



Positive Leadership

Chapter 4: Strengths-Based Leadership

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*“The purpose of life is to discover your gift.
The work of life is to develop it.
The meaning of life is to give your gift away.”*
– David Viscott

An Introduction to Strengths-Based Leadership

Modern leadership models are increasingly shifting from a deficit-based view of people (fixing weaknesses) to a strengths-based leadership approach that capitalizes on what individuals naturally do best. According to the Gallup¹ organization, strengths represent the “ability to consistently provide near-perfect performance in a specific activity, representing a developed talent².” For example, an employee with a strength in creativity will excel when tasked with innovative problem-solving, while someone with a strength in empathy might shine in community engagement roles. If we switched roles for these individuals, their effectiveness and engagement would decrease as a result.

Strengths-based leadership has its roots in positive psychology and Positive Organizational Scholarship.



Positive Organizational Scholarship argues that focusing on what is right with people – their talents and virtues – can produce extraordinary results in organizations.

In this model, the leader’s role is to maximize the collective strengths of the team; by knowing and leveraging their own strengths as well as those of their individual team members.

It is also important to note that adopting a strengths-based approach does not mean ignoring weaknesses; it is about where to prioritize our attention. Rather than focusing on what is wrong or not working, we spend more time figuring out how to capitalize on what is going well. This philosophy is often counterintuitive, as human beings tend to look at addressing problems and fixing problems rather than building on our successes. Our educational system is often highlighted as a major culprit of this philosophy, as parents/students often pay more attention to “C’s” than “A’s”.

¹ What Is the Difference Between a Talent and a Strength?, Clifton Strengths for Students.

² Although Gallup argues that everyone has a set of innate talents that have the capacity to become strengths, this only happens when we dedicate the time and energy into appropriately developing our talents. This is a perfect illustration of the expression “wasting our talent.” Regardless of how much natural ability we may possess, if we do not invest in this potential, we fail to reap the rewards.

The Business Case for Strengths-Based Leadership

Considerable research highlights the benefits of adopting a strengths-based approach at work. These benefits include:

1. Increased personal effectiveness

Research conducted by Zenger Folkman, a leading authority on 360-feedback, shows the profound power of strengths. Based on their data, when leaders showed no strengths, on average, they were rated in the 34th percentile of leadership effectiveness. However, their average effectiveness virtually doubled (up to 64%) by introducing a single strength. Their results also show that each additional strength provides a gain of 8-9% in overall effectiveness, up to a maximum of five strengths. At this point, we are in the 95th percentile of performance and the effectiveness scores level off, no matter how many additional strengths we develop.

2. Higher levels of employee engagement

Gallup's groundbreaking research has consistently found that when managers focus on employees' strengths, engagement soars. In one study, among employees who felt their supervisors focused on their strengths, only 1% were actively disengaged (essentially zero), while 61% were engaged, roughly double the national average. In contrast, when employees felt their strengths were ignored by their manager, active disengagement was 40% – a huge difference³.

Another Gallup analysis found that organizations with strengths-based management saw engagement ratios of 8:1 or higher (engaged vs. disengaged employees). In fact, one Gallup study of teams reported an astonishing 60:1 engaged-to-disengaged ratio under strengths-focused managers, compared to only 2:1 for teams whose managers focused on weaknesses⁴.

3. Lower turnover intentions

A 2022 study in China found that strengths-based leadership significantly lowered employees' desire to quit, in part because it increased employees' felt obligation to make positive changes in their organization⁵.

4. Increased productivity and performance

Gallup data also shows that simply helping employees identify their strengths can make them 7.8% more productive, and that teams that actively use their strengths every day achieve 12.5% greater productivity on average⁶. These findings have been echoed in independent research published in

³ Sorenson, Susan. How Employees' Strengths Make Your Company Stronger, Gallup.

⁴ Brim, Brian J. (2019). How a Focus on People's Strengths Increases Their Work Engagement, Gallup.

⁵ Chu X, Ding H, Zhang L, Li ZA (2022). Strengths-Based Leadership and Turnover Intention: The Roles of Felt Obligation for Constructive Change and Job Control, National Library of Medicine.

⁶ Sorenson, Susan, How Employees' Strengths Make Your Company Stronger, Gallup.

peer-reviewed studies. Wang et al. (2023) found that strengths-based leadership boosts employees' work engagement, which in turn leads to better task performance as rated by their supervisors⁷.

