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STRENGTHS-BASED HPI: A WIN-WIN FOR ALL

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PERFORMANCE CONSULTING

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What are you good at?”
At some point in our lives, we’ve been asked this question by teachers, family, friends, job recruiters, and others.

For some people, it’s an easy question to answer. These people know themselves so well that they can reel off a list of things they’re good at—or even great at—without much trouble.

For others, it can be a challenge. Perhaps these people are being too humble. Or maybe, just maybe, they haven’t thought about it enough to really know what they’re good at or what makes them stand out.

But to differentiate ourselves at work, and for our organizations to best utilize our talents, we all need to understand what it is that makes us stand out: What are we good at? And, taking this one step further, how can we get even better in those areas? In other words, how can we tap into strengths-based human performance improvement (HPI)?

As talent development professionals, we can help managers work with their direct reports to ensure that strengths are recognized and developed. We also can work with the L&D team to ensure that appropriate resources are available for employees (and their managers) for that development. Finally, we can serve as a bridge to make sure employee strengths are aligned with the organization’s needs, goals, and vision.

In this issue of *TD at Work*, we’ll discuss:

- what strengths-based HPI is, and the challenges to implementing it

- why and how strengths-based HPI works
- how to implement it in your organization.

WHAT IS STRENGTHS-BASED HPI?

Strengths-based HPI focuses on how managers and employees can help answer the question, “What are you good at?” When those strengths are identified, decisions can be made to further enhance the strengths through learning programs, hands-on experience, mentoring, and other initiatives.

In practice, employers focus on the strengths of their employees as part of their ongoing growth and development. It sounds simple, but in reality, this work takes, well, *work*.

Strengths-based HPI is less about closing skills gaps (although that’s important, too) and more about creating conditions so people can thrive based on the unique gifts they bring to the organization. Strengths-based HPI also helps enable employees to work with other people or teams with different skills so that each one is playing to their strengths and supporting gaps others may have.

To put it simply, strengths-based HPI concentrates on finding:

- where employees excel
- how employees can get better
- ways employees can apply those strengths and skills on the job.

TAPPING STRENGTHS: IN PRACTICE

Art Fry, inventor of the Post-it note, developed the worldwide office tool as an employee of 3M. It was 3M’s policy to allow employees to spend 15 percent of their time on projects of their choosing that gave Fry his opportunity.

As a church choir member, Fry used little slips of paper to mark places in his hymnal. But when he opened it, the slips would move around. Legend has it that Fry considered his dilemma and thought of a fellow 3M colleague’s invention: a low-tack, pressure-sensitive adhesive.

Thanks to 3M’s practice of letting employees work to their strengths on projects that interested them, Fry was able to develop his invention. The rest is history!

Adapted from NPR (2014).

Strengths-Based HPI Isn't Easy

There are plenty of challenges to a proper implementation of the strengths-based approach, and one of the largest is lack of communication between managers and employees. Many of you are nodding along as you read this, knowing your organization's teams. Later in this issue of *TD at Work*, you'll learn the best ways to help your managers plan, prepare, and hold one-on-one meetings to improve that communication. We'll also look at some great tips to help managers coach their employees to develop their strengths.

Of course, a lot of strengths-finding goes beyond manager-to-employee communication. We have to consider employees' personal motivations, and there are time management issues, too. But it's important to look at our strengths-finding initiatives—because business results are at stake.

But the Strengths-Based Approach Works

We've probably all heard someone call another person a “natural.” When we hear—or say—this phrase, we mean that the person has a natural talent for something, such as a gift for sport, musical ability, or some sort of technical acumen. Here's a bit of great news: The employees in your organization are naturals, too.

The catch? We may, unfortunately, not know what the employee's natural gift is. The HR department may not know. Managers may not know. Even the employee may not know.

The strengths-based approach turns learning and development on its head. A strengths-based focus asks that managers seek out their employees' natural talents and then find ways to complement them through more training, skill building, and targeted development.

