage their way through other academic subjects. Skeptics may object that receiving booming applause for a well-played piano piece does not help the student understand calculus; and there is no guarantee that the concept will work in this way. However, the model has turned lives around at Purnell and the scientific connection between self-confidence and overall success is supported by results of empirical research (Cederbaum & Klusaritz, 2009; Medina, 2008; Martin, 2010).

In essence, the concept that Purnell employs exemplifies how using strengths makes a person the subject rather than the object of their life (Canda, Chatterjee, & Robbins, 2012). This concept is also emphasized by Ben Zander in "The Art of Possibility" (2000). The chapter "Give yourself an A" tells the conductor and music professor's story about a class he once taught. On the first day, he told all students that they were going to receive an A in this class. His only requirement was for each student to write him a letter that week, pre-dated to the end of the semester, explaining how they had earned their A. By bringing forth their best view of themselves, and in essence writing about their strengths, students made themselves aware of them. Motivated by these positive thoughts and the conviction that they were going to earn their A, students were more motivated, more successful, and more pleasant to work with, according to Zander's own report.

Another aspect of strengths-based approaches in education is school counseling. Much like in medicine, social work, and professional development, school counseling has also begun to use the advantages of positive psychology. By following the notion that "happiness and fulfillment of children

and youth entail more than the identification and treatment of their problems” (Park & Peterson, 2008, p. 85), school counselors aim to identify areas in which the student does well before tackling problems head-on.

A broader version of strengths-based education can be found in the school system used in Germany (Phillips, 2000). After completing 4th grade, students choose between four different school streams:

- **Hauptschule**, which aims to educate students in basic academics and teach practical life skills to send them into the workforce or technical college after 9th grade,
- **Realschule**, which lays a solid academic foundation and graduates students after 10th grade with the opportunity to attend vocational schools or universities of applied science,
- **Gymnasium**, which uses 5th through 12th grade to produce well-rounded students with an advanced academic experience and focus area, who can then apply to continue their education at a university,
- **Sonderschule** for students with special needs who benefit from learning at their own pace in the company of fellow students with similar learning demands.

All of the above school tracks offer electives that allow students to put emphasis on specific subject areas in which they excel. For example, the *Gymnasium* track offers a profile system between 10th and 12th grade which allows students to choose an area, e. g. music, which will weigh more heavily into their final grade than other classes (Governor of the State of Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, 2010). The typical track after *Hauptschule* or *Realschule* is a dual education to combine practical training and with vocational school. This has proven to be a highly efficient way to welcome young adults into the workforce as productive contributors to society, even if they would not excel in the academic university

environment (Deissinger, 2007). Overall, the German school system emphasizes options as the key to success, and leaves it to students, their parents, and teachers to decide in which area their strengths are and which educational track best suits their needs.

Implementation in Professional Development

What does it mean to “focus on strengths”? How does one find out what their strengths are? How do we use and develop them? The roots of using strengths in professional development to improve work performance can be found in Peter Drucker’s book “The Effective Executive” (Drucker, 1967). In it, Drucker suggests that executives focus on building their strengths before giving attention to weaknesses. He further states that the effective executive focuses not only on his or her own strengths but also on those of superiors, subordinates, colleagues, and each unique situation. Looking upon the broad scale of managing companies, Cooperrider & Srivastva (1987) suggest all managers should build organizations around what works rather than tirelessly attempt to fix what will never work well. Literature suggests that his book started a trend that was originally limited to managers’ tasks, and eventually spread across the workforce. Buckingham & Clifton were on a mission to thrust this movement forward when they wrote their book about strengths in 2001 and made the first sentence “We wrote this book to start a revolution” (Buckingham & Clifton, Now, Discover Your Strengths, 2001, p. 4).

Speaking of working in a position that complements one’s strengths: Literature recognizes that having the perfectly matched job, or even having the opportunity to apply for one, is difficult (Ryan, 2006). Given today’s unemployment rate of 8.1% in the United States (July 2012, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics), I personally feel blessed to be gainfully employed at all. I acknowledge that I did not diagnose my strengths and then set out to find matching employment. I noticed the energy and fulfillment that I was getting out of my new job before I learned about the strengths movement. It was

not until months later that I even took the *StrengthsFinder 2.0* (www.strengthsfinder.com) assessment and realized what a perfect match I had at my hands. However, even in a position that requires tasks outside of your strengths area, minor changes toward strengths-based work are possible. In the film “Go Put Your Strengths To Work”, Marcus Buckingham challenges his audience to complete non-strength tasks quickly and focused in order to save as much time as possible for tasks that do meet the mantra S.I.G.N. which stands for:

- Success: You are good at it.
- Instinct: You tend to gravitate toward completing these tasks first.
- Growth: You concentrate easily and learn the most while doing these tasks.
- Needs: Does it fulfill a need? Do you feel content when completing this task?

Going one step further, Folkman & Zenger (2009) claim that while knowing one’s strongest asset and using it well make a *good* leader, *great* leaders exhibit multiple strengths and know how to use them to their company’s advantage. *Excellent* leaders will also support their team members to discover their individual strengths at the same time, and assign tasks according to what each person does best. Brandmeier (2008) suggests a three-step model to adjust a current job to play more to one’s strengths:

1. Explain one’s purpose and goals to colleagues and superiors; seek support
2. Observe oneself and to discover preferred tasks
3. Defend valuable time spent on these tasks by defeating distractions and politely declining optional tasks that do not play to strengths

Brandmeier cautions that this approach should be considered a “push” approach because it takes much effort and colleagues as well as superiors may have difficulty adjusting to such change. Contrary to organizations that implement strengths-based development top-down, an employee who

takes action on their own cannot expect the organization to sponsor strengths assessments and task re-organization to adjust to everyone's strengths. The motto for every individual who seeks strengths-motivated change should be to carefully steer away from weaknesses and towards strengths, always keeping in mind that it takes creativity and a manager's support to make change a reality.

3. Research Methodologies

I gathered from my literature review that only few studies had been conducted to assess the impact of positive psychology and strengths-based development at work. To begin closing this research gap, I surveyed 106 employees of companies that have implemented strengths-based feedback.

Research Design and Methods

I used the online questionnaire service *surveymonkey.com* to collect data. I emailed an invitation to the survey to 280 employees around the globe whose workplace has implemented positive psychology concepts of strengths-based development. My research design was a combination of quantitative and qualitative items. They assessed respondents' gender, work industry, tenure, and size of the organization at which they are currently employed. Next, respondents were asked if and in which context they had used strengths-based concepts at work (feedback conversations, choosing tasks that play to their strengths, or other ways) and how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the notion that learning about strengths had increased their self-confidence. All of these initial questions were quantitative multiple-choice questions, and only responses to the question regarding self-confidence were collected on a 5-point Likert scale. Following these quantitative questions, participants were asked to provide essay answers to these three open-ended essay questions:

1. How has strengths-based development helped you at work?
2. What is frustrating about strengths-based development? How could it be improved?
3. Do you support the use of strengths-based concepts? Why or why not?

My hope in using a qualitative approach for these questions was to touch on controversial issues around using strengths-based approaches to feedback conversations and job design. For example, I was curious to see if feedback conversations based on strengths would be perceived as uplifting and motivating, or sugar-coated chats that cover up true development needs.

I anticipated a wealth of anecdotal and emotional responses describing the success or failure of strengths-based concepts in feedback conversations and choice of tasks and what needs to be improved in order to make them more useful.

