

Strengths at Work

Every day offers individuals in the workplace the opportunity to be the best they can be. New challenges at work mean it is important that individuals and organisations make the most of their individual and collective talents. How people behave at work is influenced by the way they think and feel. Demoralised and unhappy individuals are less creative and productive than those who are engaged, motivated and happy.

Traditionally, psychology has focussed on overcoming psychological and emotional problems. However, positive psychology is different in that it focuses on understanding how to achieve excellence. Positive psychology promotes the role of positive emotions and individual strengths that are linked to successful outcomes. It is not just the practical, technical or intellectual skills the individual possesses but the psychological and emotional responses that they engage in, which makes the difference between someone going through the motions and someone truly engaged in the process of achieving excellence.

People driven by fear or perfectionism may be successful to a point. However, such emotions come at a price for the individual, those they work with and the organisation. They are limited by their emotional responses, which may manifest themselves through poor work life balance and the longer term difficulties that often ensure such as a lack of creative thinking and poor team or colleague relationships. All of these, in turn, affect the profitability of the individual from an organisational perspective.

Positive psychology focuses on making what is good even better. It does not discount individual development needs but, rather, seeks to place the emphasis on the way people use their existing talents to best effect. Positive psychology helps individuals identify and use their abilities to best advantage while minimising self-defeated thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

The research base for positive psychology provides sound evidence that developing positive emotions has a number of desirable benefits. For example, in mental health improving and maintaining physical health, increasing life expectancy, improving attentiveness, perception and in thinking abilities and increasing a person's resilience when faced with challenging life events. Apart from helping employees be healthier, with fewer days off sick and a lesser likelihood of experiencing stress related problems, positive emotions improve the profitability of teams.

The Hungarian psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and the American psychologist, Martin Seligman, founded Positive Psychology in 1998. They defined positive psychology as the 'scientific study of optimal human functioning that aims to discover and promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive'. This sci-

ence operates on three different levels, the subjective level, the individual level and the group level.

The subjective level includes the study of positive experiences such as joy, well-being, satisfaction, contentment, happiness, optimism and flow. This level is about feeling good, rather than doing good or being a good person. The aim at the individual level is to identify the constituents of the 'good life' and the personal qualities that are necessary for being a 'good person', through studying human strengths and virtues, future mindedness, capacity to love, courage, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, wisdom, interpersonal skills and giftedness.

Finally, at the group level, the emphasis is on civic virtues, social responsibilities, nurturance, altruism, civility, tolerance, work ethics, positive institutions and other factors that contribute to the development of citizenship and communities.

One intervention to enhance people's performance at work is through coaching. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development is Europe's largest professional Institute for people management and development. Research to be launched at the upcoming Coaching at Work Conference has found that almost 90% of organisations polled use coaching. It is not surprising that so many companies are turning to coaching to improve performance. Dr John McGurk, CIPD adviser, Learning and Talent says that "When budgets are tightened, it's a relatively inexpensive way to develop staff, and it also has the benefit of being tailored to an organisation's specific needs. As well as this, coaching has great scope to improve employee engagement, empower people and boost morale at a time of great uncertainty".

We have developed optimal coaching through integrating traditional coaching methods with the science of positive psychology. Optimal coaching uses the science of positive psychology to gain the best results for our clients. More specifically, optimal coaching involves cultivating positive emotions, strengths and positive attitudes to achieve the best out of our client's life, team and or organisation so that they are flourishing. As with all forms of psychological coaching, there are many different strategies that both the individual and the organisations can engage in to enhance performance. The strategies include recognising and using positive emotions, measuring them and looking at practical ways to increase their likelihood and measuring them to see what the best interventions fit for that individual employee. Strategies include recognising and using strengths on a daily basis, developing positive communications and optimism.

Essentially, optimal coaching helps people recognise and use their existing strengths on a regular basis so that they feel excited and energised about their work thereby enhancing their performance and well-being. At the same time, optimal coaching identifies aspects that may be self-limited such as negative thinking styles that may hold them back.

Identifying and using strengths

The concept of individual strengths is one of the keys to developing positive individual and organisational traits. Statements like “playing to your strength” recognise that people have aptitudes and talents. For strength to be strength there are four characteristics, as outlined in the Table One below. When all four are present, individuals are using their strengths.

Characteristic	Meaning
Being the best you can be	Functioning at peak performance allows the individual to develop and grow.
Innate ability	More like being biologically pre-programmed to be good at something. The brain has what it needs to help think, feel and act in certain ways. Tasks are made easier by existing abilities.
Congruence	The strength is in line with individual’s personal values. When they experience congruence, they feel at one with themselves.
Makes you feel alive and full of energy	When using strengths the individual feels full of energy and enjoys what they are doing.

Table 1. – Characteristics and their meanings

Playing to your strengths

Positive Psychology aims to help people identify individual strengths. There are 24 of these grouped under six headings called Virtues. The six virtues and their meanings are outlined in Table 2. Once an individual knows what his strengths are, the Coach can help how to use them to the greatest advantage.

Virtues and Associated Strengths	Meaning
Virtue: Wisdom and Knowledge Strengths: Creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective	The ability to acquire knowledge and to use it to best advantage.
Virtue: Courage Strengths: Bravery, persistence, integrity, vitality	Finding ways of overcoming obstacles that help get the most from life.
Virtue: Humanity Strengths: Love, kindness, social intelligence	Looking after others and their wellbeing.
Virtue: Justice Strengths: Citizenship, fairness, leadership	Creating a healthy society through fairness and justice.
Virtue: Temperance Strengths: Forgiveness and mercy, humility, prudence and self control	Ways of providing protection against the excesses of life.

Virtues and Associated Strengths	Meaning
Virtue: Transcendence Strengths: Appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humour, spirituality	Identifying and honoring meaning and purpose.

Table 2. – Virtues, associated strengths and their meanings

Finding strengths in others

It is important to be able to recognise and value other people's strengths and consider how to complement them and work with these. We live in a society and are interacting with people all day. The meeting of strengths can provide a powerful force for establishing the kind of environment at work that is likely to be more productive as well as enjoyable.

If strengths are the ways in which individuals act in day to day life, virtues are more spiritual in nature. For example, the six headings of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, transcendence and temperance are all virtues but the component parts are the ways in which they are expressed through individual strengths in day to day life.

Recognising and acknowledging other peoples virtues helps to

1. Discover complementary strengths in others
2. Provide models of ways of being that the individual wishes to emulate
3. Build productive and meaningful relationships by being able to acknowledge the virtues of others..

An individual is asked to think of all the people they work with and to write out a list of the virtues and strengths they believe they have. Then they identify the specific behaviours they value and consider how these complement their own strengths and how having such individuals around adds value.

In addition, attention is given to ways in which individual and collective skills can be integrated to ensure maximum advantage to all. Understanding others as well as oneself is a key building successful, profitable and rewarding relationships.

Work on strategies to build up weaker strengths

A person can tackle their respective weaker strengths head on. Once they have decided which strengths they would like to develop, a list is made of these. If there is more than one strength on the list, these are rated according to their relevance and importance, using a 0 to 10 scale. 0 being not that important and 10 being very important. Trying to change too much at once can be counterproductive. Having a hierarchy of strengths to be developed systematically is more likely to lead to the successful attainment of the desired strength.

Everyone has strengths, some more developed than others. It is possible to develop new strengths and by recognising new strengths and by recognising your own strengths as well as those of others, improves your productivity, motivation and work satisfaction.