

Invest in Strengths...or Weaknesses?



Bernard Tollec

Turningpoint Director – Executive Coach

If you spend your life trying to be good at everything, you will not be exceptional. But that's exactly what we try to do in our organizations...

It seems obvious, however...

In a study of 8000 teams published in the Journal of Applied Psychology, Jim Harter and Frank Schmidt conclude that although there are several levers to increase people's commitment and performance (talents, clear roles, a clear definition of the team's mission, etc...), **the greatest lever is to allow people to work on their strengths.**

It seems obvious, who would disagree? And yet, very few leaders and companies help their employees to detect, develop and capitalize on their strengths. In fact, they would rather focus on their weaknesses...



After 15 years as an HR Director in the industry, I discovered resources and strengths-based approaches many years ago (**Strengths Based Approaches** such as **Appreciative Inquiry**, **Solution Focus** and **Positive Psychology**). I became aware that although it was our conviction to build on the talents of our coworkers, our culture and tools inevitably led us to their weaknesses. I am convinced today that we develop ourselves from our qualities and not from our weaknesses. High-level athletes can testify to this: a decathlete told me he was very good at 3 sports out of 10, and that he worked specifically to excel in those, while adding that he tried his best in the other 7. So this is the first message: we develop upon our strengths and manage the problems generated by our weak points.

Therefore we are invited to work on our strengths and weaknesses by developing the energy to find our strengths and the intelligence to bypass and contain our weaknesses.

We choose to focus on
STRENGTHS



Our culture, logic and tools direct us towards our weaknesses

If you had to invest your money, what would you look at first? Surely the return on investment, finding the highest possible one! It's logical, right? When it comes to investing money in the development of human capital in a company, where do we invest our financial efforts? Well you won't believe it: it's usually on the lowest return on investment! Our development plans become corrective action plans!

I had the opportunity to work a lot on employee development by using many individual and collective processes: development centers, personal development plans, training plans, coaching sessions, people reviews, etc... We analyzed our managers' strengths and development points, as well as their potential for evolution. We would refer to their flaws/weaknesses with the mild euphemisms "development points" or "progress points". Upon reflection, why disguise one term with another? Because it would seem more acceptable? Probably because we already felt that people were reluctant to work on what they lacked the most! And rightly so! Working on people's weakest points allows us, at best, to go from "mediocre" to "a little less mediocre", despite spending lots of energy and financial investment!

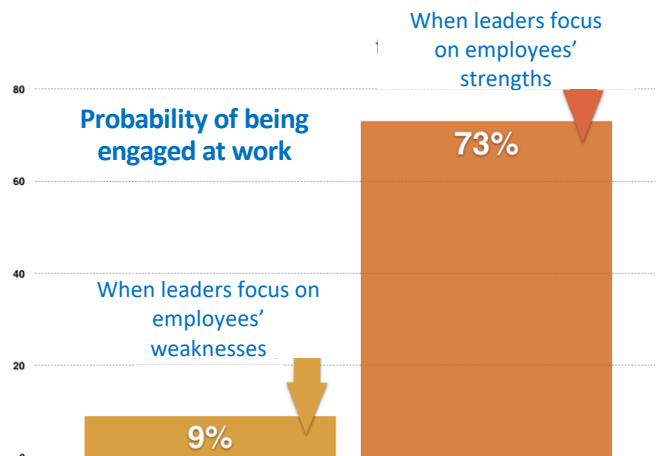
A reflex that starts very early on...

The fact that we first focus on our weaknesses is not new. This approach begins very early in our culture. In the French school system, we have already been conditioned from our childhood to focus primarily on poor grades and our weakest points, as evidenced by this survey of school parents conducted by Gallup.

France is not alone, but for once is the best in its category!

Country	Percentage focusing on good grades	Percentage focusing on bad grades
UK	22	52
Japan	18	43
China	8	56
France	7	87
USA	7	77

This continues on in the business world with disastrous effects on employee engagement, as shown by these Gallup statistics:



How can we refocus our vision and actions on our strengths?

A. Start by defining what a strength is

Only 1/3 of all people know their strengths

Recent studies have shown that only one third of people can define what their strengths are. Even then, they often think that these are the activities in which they perform well.