Merits and drawbacks of combined quantitative/qualitative research methods in this context

The major merit of an online survey is cost-effectiveness and geographical independence, especially when addressing hundreds of respondents across the world, as I did. Another major value is automated synthesis, i. e., I did not need to synthesize results manually via paper and pencil. All survey results can be automatically imported to statistical analysis software, such as SPSS. Regarding cost-effectiveness, there is no better solution than a free survey. Certainly, acquiring a professional copy of SPSS software is an investment but considering student discounts and the fact that I can continue using it for future research projects makes this a very good investment that pays for itself over time. Geographical independence is a factor often taken for granted in today's "whatever-whenever-wherever" society, but I would like to emphasize this 21st century privilege. I emailed a link to colleagues in Asia, Europe, Australia, and South America. Provided that they have Internet, a simple click led these colleagues to my survey where they enhanced my research with an international perspective.

The downsides of this quantitative/qualitative online approach include having little hard data on the participants, who respond anonymously. I am unable to take quantified performance into account

and compare how it may have changed since the implementation of strengths-based development methods. There is no intervention, hence my data only displays correlation between the data points assessed (gender, size of company, industry), how they have used strengths-based concepts, and their perception of how it has impacted their self-confidence. Additionally, I can assess correlation between these data points and their qualitative input on the three open-ended questions. Skeptics may object that this qualitative input merely reflects individuals' opinion, however, I aimed to uncover these opinions about the application strengths-based concepts rather than measure its impact in numbers. Hence, the method is a good fit in this case.

In summary:

Independent Variable: Implementation of strengths-based feedback

Dependent Variables:

- Reported perception of impact on self-confidence after implementation of strengths-based feedback
- Thoughts about the benefits and shortcomings of strengths-based development

Ethical considerations in my research

Issues that may generally arise in research involving human subjects include (in)voluntary study participation, risk of harm if physical and psychological damage can occur, confidentiality and anonymity. Outside of physical damage which does not apply to online surveys, these can occur in my study. In order to address these issues, I will take the following steps:

- Voluntary study participation: Companies that support our research by letting their employees participate in a study should not tie this participation to other rewards, or punish non-participation.
- Confidentiality: Employees' data should only be accessible to the researchers
- Risk of harm: Participants who have had a difficult time dealing with their strengths and how to apply them, may re-live the disappointment it caused.

If this project were for publication, I would apply for an Exempt review. One might argue that the study should apply for an Expedited review because it researches individual and group behavior, to include motivation and social behavior. However, I believe that an Exempt review is more appropriate because the study would:

- Only involve minimal risk,
- Involve survey procedures of adults who are not elected or appointed officials or candidates for public office and the research not conducted for the Department of Justice or for the National Center for Education Statistics,
- Not involve drugs, medical devices, blood samples, biological specimens, data collection from voice, video, digital, or image procedures.

Research Population and Questions

The survey was open to respondents during the first half of September 2012. It was completed by a total of n=106 participants, equally divided between both genders (53 female, 53 male). Most respondents are employed in Professional Services (n=79) and working for companies that employ more than 10,000 people (n=75). Most participants had used strengths-based concepts either in feedback

conversations (n=89) or by choosing tasks that matched their strengths (n=50). After these questions followed three qualitative questions, responses to which are discussed below:

1. How has strengths-based development helped you at work?
2. What is frustrating about strengths-based development? How could it be improved?
3. Do you support the use of strengths-based concepts? Why or why not?

1. How has strengths-based development helped you at work?

An analysis of the qualitative survey responses produced the insight that 6 key areas addressed used most often in responding to the first question, “How has strengths-based development helped you at work?” (figure 2): Focus on tasks where one can apply strengths (34), a rise in confidence as a result of strengths awareness (17), motivation to do one’s work well (15), positivity (9), application to better the feedback process (9), and using strengths to address weaknesses (4). In the following section, I am going to discuss the meaning of these words in the context of my research and highlight responses from survey participants from each category.



Figure 2: Most commonly used words in answering the question, “How has strengths-based development helped you at work?”

Response Category: Focus

Many respondents praised the “focus” effect of knowing one’s strengths in the sense that it helped them define at which tasks they enjoy and excel. By shining a spotlight on these tasks, they become more effective and motivated to do well. One respondent summed this up well by saying that

knowing their strengths “highlights ways that I can most efficiently contribute to my teams/projects”.

There appear to be two facets to the “focus” category: Defining/highlighting strengths (step 1) and choosing/assigning tasks to match (step 2). Others sample responses by category:

- Helps contribute most effectively versus dealing with frustration faced when working on optional projects which are not a match for you.
- Helped to shift focus to find opportunities to add value by doing things I do well.
- Better guidance in choosing projects
- Awareness of strengths that I didn’t know I had.
- Helps me pick projects that will maximize my career success
- Takes the pressure off (...) to be perfect, i. e. it’s OK not to be great at everything
- Applying what I’m good at to my tasks or to helping peers
- Defining what I excel at and choosing/assigning tasks that are in tune to these strengths
- [The strengths concept] introduced a new concept to me that I can apply to my personal life: Focusing on things I am good at and make me happy instead of trying to work on things that don’t come natural to me.

Response Category: Confidence

Self-esteem and confidence in one’s own work seem to play a big role when strengths-based development is practiced at work. Many respondents reported feeling assured by the strengths finder and that even when they cannot use their strengths in a given task, they rest comfortably in the knowledge that they excel at other things in due time. It was also mentioned that the framework of

strengths-based feedback provides a basis on which one can freely report of their talents and successes without being perceived as conceited. Sample responses:

- My self-esteem has increased because I know that I can contribute and pull my “weight” at work because I know [sic!] I am good at some things
- Has given me freedom to talk about my strengths (without sounding arrogant), has given me freedom to openly express wanting to do more to build on my strengths.
- Giving me confidence with conflict resolution (...)
- A discussion of one's strengths can (...) add to the individual's sense of self confidence - which is often a critical variable in a professional development situation.
- Confidence and awareness of strengths that I didn't know that I had.
- Builds confidence, helps me seek opportunities where I will be successful
- Helps give confidence during times when certain tasks do not align with strengths and my performance is not up to my own standards.
- Build trust in myself, become exceptional at something
- The switch to strengths-based feedback has been a big adjustment but is increasing my confidence

Response Category: Motivation

Motivation and energy are dimensions that are difficult to measure quantitatively. Both can have an effect on performance evaluations but the question remains whether and how it can be isolated from other factors that mediate performance. In my survey, respondents consistently reported

heightened motivation, energy and stamina as a result from knowing their strengths and choosing matching tasks to the extent possible. Sample responses:

- Helped me to be more effective at work. Helped me enjoy my job more!
- Generates more excitement and enthusiasm; provides a way to encourage and motivate others and self
- My stamina for being "at the top of my game" is much longer. Freeing myself from always worrying about my developmental areas (relative weaknesses) has also increased my level of engagement and increased my overall satisfaction with my work.
- I find that the strength-based development conversations help me form better relationships with my reports, where they feel supported and motivated by me.
- It has helped me feel motivated about building my existing strengths and increased my confidence that I am contributing something important to my work.
- Made me more efficient due to motivational boost
- Kept my motivation high, allowed me to not take criticism as a personal offense but as a way to get better at what I do
- It has helped me motivate team members who previously not recognized their own strengths

Response Category: Positivity

Another difficult-to-quantify but often observed effect of implementing strengths-based approaches is a shift in attitude to more positivity, confidence, and optimism (Duncan, Kosine, & Steger, 2008). This was a clear result of my survey as well. Participants report feeling more optimistic when working on difficult tasks, and sensing a more positive attitude with their colleagues. Sample responses:

- It has made the review process more positive so that I came out of it feeling like I was doing well
- Created a more positive atmosphere
- Forces folks to be more positive
- Has made me feel better about the tasks I do and don't like doing
- As a Manager, I am able to frame feedback (often constructive) in a more positive way, which ultimately leads to a more productive, encouraging conversation.
- Reduced the stress when in new situations
- Has helped raise self-awareness of tendency to focus on what people do "wrong" vs. what they do "right".

