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The Strengths to Confront Tough Times

Why the strengths-based approach is more relevant than ever

BY BRIAN J. BRIM AND HEATHER WRIGHT

Almost every day, we hear about another company cutting workers, another friend looking for a job, another industry in turmoil. In this economy, it seems the best that employees can do is hold on -- and the best that companies can do is soldier through. We should all just be grateful to have a job under these circumstances and consider everything else extraneous. Right?

A focus on maximizing talents helps people produce more, execute more effectively, and generate higher levels of engagement for themselves and customers.

The problem with that point of view is that when companies are scared, as many are right now, they may deem the wrong things to be extraneous. A focus on operational essentials makes sense until it overlooks people -- their strengths, their talents, and their individual capacity for contribution. This can hinder a company in an already difficult time. Even worse, it can stifle a company's energy at the source.

A strengths-based approach is vital in tough times because it can create hope, opens the doors to untapped potential, and brings out the best in people and in companies. A focus on maximizing talents can help people produce more, execute more effectively, and generate higher levels of engagement for themselves and customers. It can make companies better, stronger, and more profitable.

That's more important now than ever before -- and that's why it's crucial for organizations to be diligent and ensure they don't experience "sizzle and fizzle." Organizations that are working toward becoming strengths based cannot afford to let this approach fizzle. Instead, they should keep it sizzling by continuing to invest in their employees.

This article provides a framework for maintaining strengths momentum. That way, in good times and in bad, companies can rely on their people to bring the best of who they are to the workplace each day -- and that can be a competitive advantage for organizations regardless of the economy.

This framework highlights three elements necessary to effectively make the most of one's talents -- *insight, application, and meaningful impact*. We refer to this as the "I AM framework," and it's more than an acronym. I AM means "I am maximizing my strengths every day." I AM means "I am tapping into my natural potential, and because of this, I am more productive, I am executing more effectively, and I am engaging myself and my customers."

In this article, we'll show examples from real company successes that explore the three phases of this model. We'll also provide ideas for how people can connect to their greatest talents -- and stay connected to them -- to move forward and better their company and their careers.

Insight

The first step in strengths development often comes from the Clifton StrengthsFinder, an assessment tool that rank orders an individual's top 34 themes of talent -- the ways he or she most often thinks, behaves, or feels. In the early stages of strengths

development, shortly after people receive their StrengthsFinder results, we ask them to focus on what we call their Signature Themes, or their five most predominant themes. The Insight phase starts with the person's initial reaction to his or her Signature Themes.

Take Mike, a company vice president with whom we have worked, for example. He was a little hesitant about taking StrengthsFinder; in fact, he was frankly suspicious that it was akin to a horoscope. "You can tell just by looking at me that I'm a Type A," he said, "so I don't see what this thing can show me that I don't already know." We told him that we understood his concern, but the point of StrengthsFinder is to develop a deeper appreciation of his talents and how they can be productively applied -- it's not just a laundry list of his broad characteristics, as he feared.

Mike took the assessment, and his reaction to his results was typical. "This is so me," he said. "I got goose bumps as I read my report, because it's so dead on. And I can tell you, I never ever thought Harmony was a strength," he remarked about the talent theme that encourages people to look for areas of agreement and build consensus. What Mike told us is par for the course for how people react when they take the assessment.

What's also quite common is the positive energy that StrengthsFinder generates. An executive once told us that the strengths "buzz" around the organization was so strong and so positive that moving in any other direction down the strengths path would cause an uproar. That kind of energy is incredibly valuable, and it's important to build on it. If we don't, that's when momentum begins to fizzle. It's also why the insight step is so important: It helps us, as individuals, to name our greatest talents and to claim why they are valuable.

A first step in understanding a new discipline is learning its language -- and that starts with mastering the vocabulary. StrengthsFinder uses 34 words to reflect and explain the major patterns of human talent. A team that knows this language can share an understanding of and develop an appreciation for the variety of talents on the team. So, for example, they can all use the word *Woo* -- short for "winning others over" -- to describe an outgoing person like Charles, who always talks them into having lunch at the restaurant he prefers. (And they always appreciate his *Woo* when their free dessert arrives because he has befriended and charmed the waiter.)

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In many languages, an accent, intonation, or inflection changes the sound of words. The language of strengths accommodates, in fact *appreciates*, this type of variation.

Although two people may have the same set of Signature Themes -- it's rare, but it does happen -- the strengths language gains depth and nuance when people share their own views about their talents to those around them. As they read their StrengthsFinder reports and identify the words or phrases that resonate with them the most, they are able to personalize and claim ownership for the aspects of the theme that are most "them." This allows them to share a more personal version of their talents with others. It also allows them to "own" their talents while also helping others understand them at a deeper level.

Application

As people gain a deeper understanding about their talents, they can become more intentional in how they apply them. That's also how they begin to leverage their talents more fully. The first step is to take a little time and list their critical activities, both personal and professional. Then they need to study how each of their talents helps them accomplish that task or outcome. That's how people can translate insight into action.

Let's look at Anne, a human resources director at a national retailer, for example. Anne's company had decided to take a strengths-based approach to developing and engaging its employees, and Anne had taken intensive training to learn how to use this approach with the store managers in her region. She looked at her Signature Themes -- Strategic, Relator, Responsibility, Achiever, and Maximizer -- and considered how to apply who she was to the challenges she faced.