This is only one of the aspects of a strength, which can be characterized by three key elements:



Natural: It's in your DNA, you are completely yourself when you employ it. Whatever the context, you develop these strengths authentically



Energy: Every time you employ a strength, the activity you are doing gives you a lot of energy



Excellence: You deliver performance and excellence in an activity when you manifest that strength.

B. You have an adequate vocabulary to detect your strengths

That being said, it's important to be able to use a language that describes your strengths in order to develop them and share them. Our vocabulary has been largely overused to evoke our weaknesses or flaws, and we shouldn't be surprised if we find it difficult to detect our strengths. To the question "what are your strengths, your qualities?", only 1/3 of British people were able to give a sensible answer. How about you? What would you answer?

Peter Drucker wrote in his 1966 book The Effective Leader: "*the effective leader builds on strengths - his own, those of his manager, his colleagues and his collaborators*". **David Cooperrider**, creator of Appreciative Inquiry, wrote an article in 1987 that launched this discipline and explained its first basic principle: "In any organization there is something that works well, and development happens by doing more or improving on what works because that's what constitutes the DNA of the organization."

Martin Seligman, in his 1999 speech as the new president of the American Psychology Association, noted the plethora of studies that explained the reasons for human dysfunction, and the few studies that explained optimal functioning. He launched what would become positive psychology.

Nowadays, there are questionnaires built on these theories which allow you to highlight what constitutes your excellence (see some questionnaires at the end of this article).

C. Recognize what is or isn't a strength, and build a true development strategy

Depending on the frequency of use and the energy it gives us, we can begin to discern a little more precisely what a strength is and how to best invest in its development.

Discern our strengths...



“Realized Strengths”: These are the ones we use regularly, that give us energy and results. They are stronger than us, they are us, in our DNA.

“Unrealized Strengths”: They are also us, but do not manifest themselves regularly enough. Why? Because most of the time, we have not identified them, we are not aware of them, and we don't think about creating the conditions to implement them more regularly.

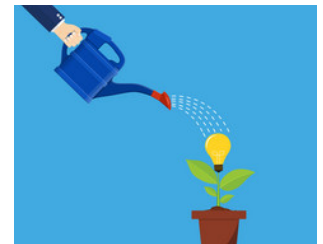
Learned Behaviors are often confused with strengths: indeed we know how to carry out these activities like a well-oiled machine that coldly delivers a good result, but it doesn't give us any particular energy, it might actually consume it. We were able to verify this with an operational leader who was functioning solely on his learned behaviors, to the point that he

eventually had a burnout. He did not realize it because he delivered good results, but without any pleasure.

Weaknesses: these are the activities we don't like to do, those that consume our time and also our energy. We don't enjoy it and often procrastinate until we are forced to do it.

...in order to act and invest appropriately in a development strategy for our strengths, and a bypass strategy for our weaknesses

After having discerned these different categories, what strategies can be implemented to truly experience the development of your talents?



“Realized Strengths”: As these are completely you, and that you manifest them in a rather systematic way, it is suggested that you control them so that they manifest wisely, at the right level and in an appropriate way according to the context. Doing too much or no longer controlling them could also become a weakness. The motto here is "master them", as you would an untamed horse.

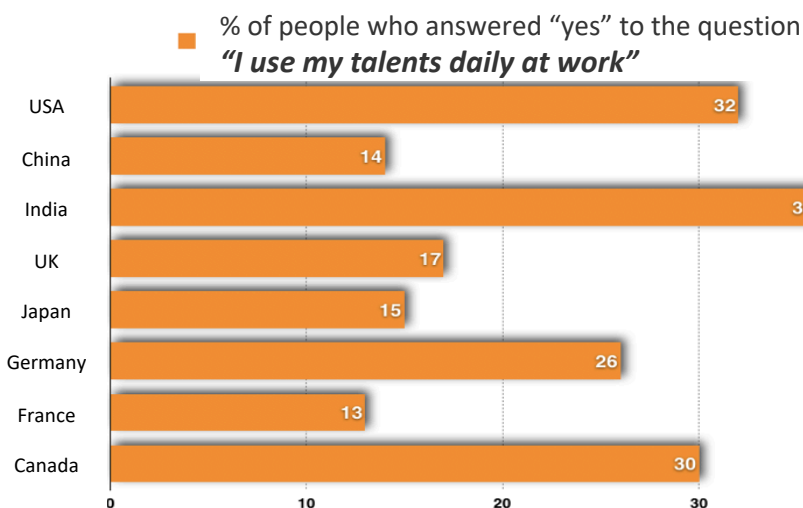
“Unrealized Strengths”: You are good at them, they give you energy, but you don't use them often enough. Once you have identified them, you can create the conditions and opportunities to implement them as often as possible. ***This is where you have the highest potential for progress.***