Response Category: Feedback

Feedback conversations and review processes in general were mentioned repeatedly in the survey responses. The ability to frame feedback in a positive way by emphasizing strengths is applauded.

Sample responses:

- It has made the review process more positive so that I came out of it feeling like I was doing well and could not worry about the things that were going well, and just build on my strengths to take me into the next level of challenges at work
- Helps when working with others to show recognition and develop their understanding of how to have best impact
- By reinforcing the ideas I had about what I do well, helping give a context and some padding to the development feedback that comes later.

- (...) It allows supervisors/managers to have more productive coaching discussions.
- As a Manager, I am able to frame feedback (often constructive) in a more positive way, which ultimately leads to a more productive, encouraging conversation.
- Allowed me to not take criticism as a personal offense but as a way to get better at what I do
- Positioned me for a smoother conversation when I was providing feedback to another.
- Strengths-based development has helped me in discussing my direct-reports professional development. Starting off discussing a person's strengths (results of the Strengths Finder test) is a good way to talk about where they excel, and therefore what areas of their role they can "stretch". For example, if someone has the "developer" strength, perhaps we could focus on how they could become a mentor to others. If they have the "analytical" strength, perhaps learning more about an accounting function and becoming an expert would be a good place to grow.

Response Category: Addressing Weaknesses

In many of his publications, Marcus Buckingham mentioned using one's strengths to address or work around weaknesses. While the concept of using something good to fight something bad makes sense in movies, it can seem daunting in professional development. However, the below responses support that notion. Sample responses:

- It helped me to get a much clearer picture and deeper understanding of my strengths and how [sic!] I could leverage them, even to maybe address my weaknesses
- It actually helped me develop an approach to development
- Understand how to leverage what I am good at to help in other areas

- It has allowed me to use my strengths to help build my weaknesses up

2. What is frustrating about strengths-based development? How could it be improved?

My analysis of responses to the second qualitative question regarding what is frustrating about strengths-based development and how it could be improved resulted in four themes (figure 3): The risk of it “sugarcoating” development needs (32 responses), a difficulty in applying strengths to given tasks (23 responses), keeping the balance between strengths and weaknesses in evaluations (23 responses), and the need for more training and thorough implementation of new concepts (16 responses). In the following section, I am going to elaborate on the category responses and also highlight samples.

Response Category: Sugarcoating

The risk of sugarcoating development needs when focusing on strengths in evaluation processes was mentioned by a third of respondents. Some called the strengths concept “cheesy” and expressed the desire to “ensure that true performance issues aren't ignored”. However, most responses in this category emphasized a theoretical concern, meaning they are concerned that future feedback conversations may omit weaknesses and leave the evaluatee oblivious to critical development needs.

Sample responses:

- Sometimes I really want to know what I'm doing wrong and when all you hear is good, I start to think even harder about what there MUST be that I could change!!!
- Sometimes people forget about weaknesses totally and I know this is not the point, but we should remember that a runner shouldn't do a marathon with a broken leg. So if the weakness is huge, still people need to fix this, not develop this as a spike but at least don't suck at some things

- There often is this impression of someone 'sugar-coating' a tough message, which is just not helpful
- Need to ensure that true performance issues aren't ignored
- It can be difficult to get an accurate gauge of performance when reviews are based on strengths. I had a situation where my supervisor gave me a far superior review in person than was reported, in part because he was trying to focus on strengths.
- It neglects development in the areas that need developing, the progress in those areas is limited
- Tends to have a "feel good" aura around it that makes it seem trite. Think it will be very hard for many people to shake this perception.
- Can feel artificial if misunderstood - needs to still recognize the need to develop both on strengths as well as in other areas critical to your job
- In most cases I've seen "strengths-based development" is a superficial layer placed on top of traditional professional development to "make it sound nicer." A given job/role typically has a set of performance expectations which are based on that role, not the development model. While "strengths-based development" may help people "talk up" strengths, few firms are willing to accept lower performance in non-strength areas... so unless "strengths-based development" includes switching to a new job that better matches one's strengths (or which doesn't match one's weaknesses), it will be superficial at best.
- Sometimes I feel the need to downplay any "development" areas when giving feedback.

Response Category: Balance

Along with the concern about sugarcoating tough messages in feedback conversations, the application of strengths while managing weaknesses is a concern to many respondents. In other words, keeping the balance between building on strengths and reducing career-hindering weaknesses presents a challenge in the realization of strengths-based development. Sample responses:

- Sometimes you focus only in what you are good at are and leave aside the rest without a real need to improve. It could be improved not ignoring your weakness
- One might not focus on a strength since it's already 'in the bag'. And sometimes it can be hard to challenge a strength to be even better if you don't focus on it.
- We have to be careful to not make it a panacea. Clear, direct feedback about the "minimum bar" for development areas is critical and sometimes lost in the process.
- 'shit sandwich' i.e "you do this really well (short discussion) you need to work in this area (long discussion)" Discussions should be balanced and really help the person how to leverage what they are good at or what other team members are good at to leverage overall to help this person become more effective
- It might lead to a wrong impression of excellent work, so I would always combine it with feedback on weaknesses for a good balance
- With less-than-stellar colleagues, it becomes difficult to focus on strengths (or sometimes find them). Staying positive can be trying when you have significant issues.
- Suggests that deficiencies should be overlooked rather than built up (at least) to some minimal level

- It is easier to fix something not working than working on something to improve that already goes well...
- It creates "spikey" people

Response Category: Application

As is mentioned by authors (Russo-Netzer & Ben-Shahar, 2011; Conchie & Rath, 2008; etc.), the most difficult part of strengths-based development is its application. Learning about one's strengths can be done by taking an assessment and/or conversations with co-workers to surface areas in which one is perceived as talented. The application to one's current job or finding a matching job elsewhere presents a challenge. Additionally, respondents challenged the notion of using strengths to address weaknesses, which appears to be conceived as counter-intuitive. Lastly, there was some energy around the fear of being "labelled" with specific strengths and being limited to assignments that match in spite of one's interests possibly lying elsewhere. Survey respondents mentioned this several times. Sample responses:

- We talk about what are strengths are, but we don't spend a lot of time explicitly talking about how to leverage those strengths--how to find more opportunities which feature those strengths. You are sort of left on your own to figure this out.
- It's not been clear **how** to continue building on one's strengths.
- Occasionally difficult to find ways to utilize strengths to help address development needs (not always possible to tie together)
- It's challenging, at times, to make the link between what someone is good at and what they clearly need to improve on to be successful in their role.
- Need to focus on the "so what" - you have a positive attitude, so... etc.

- More difficult to be concrete and tactical about next steps (compared to addressing deficiencies)
- Sometimes you can not apply all your strengths in the current role. (...)
- Does not teach me how to improve my weakness. I think there should be an emphasis on leveraging strength to overcome weaknesses.
- You can only shape your approach so much in any given role before you're reaching outside the bounds of the job.
- (...)Can be hard to apply.
- At work, we talk about strength based development all of the time and sometimes I feel there is little talk regarding how to improve in certain areas. I think the issue with this is that there are naturally going to be some people in the work place that need improve their performance in areas that may not be their strengths. So, for the employees who show promise and many strengths, this works well. I am not so sure it works for those who need significant improvement to be able to do their job well.
- (...) Strength-based development must be paired with work tasks that allow you to truly leverage those strengths....there must be the opportunity to use them at work.