As a result of the mounting evidence, public sector organizations around the globe – from local governments to education and healthcare institutions – have begun to adopt strengths-based practices to improve their workplace culture and outcomes. For instance, the UK Civil Service now uses strengths-based interviews in hiring to ensure the right person to job fit⁸. This approach has also been lauded for its ability to attract neurodiverse talent to the public service⁹.

Practical Strategies for Strengths-Based Leadership

Given the power of strengths-based leadership, how can executives in the federal public service take meaningful steps to put this philosophy into practice? Here are some evidence-informed tips, tools, and techniques:

1. Identify strengths

Being aware of our own and others' strengths is the first step in leveraging them. Several assessment tools exist that provide detailed insight into one's strengths. Perhaps the most well known is Gallup's StrengthsFinder 2.0, which yields a personalized report detailing the individual's five signature strengths and provides customized tips for activities and opportunities to leverage these strengths within the workplace.

A free¹⁰, evidence-based alternative to the StrengthsFinder is available from the VIA Institute of Character,¹¹ which has been administered to well over twelve million people and provides an equally robust analysis of your strengths. Their reports provide a ranked order of twenty-four character strengths, which are categorized under six virtues. As with StrengthsFinder 2.0, the reports specifically highlight the respondent's top five strengths.

Team members can each generate their own report and share the results with one another. In contrast to sharing a performance review or another form of personality assessment, sharing strengths-based results is a very enjoyable and meaningful activity, as it celebrates what is right about each member of the team. Additional benefits of sharing strengths-based results include:

- Raising self-awareness on the individual and team levels
- Provides insight into how team members can best interact and work with one another
- Provides a common language through which team members can understand and communicate optimal working styles (in contrast to the use of ambiguous labels meant to talk about working style)

⁷ Wang, Jixin et al. (2022), Strengths-based leadership and employee work engagement: A multi-source study, *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*.

⁸ Government of UK, Cabinet Office (2020). Preparing for the Civil Service Work Strengths Test.

⁹ Global Government Forum (2021). How strengths-based recruitment helps civil services attract neurodiverse talent.

¹⁰ The VIA Character Strengths Survey, VIA Institute on Character.

¹¹ If you so choose, you can pay a premium to obtain more insights.

2. Engage in open dialogue about strengths and job fit

Although raising awareness about our strengths is a necessary first step, it is insufficient on its own. It is critical to have ongoing conversations with our team members about their individual strengths and how those align with their current role or projects. This can be achieved through regular one-on-one meetings or coaching sessions where the leader asks their employees to what extent their strengths are being utilized in their current roles, and how their strengths can be better utilized. The key is to listen and tailor opportunities to each person.

In practice, this might mean adjusting an employee's duties to give them more tasks that play to their strengths. For example, a policy analyst who is great at public speaking can be given more opportunities to present at stakeholder meetings and find workarounds or team support for areas that are not their strength. As the evidence above clearly suggests, these changes will boost both performance and engagement.

3. Align tasks and roles to individual strengths

Executives who follow a strengths-based approach continually look for ways to match people's strengths to the right assignments. Rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach or strictly adhering to job descriptions, they exercise flexibility in job design.

One powerful application of this practice is to create complementary project teams where one member's strengths compensate for another's gaps. For example, in a public health department, a leader might pair a data-oriented staffer with a relationship-oriented staffer to work together on a community health initiative, thus covering both analytical rigor and community engagement and allowing each person to shine in their domain.

Another key benefit of this approach is that reframes how weaknesses are handled. Instead of ignoring weaknesses, strengths-based leaders make weaknesses less relevant by redesigning roles or providing support, rather than obsessively trying to fix every weakness. This might mean, for instance, giving someone with poor budgeting skills (but excellent creative skills) a budgeting partner or automated tools, rather than removing them from a creative task where they excel.

4. Provide strengths-focused feedback and coaching

During many, if not most, professional development conversations, leaders tend to focus most of their attention on gaps or "areas of opportunity." Although positive results may be referenced in passing, development areas are examined under a powerful magnifying glass. This is especially true in performance conversations.

A common outcome of a performance review is an action plan. Not surprisingly, these often focus on the development areas, with the operating assumption that this will elevate performance in the future.

A powerful, strategic question becomes, “What would happen if we paid more attention to our strengths?”

Zenger Folkman decided to look more closely into the answer.¹² They divided a group of leaders who were developing an improvement plan into two categories. The first group solely looked at their weaknesses, while the second incorporated both strengths and weaknesses into their plan.

