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14

'Choose a Job You Love, and You Will Never Have to Work a Day in your Life'

A Strengths-based Leadership Approach to Optimal Functioning at Work

Philippe Dubreuil and Jacques Forest

Positive Psychology and the Strengths Movement

Positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) is the scientific study of positive subjective experiences and individual traits (at the person level), and civic virtue as well as positive institutions (at the group level), for the purpose of decreasing negative experiences (e.g., depression, negative emotions) and increasing positive experiences (e.g., states of flow, positive emotions and optimal functioning). The application of positive psychology in the workplace, which is named either positive organizational scholarship (Cameron, Dutton & Quinn, 2003) or positive organizational behaviour (Luthans, 2002), is the scientific effort to find an answer to the question 'How can people's work make their life most worth living?' (Forest, 2004).

Work is a sphere of life where we spend almost half of our waking time (Vallerand & Houlfort, 2003), and it is a worthy endeavour to make sure that this daily period, sustained every weekday for several decades, is mainly positive and productive. In positive psychology, there is a general agreement that well-being can (broadly) be outlined on five different levels, namely positive emotions (experiencing happiness and life satisfaction), engagement (being deeply involved and absorbed in one's actions), positive relations (cultivating positive and meaningful relationships), meaning (belonging to or serving something that you believe is greater than yourself) and accomplishment (pursuing achievement and mastery for their own sakes). These together are also known as the PERMA model of well-being (Seligman, 2011).

Be it in work or general life, one main way to achieve well-being and optimal functioning through increased positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment is to identify and use one's personal strengths (Seligman, 2011). In this chapter, we will outline how leaders can use their own strengths and optimize their followers' strengths to ensure a healthy and productive workplace. We will first present a brief explanation of the strengths movement and its three main schools of thoughts, in order to clearly define the concept of 'strength' and to provide a general overview of the main research results in the

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field. Then, we will redirect our focus onto an applied perspective and discuss how leaders can identify strengths, their own or their subordinates', and increase their daily use in the workplace. Lastly, we will describe some of the main managerial practices that can be implemented by leaders to support the development of a strengths-based culture among their teams.

Three Streams of Research on Strengths

We can confidently say that in the scientific literature there are three main sources of thought and research on strengths: (1) the Gallup Organization, (2) the Positive Psychology Center (PPC) and (3) the Centre of Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP). While each source has its own specificities, they also share some significant similarities, as they influenced each other during their development process.

The Gallup Organization

The Gallup Organization's strengths model is based on Donald Clifton's original work in which he and his collaborators interviewed, over a period spanning almost 30 years, more than 2,000,000 individuals in search of excellence patterns (Asplund, Lopez, Hodges & Harter, 2007). Their view is that high-performance individuals have talents, which are further developed or emancipated through the use of knowledge (facts, information, education, etc.) and skills (steps of a process, technical abilities, etc.). These three elements combined (talents, knowledge and skills) create a strength, which is ultimately defined as 'the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in an activity' (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001, p. 25). Using their large database of millions of interviews, Clifton and his collaborators at the Gallup Organization were able to isolate, define and measure 34 specific (what they called) themes of talents (see Box 14.1).

Research using this conceptualization has led to many applications at the individual (e.g., coaching), group (e.g., team development) and organizational (e.g., career management, training, and performance evaluation) levels, as described in their popular books *First, Break All the Rules* (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999), *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001), *Go Put Your Strengths to Work* (Buckingham, 2007) and *Strengths-based Leadership* (Rath & Conchie, 2009). Subsequent research on strengths also showed that talent identification and strengths development initiatives in the workplace were associated with increases in employee engagement, customer satisfaction, profit and productivity, as well as decreases in turnover and safety incidents (Asplund & Blacksmith, 2012; Clifton & Harter, 2003; Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002; Hodges & Asplund, 2010). Thus, there is evidence, with this conceptualization, that developing one's strengths at work leads not only to personal benefits (more engagement, competence and performance) but also to organizational benefits (profits). Leaders or persons in leadership positions are thus well advised, in order to have a performing and healthy workforce, to identify and use their strengths and their employees' strengths.

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The Positive Psychology Center

The Positive Psychology Center's (PPC) strengths model is part of the birth of the positive psychology movement, in 1999, under the impetus of the then APA president Martin Seligman. With private funding and the help of 55 well-known researchers, it was decided to create an 'Anti DSM-V (diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders)', or what they called a manual of the sanities. This thorough process involved brainstorming sessions with partners, consultations at international congresses and an exhaustive literature review of scientific, philosophical and religious writings. This extensive review process generated a long list of potential candidates as strengths, which was narrowed down to 24 'character strengths' using ten discriminant criteria (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Examples of such criteria are that a strength must contribute to fulfilment and self-actualization (using this strength leads to satisfaction and well-being), must be ubiquitous (it is recognized and celebrated across cultures) and must be valued by institutions and organizations.