Learned Behaviors: Don't forget that they are not strengths, despite appearances, and that they can consume a lot of your energy. Use them only when they are essential to your activities. The only difference between these and your weaknesses is that you perform well when you apply them. Look for what you can stop doing, delegate, etc...

Weaknesses: It's important to analyze how they can hurt your performance. It will be more of a corrective action plan. You can also see how the strengths you have can counteract your weaknesses. In which way, for instance, your creativity can overcome your lack of organization, etc... It's important to treat them without focusing on them too much.

How does this take shape in companies?

There is still a huge amount of work to be done within our organizations and particularly in France, as evidenced by this survey conducted by Gallup in 2007. It shows how much France is behind on this topic, in a landscape of international companies that also show considerable room for improvement.



A maximum return on investment will only be earned as part of development plans and training plans that invest in the employees' realized and unrealized strengths.

D. How and where to start as a leader?

Really focus on your strengths and those of your co-workers

Be careful not to confuse their learned behaviors with their realized and unrealized strengths. Of course, look at their performances and also at the pleasure they take in realizing the projects and activities entrusted to them. If you want their performance to be sustainable and if you want to create a motivated team that your peers, boss and partners envy, it's important to do the work of finding your employees' strengths and helping to develop them using the 4 strategies mentioned above.

Stop investing heavily in weaknesses

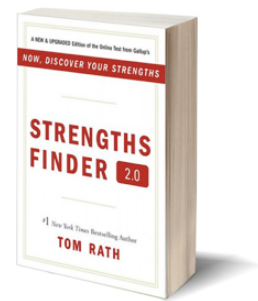
Stop spending your organization's money, your employees' energy and your own time trying to turn the weaknesses of your employees into strengths. Spend more time thinking about how to make their weaknesses obsolete by using all the appropriate means, but above all, stop believing and making them believe that they can become brilliant at their weak points! It won't happen and you risk doing a lot of damage trying to do so.

Recognize that no one has every single quality!

It's a myth to believe or to let someone believe that a person can be talented at everything. This might sound a little provocative, but what we risk by believing that everyone must progress on all levels is to create a race to the bottom (on skills and talents that everyone must have), instead of empowering everyone to achieve their best skill level based on their best talents. However, we might be tempted to do this in companies that require everyone to be at the same level on all skills.

A few resources to get you started:

Strengthsfinder (Clifton & Rath)
<http://www.strengthsfinder.com/>



Become an explorer of your colleagues' strengths!

Everyone doesn't necessarily have to fill out a questionnaire. You can simply ask your coworkers about the moments in their professional life when they felt deeply engaged or energized by what they were doing, then look with them at what talents they were able to apply. You will not only create more performance, but also a work environment that is conducive to a high level of commitment and motivation. You will also be better equipped, having done this work, when it comes to allocating projects and activities to your employees.

Strengthscope
<http://www.strengthscope.com/>



When you take a look at what you do in your organization and for yourself, what is the focus of your attention, energy and resources?



Bernard Tollec is the Director of Positive Transformation at Turningpoint, an international coaching firm specializing in the individual and collective support of managers and their teams during transformations. He is one of the European experts on strength and resource-oriented approaches such as *Appreciative Inquiry* and *Solution Focus*. He intervenes as an Executive Coach in organizations that wish to experience rapid and long lasting changes, both in France and abroad. He guides and trains leaders, coaches and internal change agents on these new pathways of collective intelligence.