Response Category: Training / Better Implementation

Many respondents reported that they the benefits of the program would be better harvested if it was implemented with more thorough training and education. They are both concerned with their own lack of knowledge as well as how their superiors hold feedback conversations with them. Sample responses:

- This is less about strength-based development per se, and more about organizations: but the most frustrating thing has been the lack of broad implementation, lack of training of managers to make it work, and lack of follow-up to make sure it is happening
- People are often reluctant or unskilled in naming others' strengths. People are also poor at self-identifying their own relative strengths
- (...) I think people are starting to incorporate the language of strengths nicely but the transition of the conversation to what needs to improve is not completely smooth yet
- When receiving a 'strengths based' review that isn't in fact 'strengths-based' it increases the sense of frustration and hypocrisy. Would be helpful if organizations surveyed their staff after reviews to see if those reviewed found their reviews to be strengths based (I've found that managers sometimes THINK they've done a great job, but the reviewer walked away frustrated or disappointed)
- There is a skill to language usage when working with strengths based development which I feel is not commonplace within most work environments. Using language correctly can be challenging, I think developing this requires skill and mindset development
- Lack of alignment with performance management systems. Good in theory, but managers are unlikely to systematically redefine jobs so they play to peoples' strengths. (...)
- Most challenging: having a strengths-based discussion about a subordinate's (or colleague's) development needs where the person is a) not performing adequately on some dimension; AND b) fails to understand appreciate the gap in performance. In such situations, the natural "fall back" is to be blunt and directive about what needs to improve. That is difficult (not impossible) to do in a strengths-based way.

3. Do you support the use of strengths-based concepts? Why or why not?

Interestingly, in spite of the numerous and partially lengthy concerns about frustrating parts of strengths-based development in qualitative question # 2, 93% of respondents expressed that they support its use. Responses were categorized into “yes” (n=68), “yes with conditions” (n=10) and “no” (n=2). It is important to note that both respondents in the “no” category worded their declining of the concept with “not particularly” and “not necessarily”.

Response Category: “Yes”

Those surveyed who support strengths-based development had many good things to say about it. Some of the comments contradict negative remarks from responses to qualitative question #2 by praising the balance it brings between positive and constructive feedback and by shifting evaluators’ mindsets toward a more positive approach to evaluation. Sample responses:

- YES! It is highly effective.
- Absolutely. I think it is more encouraging and affirming, and still winds up conveying everything essential that we need to know in order to develop. It also reminds everyone, especially leaders, to be aware of what their team members are doing well and to share that with them. This is a huge boost for morale and ultimately improves team productivity.
- I do, b/c our company is often way too negative and deficit-based in our feedback and evaluation. I also completely believe in the idea that it's simply often more efficient (for one's self and for society at large) to build on one's strengths rather than scratch-and-claw to offset a weakness.

- Yes - life is short and it's too hard to become an ace at all aspects of our work and relationship management: let's make sure we are ok on all necessary dimensions, but ace those that we are especially talented at. (...)
- Yes. It tends to enforce a balance between positive and negative feedback (at least as compared to just having a general "feedback" concept).
- Absolutely. It has changed the dynamic of feedback conversations so they're not always something to fear. (...)
- More aspirational way to approach feedback
- yes! because it is the right approach - motivating, everyone has strengths, it is still possible to work on developmental needs
- YES -- superior approach to professional development, in particular in today's context which requires more self-authorship, agility, innovation, etc.

Response Category: “yes with conditions”

Responses in this category were generally supportive of the concept but described their support to be contingent on certain aspects of implementation. Those include that “greater training is needed” and the risk of ignoring weaknesses. Sample responses:

- Yes - but greater training is needed
- Yes, but it has drawbacks. It is helpful in development, but it is important to still get an overall gauge of overall performance outside of the strength-based framework.

- Strengths are what differentiate us and make us special. However, can't forget about development areas...particularly for younger employees without well-defined self concepts who are more malleable and open to learning. (...)
- I do and I don't. I think it could be very useful for a student trying to find a major or prepare for career areas. If someone is on a career track, it could be very helpful in the way it helps them focus. If someone is just doing a job for money, they may not be in a role where they are working with their strengths, and the concepts may be redundant.
- It's a nice concept, but it can lead to a lot of doublespeak. It doesn't really hurt, but I don't believe it really helps...
- Yes I do, if spiced up with ideas on how to improve weaknesses

Response Category: “no”

The two responses that indicated no support for the concept were not a direct, passionate “no” in either case:

- Not particularly. Being a pull-up-by-the-socks kind of guy, I believe in striving constantly for excellence and bettering one's deficiencies, rather than dwelling on what's alright.
- Not necessarily. I found the MBTI much more informative because it puts you on a sliding scale in 4 categories and shows you what things you're good at and what things you have little or no connection to. Even though we might not be able to change those things, it helps to know the continuums exist and how you and other people think and react to situations.

4. Research Findings/Discussion

Overall, the study revealed that strengths-based development is very well received with survey respondents, highly effective in elevating self-confidence, a useful framework for performance evaluation and discussion, and a great contributor to employee motivation. Further key learnings include that proper training is essential when implementing strengths concepts. If used improperly, it can be perceived as superficial, especially when a few forced positive comments simply precede the negative majority of the conversation.

Hypotheses tested in this research are:

1. Learning about one's strengths increases self-confidence.
2. 2 Hypotheses regarding gender influence on support of strengths concepts:
 - a. Women are more likely to support strengths-based development because it helps them build self-confidence.
 - b. Men are more likely to support strengths-based development because it validates their already strong self-confidence.
3. The longer an employee has been with the company, the less likely they are to support the strengths-based approach.
4. Employees using strengths-based concepts with a larger organization have higher self-confidence than those using the concepts in smaller organizations.

When asked how the statement "Learning about my strengths has increased my self-confidence" applied to them, 82.4% of those surveyed responded that they agreed or strongly agreed (Figure 3: Responses to the question: "Does this statement apply to you? 'Learning about my strengths has increased my self-confidence'."). Hypothesizing that men are more likely to report higher self-

confidence induced by strengths-based development, there was **no significant correlation (.07) between gender and response to the self-confidence question**, although it is notable that more women (n=24) responded “agree” over “strongly agree” (n=17) while men’s responses were equally divided between the two (n=21 each). However, women have been found in other studies to report lower self-confidence on paper independently of how they truly felt or acted (Lenney, 1977). Considering this, the result in our study is not surprising.

Another telling correlation in this context could have been between gender and support of strengths-based development. The hypothesis here was that either (a) women are more likely to support it because it helps them build the strong self-confidence they were less likely to report or (b) men are more likely to support it because it validates their already strong self-confidence report. However, **overall correlation between gender and support of strengths-based development was only -.01**. The two respondents who claimed no support were one male and one female. Hence, there is no significant dependency to report in this aspect.