In this conceptualization, strengths are 'the psychological ingredients – processes or mechanisms – that define the virtues' (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 13), and the 24 strengths are separated into six broad virtues (see Box 14.1), namely (1) wisdom and knowledge (5 strengths), (2) courage (4 strengths), (3) humanity (3 strengths), (4) justice (3 strengths), (5) temperance (4 strengths) and (6) transcendence (5 strengths). Research allowed the verification of the fact that these character strengths are recognized and valued universally in the world (Biswas-Diener, 2006; Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2006), while there have been efforts to study strengths' presence and distribution at different ages (e.g., children, teenagers, adults) (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Steen, Kachorek & Peterson, 2003), in different populations (e.g., military, work) (Peterson, Stephens, Park, Lee & Seligman, 2010; Reivich, Seligman & McBride, 2011), in different cities (e.g., in the USA) (Park & Peterson, 2010) and in multiple countries (Linley et al., 2007; Park et al., 2006). Research on character strengths has also demonstrated that the identification and use of strengths can not only increase happiness in general life, but also decrease depressive symptoms (Gander, Proyer, Ruch & Wyss 2013; Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005) and, in the work context, increase well-being (Forest et al., 2012) and performance (Dubreuil et al., 2016). This second stream of research again emphasize the importance, at all levels (employees, leaders, organizations), of knowing and using everyone's strengths.

The Centre of Applied Positive Psychology

This British centre is led by psychologist Alex Linley and his team and has a research programme on strengths but also a strong inclination towards applied interventions (as its name implies). The Centre of Applied Positive Psychology's (CAPP) strengths model was forged through discussions, research and interventions with their expert staff (Linley & Dovey, 2015). For them, a strength is 'a pre-existing capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking or feeling that is authentic and energizing to the user, and enables optimal functioning, development and performance' (Linley, 2008). A strength is thus a trait that is natural (it seems always to have been there, it feels natural and authentic), energizing

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(it makes the person feel particularly 'alive') and leads to tangible results (performance, proactivity, development, adaptation, etc.).

The CAPP classification of 60 strengths (see Box 14.1) is not categorized by themes of virtues, but rather placed in four different possible scenarios when you fill in their questionnaire: (1) realized strengths (you use your strengths, you perform well and you should have a higher use of these), (2) unrealized strengths (you perform well while using these strengths but you underuse them), (3) learned behaviours (you perform adequately while using these strengths but it is de-energizing to do so and you should moderate their use), (4) weaknesses (you perform poorly with these, it is de-energizing to do so and you should minimize their use).

According to this intervention model, the goal is to marshal the use of realized strengths, maximize unrealized strengths, moderate learned behaviours and minimize weaknesses. These actions can be initiated by individuals but will be more impactful and thorough if done by persons in a leadership or influence role, hence the importance of strengths identification and its use as a management tool for optimal functioning. Using this general template, their research has shown that strengths use leads to greater well-being, vitality, confidence and self-esteem (Govindji & Linley, 2007; Proctor, Maltby & Linley, 2011; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Kashdan & Hurling, 2011). They also provided the scientific and practitioners' communities with numerous publications of tools and intervention models mainly rooted in their consulting practice (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Linley, 2008; Linley, Harrington & Garcea, 2010).

Strengths Identification

As stated earlier, we now turn to a more applied perspective and will first examine how leaders can identify strengths, be it their own or their subordinates', as this is the first step in any strengths development initiative. In this regard, a wide array of methods are available to help individuals identify their main areas of strengths, and the most common methods used by scientists and human resources professionals will be described in the following lines as they will be useful for leaders. That is, the use of psychometric instruments, the observation of strengths and the collection of feedback on strengths will be presented as management practices. It must be noted that although each method on its own can provide very useful information and insights regarding one's particular strengths, the combination of these different methods can yield an even more accurate and complete picture.

Psychometric Instruments

A first identification method involves the use of psychometric instruments. This method offers the advantages of being simple, brief, and grounded in solid empirical research evidence. However, its main disadvantage is that the results provided are based on general classifications which sometimes fail to capture the specificity of each individual. Still, these psychometric instruments remain excellent

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starting points that appropriately introduce the strengths philosophy, deliver powerful insights and motivate individuals to apply and better understand their strengths. So far, three main strengths identification instruments have been developed: the StrengthsFinder® (Asplund et al., 2007), the VIA Survey (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and the R2 Strengths Profiler® (Linley & Dovey, 2015).