The group who focused solely on their weaknesses showed a 12% improvement in performance. Although this may seem promising, the group who included their strengths and weaknesses in their development plan had three times better performance than the group that solely focused on their weaknesses (36% improvement). This makes a compelling case for the importance of making sure strengths are not overlooked when we are looking for ways to get the best out of team members.

Additionally, feedback conversations should link the employee’s strengths to their achievements (e.g., “Your talent for organization really showed in how you managed that public meeting efficiently – consider applying it also to how we streamline our reporting process.”). This strengths-based approach reinforces a positive identity and motivates further growth.

5. Keep expanding your strengths

Once executives have identified and found ways to put their strengths into practice, it can be tempting to stop there. However, scientific and anecdotal evidence suggests the most effective individuals continually look for ways to expand their use of their strengths.

One practical way to do this is for executives to reflect on different ways to utilize their strengths within the frame of their current role and responsibilities. In addition, executives can look at areas where they struggle and determine how they might be able to bring their strengths to bear in those areas. The point is to not settle when we have discovered a routine. The key is to keep growing and evolving.

6. Use strengths to maximize resilience

An exciting application of strengths-based research is its application to fostering resilience. In fact, one of the most empirically supported resilience-building exercises incorporates the concept of strengths.

Practical exercise:

1. Think of a challenging situation in the past that you felt was impossible to overcome.

It could have been three weeks, three months, or even three years ago. After you have identified this situation,

¹² Zenger, Jack (2019). Developing Strengths or Weaknesses, Zenger Folkman.

2. What strengths did you draw on to successfully overcome it?

This question draws your attention to the internal resources – your strengths – that support you and are especially important during times of challenge. By drawing attention to your strengths, you can think about the extent to which they apply to your current situation. If they don't, what other strengths do you possess that could also be relevant?

3. What resources did you access to successfully overcome it?

This question focuses on your external resources. Additional prompting questions you can ask include: did you take a course or webinar? Read a book? Speak with a mentor, colleague, or family member? Just as you did with the first question, examine whether these same sources of support are relevant to your current predicament. If not, can you follow the same process you used so effectively last time?

4. What did you learn about yourself?

This last question is also very important. The key lesson you learned is that [you have what it takes to overcome exceptional adversity](#). Remember the setup to this exercise: think about a time when you were facing a situation you felt was impossible and that you successfully overcame. If you faced a so-called impossible situation before and lived to tell the tale, why not now?

Although this reflection exercise is valuable on an individual level, the best executives use it when coaching members of their team through difficult periods or assignments. For example, if a direct report comes into your office expressing high levels of frustration and anxiety about a situation they view as almost impossible, you can use this approach to coach them through it by asking these three questions sequentially.

7. Engage in team-based exercises for strength building

Dr. Kim Cameron, co-founder of the Center for Positive Organizations at the University of Michigan, created an excellent team building strengths-based exercise. Here's how it works:

Give each member of your team a set of blank index cards that totals the number of people on your team minus one. If the group has ten people, for example, each person should have nine cards.

Then, the person writes a different name in the upper right-hand corner of each card, such that there is one card per team member. On one side of each card, have the employee write down the strengths of the individual named on the card. Then on the back, have the employee write down all of the strengths the named person possesses that are unrealized—the ones that he or she may not even see and could start using right away.

Once filled out, each person in the group collects their own cards and writes two paragraphs—one being a summary of what they learned about their observed strengths, and the other about how they could be contributing through their unrealized strengths.

Have everyone come back together and share their two paragraphs with the group and have each team member commit to using their strengths to the betterment of the team. It's a very powerful and motivating exercise.

Values-Based Leadership: A New Lens for Talent, Trust, and Transformation

As senior leaders in the federal public service, your most important asset isn't your title, mandate, or even your years of experience – it's your ability to see and activate the strengths of those around you.



Key takeaway: Strengths-based leadership is not about ignoring what's broken. It's about choosing to lead from what's best. It means recognizing that people are at their most innovative, resilient, and committed when they are encouraged to bring their unique capabilities to the table.

When you create the conditions for individuals and teams to operate in their zone of strength, you not only elevate performance – you foster a culture of trust, engagement, and purpose. The invitation here is simple but profound: [shift the lens](#). Focus less on fixing deficits and more on amplifying potential. Your team – and the people of Canada that you serve – deserve nothing less.

For more resources on Positive Leadership, access the full [APEX Positive Leadership Toolkit](#).