

Can you see the
mailstream?

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Leading From Strengths



I have come out with a new product, The Truth About You. “Build on your strengths and manage around your weaknesses.” Probably something you’ve long believed. On some level all of you have long believed that, but isn’t it nice to have proof. Data: companies ask me to come in and study their best teams, when you study teams in the same company doing the same work, you find range in performance where you wouldn’t expect it. You find that a great company is a financial fiction derived from one’s stock price, but inside you find a huge range. World’s best retailer, if you pit local potential against profit, the more potential a store has, the more money it should make. Question is why is the talent bleeding the company, if you are in business, one of your key questions should be why do teams doing the same work massively outperform other teams? What’s going on? I don’t read anything about this. Another example: a big factory, all go through the same front gates, they promise you will be as healthy when you go home as when you walk in. Top 10% compared to bottom 10% on number of accidents, the top 10% had 0, and bottom 10% had 25.56% per year. Some teams will keep their promise and the others won’t. If you want to build a great company, all it is is a deliberate accumulation of lots and lots of great teams. We’ve got to know the difference in the company, what creates it?

So we asked the teams the same questions, and we would throw out any employee survey where there is no difference, and will keep the ones that sort performance, and it ends up that one question comes up. “At work do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?” When you can answer that, everything works better, your sense of mission and purpose is more powerful. I’m not saying it’s easy to build teams like that, and some are delusional about what they do best. It doesn’t matter, if people say they have a chance to do what they do best, even if they are delusional, those teams are more profitable, more performing, steal less, have less accidents and less likely to sue you. If you can say even dilutedly, “I have a chance to do best.” Sometimes you don’t get along with your manager, and you say to them, you deplete me, I walk out tiny every day, you shrink me. I wish you wouldn’t but you do. Sometimes you just don’t gel. It’s really hard to build a team where people are not trying. I know that because working for a company like Gallup, you wouldn’t have to sit around arguing, you can just go ask everybody.

We asked, “which do you think will help you be most successful? Leveraging your strengths or fixing weaknesses? 41% building on strengths, 59% fixing weaknesses survey results from US (2002). In Britain, the strengths was 38%, Canada, 38%, France 35%, all the way to China at 24%. It appeared that we lived in a remedial world, a world fascinated by weaknesses and tended to take strengths for granted. You want to study excellence, study failure and then flip it. Some of you are aware of these changes. Excellence has its own patent. You can’t infer healthy people by studying sick people. Good isn’t just the opposite of bad, it’s just different. Example: study unhappy marriages, although every unhappy marriage is unhappy in its own way, they all have one thing in common, people argue a lot. The happy marriages, the people argue just as much, it’s not the number of fights you have, it’s what goes in the space between the fights. Whatever that is, you learn nothing about it by studying a rotten marriage.

By far the most popular class in Harvard is called Introduction to Positive Psychology. The whole approach to family theory in New Zealand is strength space. How well are we doing with it in the work place, it’s the single most important performance driver in the workplace. Here’s where we are today: 45% building on strengths, and 55% fixing weaknesses. I thought there would be some difference between genders, now it’s disappeared. And in terms of generations, even over 60 people are still trying to fix their weaknesses. I thought GenY would be all strengthy, strengthy, they are the most stroked, but when we asked them (18-25) they were the most remedial of all, 31% strengths, and 69% were fixing weaknesses. They do believe they can be anything they want to be, they have been rewarded for participation and not performance. We’ve got a whole new generation who doesn’t understand what it takes to be productive, they are the most confused.

In 2000, the U.S. was the most strengths nation. Today, Australia, 46% strengths, and 54% weaknesses, UK 51% vs. 49%, India, 51% vs. 49%. China: 70% vs. 30%. And the GenY are more than this. They’ve shifted to how can I differentiate myself, some element and aspect of me that is slightly more refined or energetic than someone else. We’ve been asking this every 6 months for the last 3 years, this is reliable data. China is a different place than the U.S. America is characterized by fear and China by strengths. There is less celebration here. Now today, we have a different world than the world in China.

It’s not just asking what people believe, but what they do. What % of people spend most of the day playing to their strengths? Do we use the best of you. We know that’s the single most important driver of performance. This says most of the time. But people will say I don’t live in a strengthy world, but there will always be a part I don’t like. That leaves you vast time at work where you could fill it with some aspect of what you consider strengths to be.

What % of people spend most of the day playing to their strengths in U.S.

17% 2005, 14% 2006, 12% 2007, 13% jan 08, 14% sept 08. It’s lower in Britain and Canada, higher in India, lower in China, their thinking is more coherent. Here in the U.S. we talk about how we are using our human capital. There’s range, some companies are at 13-14%.

Across the U.S. this isn’t happening, how do we move that number? I don’t think we can speak to performance. Some of us are getting together tomorrow to get more into detail. Some say to change the people systems, the way we select, measure, promote, pay. I would start here with yourself. The airlines always say put your own oxygen mask on first.

The question is are you one of the 14%? If you aren't how did you get to be? The world doesn't care about your strengths but performance. Organizations are set up to drive performance, whether it's for profit or not for profit. It's not about learning about you. How do you put strengths to work deliberately? I would suggest that as adults, even though we act our way into a new way of thinking, we have to get our thinking straight on this. Start with 3 beliefs, the myths.

Myth #1: as you grow, your personality changes. 60% of us believe this to be true. Truth: as you grow you become more of who already are. Just go to a high school reunion. But you don't need to take a strength test, just have a child. You can see the personality trait of a child. They won't outgrow it and replace it, the challenge is to find a way to channel it. They can learn new skills and experience, so the way it shows up to the rest of us will change, but the core dominant parts will stay the same.

Myth #2: You will grow the most in your areas of greatest Weakness. Truth: You will grow most in your areas of greatest strength. We characterize our kids by the most F's. You go to your first performance appraisal and you'll get 2 minutes on what you did great and 58 minutes of areas of opportunity. We think you'll grow most there. You don't work on strengths, but yes you do when you want to win. Deal with weaknesses but don't glorify the word opportunity, these are areas of least opportunity. Example: Tiger Woods, his coaches said you are 63rd in sand saves but you are #1 in driving accuracy, we need to rebuild the swing and make it shorter and more reliable and more predictable so that under pressure it will hold up, your greatest area of opportunity is with your strengths. He was #1 in scoring average, greens regulation and 117 in sand saves, he got worse but it didn't matter, he didn't have to be excellent getting out of a bunker, because he was never in one.

Myth #3: A good team member does whatever it takes to help the team (60% believe this is true). Truth: A good team member deliberately volunteers his strengths to the team most of the time. Example: Warren Buffet donated to the Bill Gates foundation, and said it's because they do it better, and he said Philanthropy is no fun for me. Who says that? It takes self-assurance to stand up to the world and say that. He didn't say it was stupid work, he said he respected the goals of charity that they can't be trusted to a guy like me. We have to stand up and say who we are.

Here's a line on risk:

"And the day came when the risk it took to remain tight in the bud became greater than the risk it took to blossom." Anais Nin.
Benjamin Franklin called risk *"sundials in the shade."*

Hope I've helped you to shine a light to get your strengths to help the world.