Developed by the Gallup Organization on the basis of decades of research and interviews conducted in the workplace to better understand the most natural thoughts, feelings and behaviours of successful people (Hodges & Asplund, 2010), the StrengthsFinder® is an online instrument that identifies individuals' main areas of talent (see Box 14.1). It is available in 24 languages and takes approximately 30 minutes to complete, and results are provided instantly online under the form of a personalized report. This report presents the individual's top five themes of talents and includes supporting material that helps build these talents into strengths.

Similarly, the VIA Survey is an online strengths identification instrument that was developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004) at the PPC (in a venture funded by the VIA Institute on Character) following the birth of positive psychology. It is based on the Character Strengths and Virtues Classification, which comprises 24 strengths categorized under six broad virtues (see Box 14.1). As stated earlier, this classification was based on an impressive research effort aiming to identify universal strengths and virtues that consistently emerged across history and culture (Dahlsgaard, Peterson & Seligman, 2005; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The VIA Survey is available in 14 languages, takes approximately 15 minutes to complete and provides results instantly online in the form of a report which ranks in order the individual's 24 strengths; the first five are termed 'signature strengths'.

Finally, the R2 Strengths Profiler® is an online strengths assessment and development tool created by Linley and his colleagues at the CAPP (Linley & Dovey, 2015). This instrument is based on a classification of 60 strengths (see Box 14.1), which was developed on the basis of the CAPP team's expertise regarding strengths interventions. The R2 Strengths Profiler® comprises 60 different attributes, which the individual must rate according to the dimensions of performance, energy and use. This assessment takes approximately 20 minutes to complete and results are provided instantly online in the form of a personalized report in which the main attributes are classified under realized strengths (perform well, energizing, use often), unrealized strengths (perform well, energizing, don't use often), learned behaviours (perform well, not energizing) or weaknesses (hard to do well, draining). The report also includes additional material that helps the individual to fully take advantage of this slightly different model and put strengths into action.

Self-Observation and Introspection

A second identification method involves the observation of specific indicators of strengths before, during or after an activity. This method is referred to as *Strengthspotting* by some researchers and authors (Linley & Burns, 2010; Linley, Garcea, Hill, Minhas, Trenier & Willars, 2010) and can be useful for leaders, both

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Box 14.1 Strengths identification instruments

Instrument	StrengthsFinder®	VIA Survey	R2 Strengths Profiler®
Definition of a strength	Ability to consistently provide near-perfect performance on a task (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001)	The psychological ingredients – processes or mechanisms – that define the virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)	A pre-existing capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking or feeling that is authentic and energizing to the user, and enables optimal functioning, development and performance (Linley, 2008)
Number of strengths	34	24	60
Strengths list	1) Achiever 2) Activator 3) Adaptability 4) Analytical 5) Arranger 6) Belief 7) Command 8) Communication 9) Competition 10) Connectedness 11) Consistency/Fairness 12) Context 13) Deliberative 14) Developer 15) Discipline	**Wisdom and knowledge** 1) Creativity 2) Curiosity 3) Judgement 4) Love of learning 5) Perspective **Courage** 6) Bravery 7) Perseverance 8) Honesty 9) Zest **Humanity** 10) Love 11) Kindness 12) Social intelligence	1) Action 2) Adherence 3) Adventure 4) Authenticity 5) Bounceback 6) Catalyst 7) Centred 8) Change agent 9) Compassion 10) Competitive 11) Connector 12) Counterpoint 13) Courage 14) Creativity 15) Curiosity 32) Innovation 33) Judgement 34) Legacy 35) Listener 36) Mission 37) Moral compass 38) Narrator 39) Optimism 40) Order 41) Persistence 42) Personal responsibility 43) Personalization 44) Persuasion 45) Planful

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	16) Empathy 17) Focus 18) Futuristic 19) Harmony 20) Ideation 21) Inclusiveness/Includer 22) Individualization 23) Input 24) Intellection 25) Learner 26) Maximizer 27) Positivity 28) Relator 29) Responsibility 30) Restorative 31) Self-assurance 32) Significance 33) Strategic 34) Woo	**Justice** 13) Teamwork 14) Fairness 15) Leadership **Temperance** 16) Forgiveness 17) Humility 18) Prudence 19) Self-regulation **Transcendence** 20) Appreciation of beauty and excellence 21) Gratitude 22) Hope 23) Humour 24) Spirituality	16) Detail 17) Drive 18) Efficacy 19) Emotional awareness 20) Empathic connection 21) Enabler 22) Equality 23) Esteem builder 24) Explainer 25) Feedback 26) Gratitude 27) Growth 28) Humility 29) Humour 30) Improver 31) Incubator	46) Prevention 47) Pride 48) Rapport builder 49) Reconfiguration 50) Relationship deepener 51) Resilience 52) Resolver 53) Scribe 54) Self-awareness 55) Service 56) Spotlight 57) Strategic awareness 58) Time optimizer 59) Unconditionality 60) Work ethic
Information	www.gallupstrengthscenter.com	www.viacharacter.org	www.cappeu.com/R2StrengthsProfiler	

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in relation to themselves and to manage their subordinates. It implies the careful observation of signs of strengths present in particular activities or behaviours, and can be conducted by the individual through self-observation or through a strengths discussion with another person. While the use of psychometric instruments provides people with a ready framework and language for strengths, this open-ended method is more flexible and offers the possibility to explore, discover and name singular strengths. It can be used in itself to discover strengths from the ground up, but can also be a useful complement to psychometric instruments.