First, Anne thought about how talents are inherently personal, and she realized that making deeper connections with each manager would be important. She knew that she could use her Strategic and Relator talents to explore the possible strategies she could pursue to build relationships with managers and to make those relationships deeper and more successful. In typical Maximizer fashion, she also considered how to make the most of the time, energy, and effort that she would have with each manager.

Anne then considered what would motivate her and how she could motivate the people she would be working with. Her Responsibility and Achiever talents were driving her to make sure that she followed through on the promises she had made to these managers about the goals they would accomplish together.

We met with Anne several times and watched as she expanded her focus from helping managers accomplish their tasks to helping each person she worked with to learn and grow. This shift came as Anne moved to viewing herself as a developer of each person she worked with, not someone simply pushing employees to increase their productivity. It also freed the managers to find the best ways to apply their own talents. In the end, because Anne studied her own talents so closely and considered how to best apply those talents, she not only became more effective, she also gained as much energy and insight as her managers did.

Anne could have stopped short of this realization, but sustainable growth doesn't come from just recognizing a talent -- it comes from finding a productive way to apply that talent. This can only happen when individuals are aware of how to apply their talents and how their talents can be of value to others. When people gain a deeper understanding of their own talents, they often realize why others seek them out in specific situations. The ultimate goal of a strengths-based approach is to leverage each person's greatest talents in a manner that boosts not only their personal performance but also the overall performance of the organization.

When we realize that the ways in which we think, organize, or build relationships are unique, we can begin to own our responsibility for helping others benefit from our perspective. As we will see below, Anne discovered that she had something special to offer Olivia, a manager she worked with -- and the result was meaningful impact.

Meaningful Impact

Meaningful impact is the culmination of the insight and application phases, and it's also how we keep the "sizzle" of strengths going. For Anne, meaningful impact was achieved in supporting Olivia -- a store manager with a challenging location -- during a time of an economic downturn. Olivia's store had a client-focused environment, but its traffic was

dwindling, which left her staff wondering how they could hit their sales goals. Anne recognized that she could help Olivia find a strategic solution to her dilemma by tapping into Olivia's Woo, Maximizer, Input, Ideation, and Competition.

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Anne knew that Olivia had great relationships in the community, undoubtedly forged with her Woo talents. It also was very important for Olivia -- who had Competition as a Signature Theme -- to lead her team to a win. Anne asked Olivia to think about her best clients. Who were they, and how could her store grow its business with those shoppers? That question activated Olivia's Ideation and Input themes. So, when a client mentioned that a local marketing firm was changing its dress code to business casual, Olivia recognized a perfect opportunity.

Olivia and her store associates hosted an exclusive event for the marketing firm; a highlight was an in-store fashion show that demonstrated how to mix and match clothing pieces to create more wardrobe options. The store offered special discounts to the firm that also increased with the customer's level of spending. Olivia arranged to use a conference room at the client site to display wardrobe ideas that the company had approved as business casual. The event was a huge success, and in the next few months, Olivia's store saw a significant upturn in traffic from the firm as clients sought to build their wardrobe and use the expertise of Olivia's staff.

Energized by their success, Olivia and her team looked for other opportunities to grow their influence with existing clients -- and to use their talents. Several of the store's clients -- and even a few employees -- were students from two local colleges with exceptional teaching degree programs. As the new school year kicked off, Olivia reached out to other retail managers in her shopping center to collaborate with her on an event celebrating teachers. The group gave discounts to teachers and students pursuing education degrees to help them dress for success and comfort in their classrooms. A local orchard even donated baskets of apples that were used as decorations and treats.

The event drove in great traffic, and Olivia was thrilled to report that her store tripled its sales for that month - another boost for her Competition theme. Even better, Olivia and her team had capitalized on the opportunity not only to make a one-time sale in these situations but also to establish relationships that would encourage customers to return to their store. In a time when many people were pulling back on purchasing, Olivia and her team found a way to demonstrate that they could help customers stretch their dollars further while receiving education that would help them make the most of their purchases. This creative, innovative approach, inspired by Ideation and Input, led Olivia and her team to win their company's award for outstanding performance in the third quarter last year.

Anne, Olivia, and the store team were successful because they understood their talents and leveraged them to achieve their performance goals. No, there's not a "fashion store" theme, but using talents tends to make people more enthusiastic, energetic, and creative -- and those are the qualities that drove the store's victories in a down economy. And that brings us squarely back to our original premise: In tough times like these, talents are not superfluous. They're essential. Employees who work from their greatest talents work harder, smarter, and create more impact than employees who don't. And now more than ever, every business needs the meaningful impact of talented employees.

The definition of what constitutes meaningful impact will be determined by each person's specific situation. For an engineer, it might be exceeding expectations on a deadline tied to an important project; a doctor might create impact by helping a patient shorten her recovery time; a teacher might stay with her school because she discovered a new way to use her talents to help her students learn. Meaningful impact could come from a more effective alignment of two parts of an organization -- or from a better alignment of two team members who previously couldn't see eye to eye. Depending on the workplace, meaningful impact could be measured through higher sales, stronger employee and customer engagement, higher productivity, better safety, or better execution.

Meaningful impact is about understanding who we are and our talents -- and how we can best apply them at work and in our lives. It comes from getting people to set their sights on what matters, and then applying the best of who they are to those challenges. It also comes from helping people understand why they matter -- and how their talents can make a difference.

Ultimately, meaningful impact is the way we feel when we use the best, truest part of ourselves every day. It is the result of talented people saying, "I AM," and knowing their companies are better for it. Meaningful impact is strength -- and what organization can't use more of that these days?

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