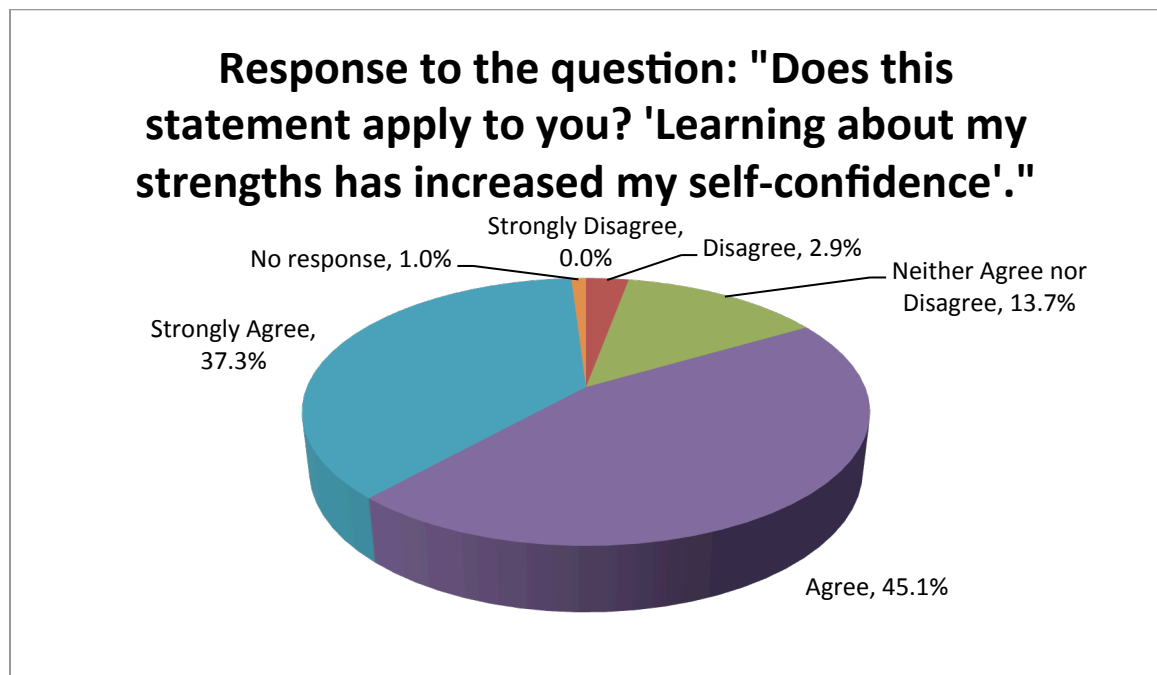


Figure 3: Responses to the question: "Does this statement apply to you? 'Learning about my strengths has increased my self-confidence'."

Next, the correlation between tenure and support of strengths-based development was tested. Hypothesis: The longer an employee has been with the company, the less likely they are to adopt a new concept, i. e. support the strengths-based approach. With a correlation of .02, tenure played only such a small role towards support of the concept that it cannot be called a significant correlation. However, it was on the positive side, meaning there was a very slight tendency of higher tenure folks to be less likely supporters of the approach.

The last correlation pertained to the hypothesis that the size of the organization positively influences the perceived effect of strengths approaches on self-confidence, i. e., **the larger the organization, the higher the self-confidence. A correlation of -.08 was found**, indicating that a slightly stronger effect on self-confidence is actually found in smaller organizations. Then again, it is worth noting that only 6.6% of respondents work in organizations with less than 100 employees, so the input of these 7 participants should only be considered to an extent.

In conclusion, the most valuable insights gained with this study stem from responses to the self-confidence question and the qualitative input. No significant correlations were found relating to gender, size of organization, or tenure with organization. Correlations by industry were not assessed because the overwhelming majority of responses came from the Professional Services industry.

5. Conclusion: “So what?” What can companies learn?

The main insight gained from this study is that strengths-based development, if implemented properly and with appropriate training, is extremely well perceived among employees. Respondents' choice of words to describe why they support it ranged from “highly effective” to “powerful”, “exciting”, “motivating”, and “contribute”. Even those participants who mentioned not having used the approach for very long expressed excitement about it and higher motivation than before. The most often mentioned concern revolves around sugarcoating tough messages, and around losing focus on their weaknesses if only strengths are emphasized. While employees thoroughly enjoy, support and benefit from learning about their strengths, they want to know that development needs will still be surfaced and that they are not left to find out the hard way that something is wrong. This leads me to conclude that investing in promoting the approach and training employees properly, beginning with managers who lead feedback conversations, is a worthy investment. It is notable that numerous comments in the question if and why respondents supported strengths-based approaches contradict criticism mentioned in qualitative question #2 and defend the notion that it can be a broad success with enough education opportunities, training, and broad implementation. Education around the counter-intuitive parts of the concepts appears to be crucial, i. e.:

1. How to identify strengths by using assessments and/or observing oneself and others at work.
2. How to build on strengths while managing weaknesses versus ignoring weaknesses. The common misconception in the latter seems to present a serious hindrance in broad acceptance of the concept.

3. How to apply one's strengths to the current position by shifting tasks, or how to find a different occupation that is a better fit.

Next, one could create ways to modify individuals' roles in order to align their tasks with their strengths. Another step down the road would be to put teams together according to how the team members' strengths harmonize with and complement each other. As mentioned in the next section, it may be interesting to quantify the return on investment (ROI) of the related implementation cost by comparing it to productivity gain.

6. Suggestions for future research

There is much work to be done to close the research gap between literature on surveys and application of concepts. If replicating this study in the future, I recommend making several adjustments.

1. **Randomize the order of questions:** In my survey, the question regarding self-confidence was asked before qualitative input about strengths-based development was requested. There was a high correlation of **.8** between respondents who agreed or strongly agreed to the self-confidence statement and who reported solely positively about strengths-based development. This leads me to speculate that initially reminding participants of the self-confidence boost induced by focusing on strengths might have impacted their positive qualitative input.
2. **Survey different industries:** My survey received most input (75%) from employees in the Professional Services area. It would be interesting to compare these results to more input about strengths-based approaches in manufacturing, education, and other industries.
3. **Survey about the specific implementation:** We received a significant number of comments about feedback conversations and how they have changed with strengths-based development. It may be helpful to survey quantitatively exactly *how* strengths concepts are being applied. This would be in more detail than the question I asked, "How have you used strengths-based concepts" with the options (1) feedback and (2) choosing tasks. The answer category "other" did not produce additional insight. According to Brandmeier (2008), many companies use strengths-based development, including Wells Fargo, Intel, Best

Buy, Accenture, Toyote, and Google. All of these may be worth a close look for future research.

4. **Correlate country to self-confidence question:** Much like the Gallup organization surveyed workers in different countries about their perceptions of using strengths to improve performance (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001), it may be interesting to repeat this approach by correlating the perceived elevation in self-confidence with the respondent's country of residence. This may produce additional insight into the effectiveness of strengths approaches across cultures.
5. **Return on investment (ROI):** It would be interesting to quantify productivity gains after implementing strengths-based development as it appears to raise employee motivation and morale.

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Appendix: All Qualitative Responses

1. How has strengths-based development helped you at work?

- Helped me focus on the tasks that best fit my strengths. Helped me to be more effective at work. Help me enjoy my job more!
- My self esteem has increased because I know that I can contribute and pull my "weight" at work because I know I am good at some things
- It helped me to get a much clearer picture and deeper understanding of my strengths and where I could leverage them, even to maybe address my weaknesses
- It has made the review process more positive so that I came out of it feeling like I was doing well and could not worry about the things that were going well, and just build on my strengths to take me into the next level of challenges at work.
- It's confirmed my strengths through real work examples and perceptions of co workers. It's helped to move from thoughts to confirmed strengths.
- about a year
- Generates more excitement and enthusiasm; provides a way to encourage and motivate others and self; highlights ways that I can most efficiently contribute to my teams/projects
- created a more positive atmosphere
- I can clearly be more successful by being in a role that requires my strengths
- Forces folks to be more positive
- When problem-solving how to deal with a situation, I now start with my strengths and incorporate that into my strategy.
- Has given me freedom to talk about my strengths (without sounding arrogant), has given me freedom to openly express wanting to do more to build on my strengths.
- When I'm operating from my strengths, I'm more confident, powerful, and passionate and my contributions are more valuable to my clients as a result. In addition, my stamina for being "at the top of my game" is much longer. Freeing myself from always worrying about my developmental areas (relative weaknesses) has also increased my level of engagement and increased my overall satisfaction with my work.
- Make more confident
- By giving me confidence with conflict resolution in calendaring, and to have interaction with colleagues of all levels.
- Helps when working with others to show recognition and develop their understanding of