Most scholars agree that the main signs of a strength are authenticity, energy, flow and performance (Buckingham, 2007; Hodges & Clifton, 2004; Linley, 2008; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). 'Authenticity' means that when people use their strengths, they feel they are being 'the real me'; they are being true to themselves and they feel they are doing what is right for them (Linley, 2008; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). 'Energy' means that when people use their strengths, they feel energized and vitalized. The activity or behaviour is not draining them; on the contrary, it seems to provide them with even more energy (Linley, 2008; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The flow component is the feeling people report having, when they use their strengths, of being deeply absorbed in the activity and losing all sense of time (Buckingham, 2007; Linley, 2008). This particular experience of deep engagement is well known as the state of flow (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Finally, 'performance' signifies that when people use their strengths, they usually display impressive performances in that particular activity, such as rapid learning and development, constant success, innovation and remarkable task efficiency (Hodges & Clifton, 2004; Linley, 2008; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Therefore, it is possible for leaders to be particularly attentive to these signs and identify an activity or a behaviour as a strength when it meets all these criteria. This can be done through careful self-observation, either at the time or retrospectively, or through a discussion with another person. For example, leaders can use this technique as an introspective self-observation tool to identify their own strengths. They can also use it in the form of a one-to-one discussion with a colleague or a mentor that specifically aims at better understanding and identification of their personal strengths. Similarly, they can apply this technique with their employees, by observing and identifying their strengths in action or in a coaching perspective through conversations that aim to reveal more about their strengths. In this regard, many authors have developed lists of indicators and questions that can help individuals observe themselves, and discuss and identify their personal strengths (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Buckingham, 2007; Linley, 2008; Linley & Burns, 2010; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Box 14.2 presents some indicators and questions that can help start a personal reflection (or a managerial discussion) of this kind.

Feedback on Personal Strengths

A third identification method involves the collection and organization of feedback from peers about one's strengths. Also known as the Reflected Best Self exercise (Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy & Quinn, 2005; Roberts, Spreitzer,

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Box 14.2 Indicators and questions for strengths identification

	Authenticity
Indicators	• A sense of being genuine and particularly true to yourself during an activity • A sentiment of doing something that fits with who you really are • A feeling of deep personal satisfaction after an activity
Questions	• What makes you feel particularly connected with yourself? • What kind of activities provide you a sense of being who you really are?
	Energy
Indicators	• Being energized and vitalized rather than drained by an activity • Feeling alive and seeming to continuously have energy for a particular activity • Being irrevocably drawn to a particular activity
Questions	• What kind of activities do you find particularly energizing? • What sort of activities or tasks do you always end up looking forward to? • What do you enjoy doing on a daily basis?
	Flow
Indicators	• Being intensively focused and concentrated during an activity • Being deeply involved and doing things almost automatically • Losing track of time during an activity
Questions	• In what kind of activities do you find yourself deeply concentrated and engaged? • When do you lose sense of time because you are so absorbed in what you do?
	Performance
Indicators	• Quickly learning new information, skills and techniques in a particular activity or domain • Receiving praise, recognition and compliments in a specific activity • A feeling that this behaviour or activity seems almost natural to you
Questions	• When you are at your very best, what are you doing? • What sort of activities do you pick up quickly? • What seems somehow easier for you than for others? • In what kind of activities have you always been successful? • Do other people compliment you or tell you that you are gifted in particular activities?

Dutton, Quinn, Heaphy & Barker, 2005; Spreitzer, Stephens & Sweetman, 2009), this method comprises three main steps: (1) gathering feedback from peers, (2) summarizing the information collected and (3) composing a self-portrait representing oneself at one's best. This method requires more time and effort; however, as it is based on a collection of first-hand observations it also provides more precise and compelling information regarding one's personal strengths.

In the first step the individual collects feedback from significant people around him or her. These can be past and present colleagues, supervisors, clients, mentors, friends or family members, as long as they know the person well and

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the individual feels comfortable asking them for positive feedback. It is recommended that a diverse group of about ten people is selected who come from various contexts in which the person is involved. Once these people are identified, the individual asks them to provide information about his or her strengths, accompanied by specific examples. This can be done in person, by phone or by email; however, emails are generally preferred as they constitute a fast and convenient method, and they facilitate the subsequent analysis of the information.