Strengthening what we excel at and then applying those skills to our jobs leads to increased productivity and innovation. When Gallup studied business units across multiple industries, the organization discovered that business units with managers who were on the receiving end of feedback boasted nearly 9 percent greater profitability after receiving that feedback compared with other nonfeedback

managers (Asplund and Blacksmith 2011). In another Gallup study of 1.2 million workers across seven industries in 45 countries, companies that implemented strengths-based development saw up to a 19 percent increase in sales, up to 59 percent fewer safety incidents, and up to a 15 percent increase in employee engagement (Rigoni and Asplund 2016b).

Further Gallup research shows that employees who rock their strengths are usually better performers. A study of more than 65,000 employees found that those who received feedback on what they were good at (their strengths) had turnover rates that were nearly 15 percent lower than that of employees who received zero feedback (Asplund and Blacksmith 2011).

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WHAT ABOUT OUR WEAKNESSES?

Before we discuss all the fabulous bits and pieces of the strengths-based approach, let's stop for a moment to ask a quick question: “What about our weaknesses?” After all, we are imperfect human creatures.

Along with our strengths (Sarah is amazing with customers! Rodrick writes great copy!), we also have baggage. Our presentations suffer from a serious case of boring-itis. One person's spreadsheets are a disaster. Another colleague's strategic skills are lacking. Our ability to complete a task well borders on the mediocre. As we all know, there's a lot that could be much, much better.

So, take a moment to consider this question: What are your weaknesses? Faced with a list of deficiencies, shouldn't we all scurry to

development classes to fix what's wrong, not embrace what's already awesome? This is a great point and one that's important to address.

Of course, the development of strengths should never be used as a circumvention of developing other skills and abilities. An example of that would be a person who has always harbored a fear of speaking in public. It would be easy for this employee and her manager to say, "Ellen's strengths lie elsewhere. It's no use developing her public-speaking skills." That would be the wrong approach; perhaps Ellen has never benefited from any training in public speaking. Or maybe she had a traumatic experience delivering a speech early in her career. Whatever the case, strengthening Ellen's skills in presenting material will help her career in innumerable ways.

Using Ellen once more, it's important not to shy away from helping her develop crucial business skills such as presenting information to others with confidence. But helping Ellen develop her strengths is a different twist on the matter. When employees have a natural talent, they are often more naturally inclined to pursue that talent with excellence. Put another way, when our employees are good at something, their attitude is more positive than someone else who may perform the task with less natural ability.

THE EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT CONNECTION

It's no secret that most organizations are searching high and low for better employee engagement scores. They can't be faked, and for most companies, the scores are dismal. According to Saba Software's 2017 *State of Employee Engagement Report*, nearly two-thirds of employees don't believe they have an effective platform to engage with the business and share their input. Just 22 percent of employees say their organizations are very effective in providing easy access to training and development. And only 57 percent of employees believe their organizations are competent in their ability to find, retain, and develop their employees. That's a real problem.

The benefits of employee engagement read like a talent development pro's dreams. They include increases in everything: profitability, employee retention, productivity, and innovation; as well as happier employees, better communication, and deeper company loyalty. With that wish list, who wouldn't want better employee engagement?

Employee engagement can be increased through discovering and building on employee strengths.

THE MANAGER'S ROLE IN STRENGTHS-BASED HPI

As mentioned earlier, an important part of the strengths-based approach involves effective communication between employee and manager. As a talent development practitioner, you can help managers by facilitating the asking of questions, encouraging managers to give employees tools—and time—for self-reflection, providing guidance for one-on-one meetings and coaching, and giving managers tools for informal learning.

Let's take a look at these more closely, including how they can play out in an organization.

Why the Manager Connection

For organizations searching for better employee engagement, most should consider the strengths-based approach. Research has found that nearly seven in 10 employees who strongly agree that their managers emphasize their strengths or positive characteristics are engaged at work. On the other hand, a scant 2 percent of employees who strongly disagree that their managers emphasize their strengths are engaged (Rigoni and Asplund 2016c).

Employee research by Plasticity Labs shows that employees who recognize and value their managers are more satisfied with their jobs and more engaged. They're also more "dedicated, energetic, captivated by their work, grateful and happier" (Buote n.d.).

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