how to have best impact

- It increased my confidence in the way I work. It actually helped me develop an approach to development. Ma
- helped to shift focus to find opportunities to "add value" by doing those things I do well.
- Has made me feel better about the tasks I do and don't like doing
- Helped with my annual Goals
- understand how to leverage what I am good at to help in other areas
- By reinforcing the ideas I had about what I do well, helping give a context and some padding to the development feedback that comes later.
- slowly being integrated in our workplace, but we've found it allows supervisors/managers to have more productive coaching discussions.
- As a Manager, I am able to frame feedback (often constructive) in a more positive way, which ultimately leads to a more productive, encouraging conversation. I find that the strength-based development conversations help me form better relationships with my reports, where they feel supported and motivated by me.
- Better guidance in choosing projects.
- In my work as an executive coach and trainer, I find that working with individuals to focus on developing their strengths as well as the areas in which they need to improve provides a more "balanced" approach to professional development vs focusing solely on those areas that need to be developed.. A discussion of one's strengths can also add to the individual's sense of self confidence - which is often a critical variable in a professional development situation.
- Yes. Helps identify strengths so that you can contribute most effectively versus dealing with frustration faced when working on optional projects which are not a match for you.
- It has allowed me to use my strengths to help build my weaknesses up
- Hasn't been used as yet.
- Confidence and awareness of strengths that I didn't know that I had.
- Reduced the stress when in new situations
- Thinking about how to leverage my current strengths to develop into a truly distinctive leader
- It has helped me feel motivated about building my existing strengths and increased my confidence that I am contributing something important to my work.
- guide selection of work and projects determine focus areas within a given project guide feedback delivery
- By leading my works and tasks to what I am really good at.

- Made me more efficient due to motivational boost
- Builds confidence, helps me seek opportunities where I will be successful
- Frequent reminders of my strengths help me to pick projects that will maximize my career success.
- in setting my goals for my professional development, in motivating myself
- kept my motivation high allowed me to not take criticism as personal offense but as a way to get better at what I do
- Takes the pressure off me and my colleagues to be perfect (i.e., OK to not be great at everything). Also, recognizes that excellence in certain areas is key to success
- Identifying what I'm good at and applying that to my tasks or to help peers
- it has helped me match my team to appropriate projects. it has helped me motivate team members who previously not recognized their own strengths
- Has helped raise self-awareness of tendency to focus on what people do "wrong" vs. what they do "right".
- Focused me on things that I am naturally good at (closely correlated to things I enjoy doing) Positioned me for a smoother conversation when I was providing feedback to another.
- It has reminded me that I can use my strengths to help others and the team. Also even when i recognize my weaknesses, it is good to be reminded that i have my strengths too.
- Yes, defining what I really excel at and choosing/assigning tasks that are in tune to these strengths.
- Improved my ability to execute tasks based on my strengths - improving my skills that support my strengths allows me to trust and rely on my strengths.
- Helped me realize areas that align with my strengths. I am able to work with my manager to find projects/tasks that use my strengths.
- by helping me to understand where I am naturally strong and helping to guide me toward roles and jobs that capitalize on those strengths.
- I can't say that is has, although the knowledge is interesting.
- It's helped me to reframe the way I approach my work. My attitude at work has improved as a result. I'm more likely to identify the tasks that I'm good at and focus on them, while not becoming overly negative about the things I'm not great at.
- *great way to connect with colleagues *improved ability to focus energy on the right kinds of tasks (aligned to my strengths)
- Strengths-based development has helped me in discussing my direct-reports professional development. Starting off discussing a person's strengths (results of the Strengths Finder test) is a good way to talk about where they excel, and therefore what areas of their role they can "stretch". For example, if someone has the "developer" strength, perhaps we could

focus on how they could become a mentor to others. If they have the "analytical" strength, perhaps learning more about an accounting function and becoming an expert would be a good place to grow.

- Helped me decide what I want to do for the next project
- It has helped me to focus on the areas that I do well in - but mostly it has introduced a new concept to me that I can apply to my personal life. Focusing on things I am good at and make me happy instead of trying to work on things that don't come natural to me.
- Build trust in myself, become exceptional at something
- to focus on what I can do and get recognition
- It helps me focus on things I really enjoy doing. When working in teams it helps dividing tasks. The overall mood at work improves and I can be more efficient.
- Yes, I know what I am good at and what people appreciate about myself
- Gt better
- More aware of my strengths, size opportunities to focus on them rather than focus on developing skills that are more difficult for me choose projects to stretch myself but also can choose projects that play to my strengths when success is critical.
- Helps give confidence during times when certain tasks do not align with strengths and my performance is not up to my own standards.
- Helps me guide my reports
- Not particularly helped or harmed.
- "Strengths-based development" has sugarcoated discussions about my performance. I'm not sure that this is helpful.
- Helps me inspire my teams by focusing on their strengths and passions and connecting on those rather than having "feedback" sessions which tend to set a negative tone
- In my previous jobs, I never received any formal feedback, and other than a casual "good job", any other informal feedback was negative and usually directed at things that were beyond my control (e.g., a customer is angry so somehow it must be your fault). The switch to strengths-based feedback has been a big adjustment but is increasing my confidence
- It allows you to do more of what you are good at.
- Understanding my strengths has allowed me to choose tasks within my realm of responsibilities that are more aligned with my strengths. For example, there is latitude in my job to choose a 'people project' of interest, and knowing my strengths in coaching and development among EMs, I was able to lead an initiative on EM engagement and retention. I also feel more motivated at work knowing that I am in a job that truly utilizes my strengths. Knowledge of strength will continue to help me in my career, even beyond my work at this firm, to identify jobs and situations where I will thrive.

2. What is frustrating about strengths-based development? How could it be improved?

- People are often reluctant or unskilled in naming others' strengths. People are also poor at self-identifying their own relative strengths
- We are just starting to talk about it here and so I have to be patient until we really see any actions taken.
- there often is this impression of someone 'sugar-coating' a tough message, which is just not helpful; the only recommendation I can think of in this context is, using the strengths-based development ONLY when you have the right mindset and are authentic. Otherwise it's is a perfect set-up for failure, not just harmful to the person using it, but actually to the whole approach!
- I haven't found anything frustrating about strengths-based development per se. I'd say the only thing is that we aren't really sure how to apply it and could use some training and practice.
- One might not focus on a strength since it's already 'in the bag'. And sometimes it can be hard to challenge a strength to be even better if you don't focus on it.
- Sometimes I really want to know what I'm doing wrong and when all you hear is good, I start to think even harder about what there MUST be that I could change!!!
- We talk about what are strengths are, but we don't spend a lot of time explicitly talking about how to leverage those strengths--how to find more opportunities which feature those strengths. You are sort of left on your own to figure this out.
- if it isn't done in a sincere way or if it is done superficially, it is not helpful
- The idea that the way the feedback message is delivered you know that something else it's coming. I think people are starting to incorporate the language of strengths nicely but the transition of the conversation to what needs to improve is not completely smooth yet
- You get pigeon-holed into what you are good at and folks may doubt your ability in new areas because X is not a "strength of yours"
- When receiving a 'strengths based' review that isn't in fact 'strengths-based' it increases the sense of frustration and hypocrisy. Would be helpful if organizations surveyed their staff after reviews to see if those reviewed found their reviews to be strengths based (I've found that managers sometimes THINK they've done a great job, but the reviewer walked away frustrated or disappointed)
- It's not been clear *how* to continue building on one's strengths.
- We have to be careful to not make it a panacea. Clear, direct feedback about the "minimum bar" for development areas is critical and sometimes lost in the process.
- I don't find anything frustrating about it. We can all continue to learn and improve continuously.