The second step consists of analysing and summarizing the information collected. After all the feedback is gathered, the individual searches for common themes and patterns in the examples provided and organizes the information. A table including separate columns for common themes, examples and personal notes can be a helpful tool in making sense of the feedback (see Box 14.3). For some people, the result will be a confirmation of what they already knew about themselves, reaffirming their strengths with even more conviction. For others, it will be a true revelation, exposing behaviours they were not aware had such an impact. For others again, the feedback provided will shed a more nuanced light on particular strengths, giving them useful information on what exactly constitutes an edge in their behaviours and how to make the most of it.

In the third step the person writes a brief description of him- or herself at his or her best. This description should capture the themes, examples and observations from the previous step and weave them together in a short paragraph. This paragraph should begin with the phrase 'When I am at my best …' and be about ten sentences long. The final result must constitute a powerful and inspiring image of the individual at his or her best and serve as a guide for future action (see Box 14.3). This introspective process can be quite hard and time-consuming; however, it is very important as it allows one to carefully examine one's strengths, make even more connections and consolidate this information in one's identity.

Strengths Use and Development

As a leader, it is important to know how to make the most of your strengths and how to help others fully take advantage of theirs. This section will present the main strategies proposed in the strengths development literature. Again, the following methods and advice are applicable to leaders in the development of their own careers, as well as in coaching or development processes intended for their employees.

Strengths-Based Job Crafting

While strengths identification is essential, it is only the first step in a strengths development process. In order to fully harness the benefits of this approach, one must make a conscious effort to find and develop new opportunities to apply one's strengths at work. This active process, through which people gradually shape their jobs around their areas of interest and specialities, is also known as job crafting. More precisely, job crafting is defined as 'the physical and cognitive changes that individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work' (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001, p. 179). Job crafting can therefore be either

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Box 14.3 Example of steps 2 and 3 of the Reflected Best Self exercise

Step 2 Feedback analysis

Common themes	Examples	Personal notes
Justice and fairness	As a sales assistant, I stood up to a supervisor who asked me to sell damaged merchandise. I publicly defended my colleague who was wrongly accused, even though it meant trouble for me.	Justice is a fundamental value for me and I am willing to sacrifice my own good for it.
Connection	I organized a successful mentoring programme in my organization from the ground up. I started a running club in my community just a few weeks after we moved in.	I love to remove barriers and help new people meet, team up and develop projects together.
Listener	Somehow, people always end up in my office to discuss personal matters. Many people tell me that I always find the right words to explain what they are trying to say.	People deeply appreciate it when I listen to them and genuinely try to understand how they feel.
[…]	[…]	[…]

Step 3 – Self description

When I am at my best, I stand up in front of injustice. I deeply believe it is a common value that must be respected and I am ready to sacrifice my own good for it. I expect fairness from others and I also act accordingly. By setting an example, I gain trust and respect from people around me. At my best, I easily envision new possibilities, projects and structures that bring people together. It gives me meaning, because I help people grow, team up and start new ventures that would not have come to life otherwise. When I am at my best, I take my time and carefully listen to what others are saying. It is a sign of respect, consideration and engagement that others appreciate and […]

physical (changing the form, scope or number of tasks), cognitive (changing how one sees the job) or relational (changing the people with whom one interacts). Research on this topic has shown that job crafting is predictive of work engagement (Bakker, Tims & Derk, 2012; Chen, Yen & Tsai, 2014), well-being (Slemp & Vella-Brodrick, 2014) and work performance (Bakker et al., 2012). However, it must remain aligned with organizational objectives and respect other colleagues'

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Box 14.4 Questions about strengths-based job crafting

How can you use your personal margin to gradually carve and shape your role so you can spend more time working from your strengths?
Given the current objectives of your team and organization, where do you think you could make your greatest contribution?
Are there any projects that would particularly benefit from your strengths? How can you volunteer or offer your help on those projects?
Can you start new projects that would play to your strengths and be useful for your organization?
How can you free up your time and make better use of your strengths? Can you delegate specific tasks? Is it possible to team up with someone? Do you need to rearrange your work schedule?
In what new situations can you put yourself in order to use your strengths more and make them known to others?
Are there any of your strengths that remain underused in your work? If so, how can you change this situation?
What new skills and techniques can you learn in order to develop and hone your strengths even more? Who can help you achieve this?
Can any of your strengths help you overcome any of your weaknesses?

workloads and preferences; otherwise it can quickly become detrimental to the organization (Tims, Bakker & Derks, 2015).

