

Strengths Taster

Why focus on Strengths?

The interest in Strengths has been spurred by the Positive Psychology movement: around the turn of the century, psychologists returned from study of the negative and dysfunctional to the original focus of psychology – ‘optimum functioning’ – under the leadership of Martin Seligman (1998 President of the American Psychological Association) and colleagues. Well-researched projects¹ show that using strengths increases happiness, energy levels, effective functioning, flow / ‘being in the zone’ / peak performance, and the achievement of goals. Increasingly, individuals and organisations recognise the value of ‘playing to strengths’, which goes far beyond the idea of ‘positive thinking’.

How do I discover my Strengths?

Most of us have a good idea where both our strengths and weaknesses lie, but this clarity can become clouded by the demands of our jobs and life roles. We can confirm our strengths by observing our happiness and energy levels, by asking our friends and co-workers, and by completing specific instruments designed to label and identify our key strengths. Three of these are described below (all are self-scored with a report available immediately):

- Realise2 was developed in the UK by the Centre of Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP) / Prof Alex Linley, assesses 60 strengths, and has now been used by a significant population (50k). It considers strengths according to energy, performance and use, and shows the results as realised strengths, unrealised strengths, learned behaviours and weaknesses. It also groups strengths into five separate categories: being, communicating, motivating, relating, and thinking.
- VIA (Values in Action) was developed by Seligman and colleagues in the USA, is used widely throughout the world (17 languages) and by a large population (~1.3 million). It identifies and places in order ‘signature strengths’ from a list of 24 overall strengths, categorised into six virtues: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence.
- Gallup StrengthsFinder™ was developed by from the research of Dr Donald O Clifton over several decades and has been available widely since 2001 (now ~8 million users). It identifies ‘signature strengths’ and orders a list of 34.

How might Strengths help me personally?

Awareness and conscious application of personal strengths, within and outside work, tend to boost energy levels, increase motivation and promote achievement of goals. If you are also aware of your ‘learned behaviours’ (see Realise2) and weaknesses, you may choose to manage your work differently: if you spend too much time on activities using learned behaviours, your energy levels are likely to drop; if in activities where your weaknesses are exposed, you may lose motivation too.

Building awareness of strengths:

- Observe yourself in flow² (a state in which you are motivated by the task, the challenge and skill requirements are both high and appropriately matched, there is a goal and a structure for the activity, and you know whether the task is going well) – what are the strengths you are employing?
- Be aware when your energy levels drop – what characteristics are you dealing with and how do these relate to your learned behaviours or weaknesses?
- What do your colleagues and friends see of you? How do they describe your strengths and weaknesses?

When you next face a specific challenge (a project, assignment, relationship) consider:

- If I were to approach this by playing to my strengths, what would I do differently? How might I use my signature strengths to achieve a positive outcome?
- What aspect of the challenge am I shying away from? What is the strength or weakness underlying that? How might I approach this differently?

What ideas might I put into practice longer-term?

As you develop your interest in Strengths you may wish to organise your work and that of others by paying greater attention to strengths, learned behaviours and weaknesses.

- What percentages of time do I attribute to work that plays to my realised and unrealised strengths, my learned behaviours and my weaknesses? How would I like them to be?
- What aspects of my job could I do differently to draw more on my strengths, both realised and unrealised? How might I re-design or re-order my work so that I vary my use of strengths, learned behaviours and weaknesses?
- How might I contribute further to my work and development by using strengths to full advantage?
- How might I approach aspects of my work differently, setting out to use specific strengths and to mitigate weaknesses?
- How might our team achieve more by matching activities and people by strengths?

How do Alliance coaches use Strengths?

Alliance coaches see value in using strengths ourselves and encourage our clients to do the same.

- We reflect on individual strengths when matching coaches to clients and when completing internal projects, building teams that have the range of requisite strengths
- We often Realise2 to stimulate self-awareness in a new coaching client
- We ask questions from our strengths, whether working together or with our clients
- We complete group peer supervision, drawing on the strengths of each member of the team in interpreting and offering observations
- We still stretch and challenge one another to build our capabilities in areas of weaknesses.

How might Strengths help my organisation?

Organisations which have incorporated Strengths thinking have reported:

- Improved results when recruitment is based on strengths rather than competencies
- More effective assignments of individuals and teams to roles and tasks
- Increases in output and effectiveness
- Better working relationships between individuals and within teams
- Greater level of energy and engagement, greater retention of talent.

How might I find out more?

This is just a 'taster' on Strengths. There is a wealth of books, articles and blogs about positive psychology and related topics. To keep this manageable, the references below are primarily about strengths, including tools and techniques.

Strengths Instruments

- Realise2 at www.cappeu.com/Realise2
- VIA character strengths at www.viacharacter.org
- Gallup StrengthsFinder™ at www.gallupstrengthscenter.com

Reading

- Reference²: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow*, Basic Books, 1997
- Alex Linley, *Average to A+: Realising Strengths in Yourself and Others*, CAPP Press, 2008
- Reference¹: Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, Nicholas Brealey, 2003

Articles / blogs / videos / websites

- Authentic Happiness website www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu
- Martin Seligman, *The New Era of Positive Psychology*, www.ted.com/talks/martin_seligman_on_the_state_of_psychology.html
- Marcie Schorr Hirsch and Therese S Kinal, 8 August 2012 http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2012/08/five_coaching_strengths.html

This 'topic taster' has been produced by The Alliance, a group of experienced coaches. Additional guides, support materials and case studies are available on our website. For further information contact info@alliancecoaching.co.uk or call 020 7794 5841 (www.alliancecoaching.co.uk).