



GIVE ME **STRENGTH**

Does strength-based leadership coaching
enhance leadership effectiveness?

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by DR DOUG MACKIE

Strength-based approaches in leadership development are increasingly popular among leaders and practitioners alike, but the evidence base for this approach lags behind the enthusiasm. Interest in positive forms of leadership development, including strength-based leadership coaching, is growing but what exactly is it, does it work, and how do practitioners develop capacity in this area?

Strength-based approaches have evolved from the positive psychology movement that reshaped applied psychology at the beginning of the millennium, when clinical psychology was accused of spending too much time and focus on what was broken and dysfunctional rather than what made people flourish and excel. Consequently, positive psychology developed to address

exactly those questions. Perhaps because HR and organisational psychology did not show the same negative bias, positive psychology has been slower to infiltrate the world of work. However, that is changing now with many executive and leadership coaches identifying with a strength-based approach and applying this in their practice.

Broadly there seem to be two strength-based approach methods emerging. Firstly the 'identify and use' approach involves an identification focus that employs an assessment process to identify what the coachee reports as their top strengths (the VIA, Gallup Strengthfinder and Realise2 are commonly used). The coachee is then encouraged to leverage these strengths in a variety of environments. Implicit in this approach is the assumption that strengths are traits (character strengths and virtues,

personality variables) and that these are fairly consistent across time and situations, hence it really is a case of applying these talents more in differing contexts.

An alternative approach is the concept of 'strengths development' that involves more of a developmental focus. Here strengths are still identified through a psychometric or interview process that reviews peak experiences, but then considers exactly how these strengths can be amplified without becoming derailleurs. The process examines how they interact with other strengths, how strengths are aligned with the goals of the business and how they are best applied in a variety of contexts and systems. Implicit in this approach is that strengths are states that can be developed and enhanced as a result of coaching. Readiness for change and developmental readiness as a leader are good

examples of such potential strengths. The development of strengths is now being connected with leadership theory, including authentic leadership, and gives practitioners a solid theoretical foundation for their leadership development practice.

So does strength-based coaching actually work? We know from several meta-analytic studies that leadership development programs do provide positive outcomes but there is a significant variation in their effectiveness depending on which models, theories and approaches are utilised. Equally, the evidence for the effectiveness of executive coaching at work is growing (and coaching often utilises constructs from positive psychology and strength-based approaches with its focus on the affirmative bias, goal attainment and individualised professional development).

However, there are no published studies yet that have combined an explicit strength-based methodology into a coaching format and evaluated its impact with objective and leadership-orientated outcome criteria. Consequently I set up my own research project to address this question. Strengths-based research is challenging as there is no agreed definition of strengths. However, all approaches make the assumption that inherent talent plus deliberate practice equals strength to some degree. The construct validity of strengths is questionable and there is significant overlap with personality traits, competencies and virtues.

For the purposes of our strength-based research, we took the top two layers of management in a large not-for-profit international organisation (37 leaders in total) and used a quasi-experimental waitlist control design to divide them into coaching-first and waitlist-first groups. Each coachee received six sessions of strength-based leadership coaching from a highly experienced coach. The coaching included an assessment and a strengths-development phase. The coaching was manualised to encourage adherence to

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the strength-based protocol and encouraged participants not just to raise awareness of their strengths but also to consider how aligned their strengths were with the business goals, how much they utilised their strengths, and in what context. We used the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ360), a 360-degree feedback instrument based on the full-range leadership model. Each participant had an average of 10 raters score them on their leadership style before coaching, after coaching and at follow up. This was important as the majority of coaching research relies on subjective self-assessment in assessing outcomes and this is prone to bias.

The results were unequivocal. Coachees showed a highly significant increase in transformational leadership behaviours following the coaching intervention when compared to the control group. Their peers, direct reports and, in particular, their line managers all saw a significant improvement in their transformational leadership behaviours and leadership outcomes (effectiveness, satisfaction and extra effort). Moreover adherence to the strength-based protocol was significantly correlated with increases in transformational leadership behaviour, suggesting that the protocol was a significant factor in their improvement. This is one of the first studies to show convincing

evidence of significant changes in leadership behaviour beyond self-report in an organisational context after leadership coaching using a structured methodology.

This is an exciting finding, which indicates that six sessions of strength-based coaching over a relatively short period of time, in what was already a high-performing cohort, can significantly increase transformational leadership behaviour, even in a challenging and highly complex environment. The return on investment for the organisation was significant at 825 per cent, calculated by multiplying the leadership benefits by the mean salary of participants, by the amount of change attributable to coaching and dividing by the total cost of the intervention. This figure assumed only individual impact, whereas we know team members were also affected positively so it's an underestimate.

So how does the strengths-orientated coaching practitioner improve their capability in this area? My own view is that it is unlikely that there will be a definitive strengths-based psychometric any time soon, largely given the challenges of defining strengths in a meaningfully distinctive way from competencies or traits, and because test manufacturers are not producing tools that can be used in research. I think assessment will be multi-modal (interview, feedback etc) and the emphasis needs to be on development.

The art of strengths-based coaching is in the debrief and subsequent development of the strengths that are identified. Working through with the coachee on how to measure and adjust their strengths, align them with organisational goals and pair them with complementary strengths in themselves or others is likely to lead to a much more balanced, nuanced and productive process, which will build positive leadership capability in the coachee and their organisation. **HRm**
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