From a strengths development perspective, this means gradually steering your job towards your main areas of strength, while staying focused on priorities and organizational objectives. Strengths-based job crafting involves using the flexibility provided around your core tasks carefully and finding new opportunities to use your strengths, develop them and make them known in the organization. By doing so, individuals gain as their strengths become more and more used, known and demanded by their peers, and the organization also gains from the performance and innovation that follows. In order to help individuals craft their jobs around their strengths, authors and scholars have developed a series of specific questions regarding strengths positioning and deployment in the workplace (Buckingham, 2007; Linley, 2008; Linley, Willars & Biswas-Diener, 2010). Box 14.4 presents a sample of such questions, which can be used by leaders in a self-development perspective, or in the development of their followers' strengths.

The 'Me at My Best' Exercise

The 'me at my best' exercise was developed and tested by Seligman et al. (2005). In this activity, participants are asked to write about and discuss a time when they are functioning optimally and to think about how their strengths contributed to this episode. We applied it to the work context (Forest et al., 2012) and expanded it to a three-hour format where this basic idea of optimal functioning using one's signature strength is broken down into several different sub-questions (see Box 14.5). This exercise can be done as an individual (to foster one's own optimal functioning) or with a group of employees by a leader who wants to foster the team's optimal functioning.

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Box 14.5 Examples of questions for the three-hour version of the 'me at my best' exercise

1) Take a few minutes to think about something that you did, a decision that you made or a project you accomplished, for which you feel a great sense of pride and satisfaction. Briefly describe this situation. Which strengths allowed you to be successful in this situation?
2) What kind of compliments do you usually receive from your colleagues/friends/family/partner? To which strength(s) do these compliments refer to?
3) What kind of circumstances would you say allow you to be at your best? To which strengths do these circumstances refer to?
4) When you think about the future (next week, next month), what motivates and stimulates you? What are you looking forward to? Which strengths are implicated in your anticipations about the future?
5) Are there any strengths that are underused in the context of your work? In which context could they be used? Which strategy could you adopt to concretize their application?
6) Do you think there are any downsides to your strengths? In which contexts do you need to be especially careful about this?
7) Can certain strengths be used to compensate for your weaknesses? If so, how?

The first questions are aimed at helping the participants understand the idea that to function optimally we need to use our signature strengths often, intensely, and for long periods of time (see question 1 in Box 14.5). To get another point of view on this same idea, we ask participants to ask each other what significant others (colleagues, friends, family, partner) appreciate about them, for example what compliments they receive from them (see question 2 in Box 14.5). Once this idea has been grasped, the intervention brings the participants to think about the circumstances which allow them to be at their best (see question 3 in Box 14.5). We specifically ask participants to enumerate and describe in detail the ingredients, elements, components or type of colleagues they need in order to be able to use each of their top five strengths. Participants have often called the answer to this question their 'operating manual', meaning that a colleague reading this list should know how to make the best use of them.

Having thought about and discussed a past event that displayed our optimal functioning and qualities and strengths in the eyes of other people, we turn to the anticipation of a future event (see question 4 in Box 14.5). This question is specifically aimed at the energization component of a strength. Then, to jolt the use of unrealized strengths, we try to devise and put in place strategies to use them more intensively and frequently (see question 5 in Box 14.5). Finally, in this extended version of the exercise, we also devote time and energy to the 'dark' side of strengths use (see questions 6 and 7 in Box 14.5). We force participants to think about situations where combinations of strengths or strengths overuse might be problematic or even negative (question 6 in Box 14.5), and also about how someone's strengths can be put to use in buffering or neutralizing weaknesses (question 7 of Box 14.5). For this latter question, we can imagine the example of someone who has difficulty in being organized but has a love of learning: they

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might put this latter strength to use by taking courses and reading books about classification and organizing systems.

As mentioned earlier, we want to emphasize the idea that this exercise can be conducted by leaders on an individual basis (for their own development or with individual employees), but is especially well suited for medium to large teams or groups. In such settings, after strengths have been identified with the use of psychometric instruments, a first hour is devoted to the introduction of positive psychology and strengths (what is positive psychology, what is a strength, definitions of all the different strengths, etc.). The questions are then presented and explained to the group and participants are asked to write down, individually, their answers to the questions. The leader moves from person to person (or from table to table) to facilitate individual progress and take note of some good examples, which are then shared in plenary with the whole group. This is done for each question and usually takes two hours. This process allows participants to gain a deeper knowledge about their strengths, share their ideas with their colleagues and find new and exciting ways to optimize the workplace as well as the use of their strengths.

Using Signature Strengths in a New Way

Another short and very simple intervention that can be employed by leaders to increase the use of strengths is to ask people to use one (or two) of their top five signature strengths in a new way, every day, for a whole week (Forest et al., 2012; Seligman et al., 2005). To help with this task, there is a free online list which offers 340 new ways to use signature strengths (Rashid, 2014). This list has suggestions of specific actions to do, books to read, songs to listen to and films to watch in order to practise (or hear or see) the use of signature strengths (for movies specifically, see Niemiec & Wedding, 2014). In the work context (Forest et al., 2012), we used this activity (in complement with others) by asking participants to write and sign a 'contract' in which they engaged themselves, in order to try to use their signature strengths in new ways. This is an intervention that requires a low investment of time and effort, and which helps increase the use of strengths in various domains.