- There is a skill to language usage when working with strengths based development which I feel is not commonplace within most work environments. Using language correctly can be challenging, I think developing this requires skill and mindset development
- Sometimes people forget about weaknesses totally and I know this is not the point, but we should remember that a runner shouldn't do a marathon with a broken leg. So if the weakness is huge, still people need to fix this, not develop this as a spike but at least don't suck at some things
- This is less about strength-based development per se, and more about organizations: but the most frustrating thing has been the lack of broad implementation, lack of training of managers to make it work, and lack of follow-up to make sure it is happening
- Need to ensure that true performance issues aren't ignored
- Don't know
- 'shit sandwich' i.e. "you do this really well (short discussion) you need to work in this area (long discussion)" Discussions should be balanced and really help the person how to leverage what they are good at or what other team members are good at to leverage overall to help this person become more effective
- Nothing very frustrating actually. I like the concept - as long as there's a balance between strength feedback and development feedback.
- It might lead to a wrong impression of excellent work, so I would always combine it with feedback on weaknesses for a good balance
- occasionally difficult to find ways to utilize strengths to help address development needs (not always possible to tie together)
- - Weaknesses tend to stick more in my mind than strengths. - Claiming that "we are a strength based organization", it almost gives a sense that I am receiving feedback about my strengths because that's what my manager is supposed to do and not because I
- Might seem a bit narrow or people might be fearful about developing a new skill
- Sometimes when giving someone the message in a strengths-based way, the receiver misses key messages (i.e., if something really needs to be improved). It's also challenging, at times, to make the link between what someone is good at and what they clearly need to improve on to be successful in their role.
- Needs to be balanced with constructive criticism. Also need to focus on the "so what" - you have a positive attitude, so... Etc
- When strength-based development is presented as the "sole focus" of professional development, areas that need to be developed can often be given little attention. This lack of "balance" can be an issue.
- Institutionalizing it so that all managers are using it. When one leader uses the approach and another does not, they compete with one another.
- It is very cheesy

- It can be difficult to get an accurate gauge of performance when reviews are based on strengths. (I had a situation where my supervisor gave me a far superior review in person than was reported, in part because he was trying to focus on strengths.)
- If there are weaknesses that need to be developed for the current job they might get marginalized
-
- Sometimes I do want to know more directly what my weaknesses are, but only if they are really important to fix.
- feedback conversations often appear to start with strengths but then lead into development areas, meaning receivers may largely ignore the strengths component as they're waiting for the shoe to drop
- Sometimes you focus only in what you are good at are and leave aside the rest without a real need to improve. It could be improved not ignoring your weakness
- It neglects development in the areas that need developing, the progress in those areas is limited
- Sometimes still feels like a quick way to get to development needs
- Our organization is still adjusting to a true strengths-based model, and I'm not convinced promotion decisions are based on this approach.
- it is not frustrating at all
- haven't experienced it long enough to be able to answer
- Lack of alignment with performance management systems. Good in theory, but managers are unlikely to systematically redefine jobs so they play to peoples' strengths. A bit impractical. Lack of clarity regarding how best to action plan against strengths Some of the science is weak and "oversold." i.e., I don't fully buy the Tal Ben Shahar video we show at BAT...if you take the analogy of golf, it IS easier to go from shooting a 110 to a 100 than from a 75 to a 70.
- Sometimes you can not apply all your strengths in the current role. Know them and applying them as required, on demand
- with less-than-stellar colleagues, it becomes difficult to focus on strengths (or sometimes find them). Staying positive can be trying when you have significant issues.
- Tends to have a "feel good" aura around it that makes it seem trite. Think it will be very hard for many people to shake this perception.
- Suggests that deficiencies should be overlooked rather than built up (at least) to some minimal level
- does not teach me how to improve my weakness. I think there should be an emphasis on leveraging strength to overcome weaknesses.
- They are not always taken into consideration when assigning roles.
- Not individual enough, but that's hard to do. Some people are more advanced in some areas than others, for the same strengths. Maybe more personal study, or self-learning options.
- You cannot ignore "weak" areas that also need development. It is good to be aware of these areas and to work on developing them so they are not a weakness.

- Many folks seem to think strength based feedback is only giving feedback on strengths, rather than including feedback to build self-awareness of where you are NOT strong and need more development or ways to compensate for weaknesses.
- If we learn our strengths, we should also learn our weaknesses. There will definitely be things we don't excel at and we should know about those so we don't keep hitting our heads against brick walls.
- You can only shape your approach so much in any given role before you're reaching outside the bounds of the job.
- *can feel artificial if misunderstood - needs to still recognize the need to develop both on strengths as well as in other areas critical to your job *I think some people see it as weak *can be hard to apply
- I have been struggling with the concept of using a strength to improve a weakness. I think there needs to be a balance between celebrating strengths and working on weaknesses, or areas that need development. Areas for improvement: If the materials in the strengths finder could provide more examples of the above (how to use a strength to develop a weakness), perhaps it would be more easily applied.
- It can seem too formal and forced
- At work, we talk about strength based development all of the time and sometimes I feel there is little talk regarding how to improve in certain areas. I think the issue with this is that there are naturally going to be some people in the work place that need improve their performance in areas that may not be their strengths. So, for the employees who show promise and many strengths, this works well. I am not so sure it works for those who need significant improvement to be able to do their job well.
- 1) how to turn the weaknesses into positive 2) sometimes hard to identify concretely what to do to get better at your strength
- - when giving feedback, colleagues and supervisors often comment on the most obvious strengths, but don't go into the depths
- it does not help to solve issues that exist in other areas
- You still keep your weaknesses, people just stop focusing on them. We could share ideas about how to change a weakness into a strength (ie if somebody's strength is somebody else's weakness).
- It is easier to fix something not working than working on something to improve that already goes well...
- Does not help you in eradicating weaknesses - which is fundamental in improving yourself
- People sometimes just say positive things to pass on to what they really feel.
- difficult to gauge whether some gaps in my strengths must be plugged to move to the next level.
- Nothing, as long as it is used in conjunction with pointing out areas where there is room for improvement.
- sometimes causes employees to forget about non strength skills that need development

- Can be unfocused, and overly "positive" or saccharine. Can lead to less than humble statements by colleagues which make me lose respect for them
- In most cases I've seen "strengths-based development" is a superficial layer placed on top of traditional professional development to "make it sound nicer." A given job/role typically has a set of performance expectations which are based on that role, not the development model. While "strengths-based development" may help people "talk up" strengths, few firms are willing to accept lower performance in non-strength areas... so unless "strengths-based development" includes switching to a new job that better matches one's strengths (or which doesn't match one's weaknesses), it will be superficial at best.
- - It creates "spikey" people
- Most challenging: having a strengths-based discussion about a subordinate's (or colleague's) development needs where the person is a) not performing adequately on some dimension; AND b) fails to understand appreciate the gap in performance. In such situations, the natural "fall back" is to be blunt and directive about what needs to improve. That is difficult (not impossible) to do in a strengths-based way
- Sometimes I feel the need to downplay any "development" areas when giving feedback.
- It is difficult to address major development needs as part of strength-based development.
- Sometimes strength-based feedback does not get into the depth of detail, i.e. actionable behaviors, that helps one leverage that strength. Hearing that you are "a good people person" is less helpful than behavioral examples such as "you are at your best when you help people transitioning from Asc to EM become inspirational leaders". Also, strength-based development must be paired with work tasks that allow you to truly leverage those strengths....there must be the opportunity to use them at work.