Card Games on Strengths

While there have been a host of scientifically tested interventions to increase strengths' identification and use, this positive movement also encouraged numerous initiatives. One such initiative is a Canadian-based personal development tool called 'Totem: The feel good game' (www.totemteam.com/en). Their goal is to propose an activity to help people become aware of their own strengths and qualities while having fun with colleagues. This exercise can be used by a leader if employees have doubts about and an unfavourable perception of psychometric instruments, or if a more playful intervention is necessary. While making no scientific claims for their game, they tried to take into account the research showing that people who know their strengths, and use them more often, over longer periods of time and more intensively, have a stronger feeling of general well-being. This company developed something that people would want to use on social or professional occasions. It is a card game which comes with 80 'strengths' cards, each associated with a different animal (an example is 'Caribou: You

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fearlessly explore new trails'), and 80 'quality' cards (e.g., 'Organized'). The goal of the game is to make a 'Totem' representing the individual, which is composed of an animal (a strength) and a complementary quality. This idea was taken from different social movements, such as the boy scouts in Canada, where participants are 'totemized' after a certain period of time (for example, 'Optimistic Fox' is the TOTEM name of the second author of this chapter).

In a game, when it is your turn to get your Totem, you randomly distribute to each other player seven strength cards (in the first round) and seven quality cards (in the second round). Each player then selects from their cards the one that they see the most in you, and places it face down on the table. When you uncover these cards one by one, the player who selected the card identifies themselves and tells you why they selected it, when they saw that strength or quality in action, and how it positively affected them and those who surround you. At the end of the process, the group selects the most representative cards (one strength card and one quality card) and creates a Totem for the person. This simple game creates a rare occasion when colleagues are gathered to tell, one after the other, the strengths and qualities that they see in the target individual. It has been used in corporate and academic settings as a team-building tool, and we are now in the midst of testing its effects scientifically through a web-based platform. While the game has an end-product (the Totem) which may sound peculiar, it is the process (hearing others talk about one's strengths and qualities and having them aggregated in two words) that leads to this end-result which is positive. This is but one initiative in the public arena which was fostered by the positive psychology movement and we can expect several others in the years to come.

Strengths Overuse and Misuse

Although most scholars adopt an approach in which they simply encourage people to 'use their strengths more', practical experience shows that a certain amount of caution must be exercised regarding this advice. It is important to remember that more is not always better and that all strengths can become weaknesses if they are overused (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan & Minhas, 2011; Kaplan & Kaiser, 2009). For example, an individual whose strength is 'analytical ability' may tend to stick too much to details during meetings, slowing down processes and irritating his colleagues. Likewise, strengths can be of great value in one context but harmful in another (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011; Linley, Willars et al., 2010). For instance, a manager whose strength is 'persistence' may be particularly appreciated by his customers because he puts a lot of time and effort into meeting their expectations, but at the same time he may ruin the climate in his work unit if he applies the same strength without discernment and is uncompromising towards his staff. Finally, one must also be aware that putting too much emphasis on one area at work may also cause one to neglect an opposing but necessary area (Kaiser & Overfield, 2011). For example, an overly assertive manager will not only be firm, but will also lack the capacity to delegate, empower and collaborate. Similarly, an analytical individual who pushes her strength too far will not only be trapped and slowed down by details, but will also lack the vision and perspective needed for her projects.

Therefore, it is important to remain aware of and sensitive to the context and situational demands in order to use one's strengths wisely. In other words,

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after identifying your strengths, instead of simply trying to 'use your strengths more', the right approach is to learn to use the right strength, at the right time and with the right intensity – what some authors call the 'golden mean' of strengths (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Linley, 2008). It involves having the sensitivity and judgement to read your environment, select the appropriate strength and use it with the intensity that is required in the situation. A first step to preventing strengths overuse can be to identify, one by one, the potential downsides of your strengths and plan how you can avoid them. A helpful tool in this regard can be found in *The Strengths Book* (Linley, Willars et al., 2010), in which the authors provide a list of pitfalls and mistakes to avoid for each strength of their classification. Another helpful way to stay facing the right direction and prevent strengths overuse is to proactively ask for feedback from trusted colleagues about your use of your strengths (e.g., 'Am I sometimes excessive regarding [a representative aspect of your strength]? If so, under what circumstances? What consequences does it have?'). Finally, a more formal way can be to include in individual evaluation surveys (e.g., performance appraisal surveys, 360-degrees surveys) specific questions regarding the person's main areas of strength, whether any of those strengths are sometimes overused and, if so, in what contexts (Kaiser & Overfield, 2011).