3. Do you support the use of strengths-based concepts? Why or why not?

- YES! It is highly effective.
- It is great to have teams made up of people with different strengths these I have personally seen be very successful.
- Absolutely! Reason is that I have been seeing loads of people, who have hardly been aware about their strengths, not to even think about on how to use these. However, those folks have all been able to articulate their weaknesses broad & deeply, which indicates a huge disbalance towards the negative and therefore does not foster to leverage the utmost potential of a person. This not only turns out to be an economic issue for the employer, but much worse chisels people to significantly improve
- Absolutely. I think it is more encouraging and affirming, and still winds up conveying everything essential that we need to know in order to develop. It also reminds everyone, especially leaders, to be aware of what their team members are doing well and to share that with them. This is a huge boost for morale and ultimately improves team productivity.
- Yes. I feel it builds up confidence. It's much easier to work on 1-3 areas when you use the confidence of strengths behind you. We all have different strengths that we bring to teams and if you call them out you might be able to help someone else that is lacking in that area.
- Yes, I think it's helped me and my team a lot
- I do, b/c our company is often way too negative and deficit-based in our feedback and evaluation. I also completely believe in the idea that it's simply often more efficient (for one's self and for society at large) to build on one's strengths rather than scratch-and-claw to offset a weakness.
- yes
- Yes, if done correctly it can open people up to change both at individual and organizational level
- Yes - but greater training is needed
- In general just a more positive mindset.
- Most definitely because I've seen the results from using the approach, both for myself and in my clients.
- Yes, helps better understanding your abilities.
- I do support the use as we should always be moving forward in our goals and using our strengths helps us to succeed. Also, This helps us to strengthen our weaknesses as lesser strengths that need to be cultivated.
- Yes, I believe each person should be valued for their uniqueness and in utilising and demonstrating value of strengths. people can best contribute and live more satisfied lives.
- I do for the reasons mentioned above, but try not to forget about some clear development areas. This is also a better way to engage employees than listing their weaknesses
- I do. It makes intuitive sense to me. Also, I've read some of the research and it works.
- Definitely. It's only a good thing.

- Yes, it is a positive approach.
- sure. talking about the entire picture is always a good thing. Humans are naturally better receivers and givers of positive information than negative when talking directly with someone. We are better at giving negative information when talking about others who are not around.
- Yes. It tends to enforce a balance between positive and negative feedback (at least as compared to just having a general "feedback" concept).
- Yes, as long as it is mitigated with also feedback on weaknesses
- Yes, believe it is a logical approach and when done effectively, yields strong results
- Yes If implemented in true spirit, it can boost self confidence which would also empower people to work on the areas that do not come naturally to them.
- Yes - I think a certain level of specificity helps employees use and improve their talents and skills and makes it easier/more practical to set and attain goals.
- Absolutely. It has changed the dynamic of feedback conversations so they're not always something to fear. And I think it makes the conversations more of a dialogue with an uplifting message, even when there are clear areas that need improving - more of a "let's work together to build on what you're good at" vs. just "here's what you need to improve".
- Yes. In my experience We are not always aware of our own strengths (and weaknesses too for that matter). Having our strength pointed out to us can help us to better match our strength to creating impact.
- Yes, as long as there is an intentional balance between "strengths" and areas of human endeavor that need to be developed - if the individual is to be increasingly successful. To not focus on both is a dis-service to the individual who is interested in "comprehensive" development.
- Yes. If you have a team which is balanced across skills, you are more satisfied and more productive when working on items which are suited to your strengths. The balanced team allows you to do this since what may be strength for one is not for another.
- Yes, but it has drawbacks. It is helpful in development, but it is important to still get an overall gauge of overall performance outside of the strength-based framework.
- I support the basic concept that one should not just focus on weaknesses.
- More aspirational way to approach feedback
- Yes - very much so. When I know I have strengths that are appreciated, I get excited about using them as well as leveraging them to build new strengths. When I am focused on my weaknesses, I become self-conscious and perform worse.
- yes, overall seems like it makes more sense to refine strengths than labor over weaknesses
- I do, because it helps you master your skills and lead others whose areas are weak. Also, it allows you to work happier doing what you like and what you are good at.
- I do but it needs to be aligned with development of "weaknesses"

- Yes - everyone has strengths and development needs. Put people where they will be most successful. Research shows that reinforcing strengths improves performance much more than building weaknesses to a better place.
- Yes, b/c I think it's much easier to build on strengths than address weaknesses.
- yes! because it is the right approach - motivating, everyone has strengths, it is still possible to work on developmental needs
- yes - life is short and it's too hard to become an ace at all aspects of our work and relationship management: let's make sure we are ok on all necessary dimensions, but ace those that we are especially talented at, since incremental benefit will likely come at a lower cost/effort! that's what I understand strength based development to be able.
- Yes. Strengths are what differentiate us and make us special. However, can't forget about development areas...particularly for younger employees without well defined self concepts who are more malleable and open to learning. Seems most appropriate from mid to late career executives who know their strengths and development areas, and these aren't likely to change. In these instances, leveraging strengths is the best way to grow someone.
- Yes. Because will improve performance, reduce costs and help the company
- I do. My ideal situation would be one where each member of my team had different strengths that each relate to key initiatives - it's a good way to spread the work, allow colleagues to thrive, and get things done well all at the same time.
- Yes. In my experiences outside the office, learning new skills (e.g., dance, kayaking, etc.), I have found myself more responsive to praise rather than criticism, especially when feedback is being delivered in a public environment or group setting.
- Yes, but reservedly. Has the potential to ignore real weaknesses that hold people back from being successful.
- Yes but i don't think it should be the only developmental concept applied at work. I think there needs to be some focus on one's developmental needs and shortcomings as well.
- I do and I don't. I think it could be very useful for a student trying to find a major or prepare for career areas. If someone is on a career track, it could be very helpful in the way it helps them focus. If someone is just doing a job for money, they may not be in a role where they are working with their strengths, and the concepts may be redundant.
- I do support it. I believe it puts people in a more positive mindframe, making them more collaborative, open-minded, and solution-oriented.
- Yes. At its core - it is building self-awareness which, to me, is the root of leadership.
- YES -- superior approach to professional development, in particular in today's context which requires more self-authorship, agility, innovation, etc.
- Not necessarily. I found the MBTI much more informative because it puts you on a sliding scale in 4 categories and shows you what things you're good at and what things you have little or no connection to. Even though we might not be able to change those things, it helps to know the continuums exist and how you and other people think and react to situations.
- Yes, I think strengths-based concepts help foster understanding of different work styles.

- *yes *I think it makes a lot of sense that you do better and enjoy work more when you focus on the things you are naturally good at *I've seen it work for me
- I do support the use of the concept especially as it relates to professional development, particularly for people who are in the same role for years and would like to do something more with it.
- Yes - overall, very helpful. Makes feedback process more valuable.
- I do. Although I feel it shouldn't be all or nothing, it should always be used if applicable. If someone is really struggling in their job, the areas they need to work on must be addressed.
- Yes, it is very powerful, easily accepted (people like praise, especially if it is right) and I generally like people a lot more if I focus on their strengths
- Yes. It's a great way to increase motivation and dedication to your work.
- yes, but a balance towards traditional feedback is needed.
- Yes, I support strengths-based concepts. It creates a much more positive work environment and people don't get too frustrated. That's a much better way to start working on personal/professional development and keeps people motivated.
- yes, because it makes me feel happier to know I am good at something
- Yes I do, if spiced up with ideas on how to improve weaknesses
- Yes, especially when teams are put together based on complementary strengths. Also support it when the whole team is aware of each person's strength. Because the team output is generally better and more efficient.
- Yes. It helps build and maintain confidence, and also allows people to be more effective in utilizing their skills to help the team.
- yes - agree it is best to focus on what people do best and are excited by - but blend with focus on needed skills and job refinement to match skills
- Not particularly. Being a pull-up-by-the-socks kind of guy, I believe in striving constantly for excellence and bettering one's deficiencies, rather than dwelling on what's alright
- It's a nice concept, but it can lead to a lot of doublespeak. It doesn't really hurt, but I don't believe it really helps...
- - Yes - I'd rather be happy and work on what will make me great
- Yes. Ultimately, it makes the "feedback" conversation a development one, and shows real care and commitment to professional development rather than simply "evaluation"
- Yes, I think it creates a better environment for people to develop and push their boundaries.
- I do because they give people a strong motivation to develop their skills or adjust behaviors.
- I do support strengths-based concepts. Psychology studies have long showed the power of positive reinforcement on self efficacy and behavior. With higher self efficacy comes increased performance.