Managerial Practices

The holy grail of management is to increase performance while maintaining and developing well-being (Cropanzano & Wright, 2001), and it seems that strengths use is an efficient way to attain both of these aims. The presence of well-being and the absence of ill-being are also important outcomes as, according to the World Health Organization, psychological health in the workplace is closely associated with individuals' physical, mental and social health and is a key public health concern with clear implications for society at large (Leka & Jain, 2010). Since strengths use has been shown to be effective in decreasing ill-being (Gander, Proyer, Ruch & Wyss 2013) and increasing well-being (Forest et al., 2012), it can be considered an efficient way to create a healthy workplace (Kelloway & Day, 2005a, 2005b). Regarding performance, a study conducted by the Corporate Leadership Council (2002) of 19,187 employees from 34 organizations in 29 different countries revealed that a strengths-based management approach led to a 36.4% increase in performance while, in contrast, a weakness- or deficit-based management approach led to a 26.8 per cent decrease. In the same line of thought, Hodges and Asplund (2010) have presented the results of a study conducted with 469 work units, in which managers trained to use a strengths-based management approach produced an 8.9 per cent greater increase in net profits than those who didn't receive such training.

Strengths-based managerial practices can be used in a variety of moments of a career (e.g., attraction of talents, recruitment and selection, onboarding and induction; Linley, Garcea, Harrington, Trenier & Minhas, 2011; Linley & Page, 2007) to increase performance and create a long-term healthy workplace. We will, however, concentrate in the following paragraphs on two of the main strategies, namely strengths-based performance appraisal and strengths-based team development.

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Strengths-Based Performance Appraisal

While performance reviews and appraisals are often the most feared events of the year, that is mainly because most leaders adopt a deficit-based approach or a competency-based approach to them (Boyatzis, 1982). That is, we identify the level of competence an individual should have and the gap there is to cover, and then try to find ways for people to attain it, *regardless of whether it plays to their strengths or not*. This is typical of a fixed-mindset or a mechanistic approach to performance management. Moving towards a strengths-based type of performance appraisal needs some changes to be made to the 'traditional' approach; we completely endorse Linley and Page's (2007) recommendations, which chime with our experience.

First, feedback needs to be given often, not just once a year. The good news is, it is slightly easier to say what is right and increase it than to say what is wrong and change it. This positive feedback needs to be given in a timely fashion and in a trustworthy way, and if it is sustained in the long run it will help create a strengths-based culture in which giving a compliment to a colleague or a boss is seen as a normal daily act rather than as a manipulative political action to gain access to more resources.

Second, the time frame is changed. While traditional deficit-based performance appraisals adopt a past-time orientation and evaluate development areas (a more neutral expression to designate weaknesses), a strengths-based approach implies a future-time orientation and a focus on what people are good at. In other words, the questions shifts from 'What are you not good at, and how can we help you be ordinary at it?' to 'What are you good at and could do more? What are your aspirations?' Rather than spending time, energy and resources in trying to fill the gaps and 'fix' weaknesses which can hardly shift significantly, it is much easier and more productive to facilitate what is already natural, energizing and performant for an individual.

Third, weaknesses should be tolerated if they are not performance killers. This is not to say that weakness management must stop, but this new mindset puts a different perspective on weaknesses, which everyone has (plentifully). A weakness is a lack of capacity or a fault, so by definition the best we can expect from weakness management is the absence of a fault, not the presence of something more. To use an analogy, weakness management is like expecting someone with a sprained ankle to run as fast with crutches as he would normally do with a healthy leg. The absence of a fully functioning leg can be alleviated or facilitated with the help of crutches, but never can we expect fast runs in these conditions. To sum it up, strengths-based performance appraisal shifts from past (lack of) performance and weaknesses to future (high) performance and strengths.

We have two specific examples (among dozens of others) from our experience following these recommendations. The first is the Centre de Réadaptation Estrie [Eastern townships physical re-adaptation centre], a physical rehabilitation centre which is part of the Québec health system. The second is Normandin Beaudry consulting actuaries, a consultation firm specializing in pensions, group benefits, compensation and health.

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In the Centre de Réadaptation de l'Estrie, the objective of the performance appraisal has been changed to 'create a space and time to help generate what is best in the employee'. Two main points are now pursued: (1) recognize and emphasize strengths; make sure to optimize their use and development by aligning them with individual, group and/or organizational objectives, and (2) reframe areas of improvement and translate them into learning objectives; make sure that the employee sees the benefits that can realistically be expected from these learning achievements. We can thus see that the spotlight and emphasis are clearly on the knowledge and use of strengths, while fixing weaknesses remains an important but secondary objective. In that same document, the employees are asked to write down their five signature strengths (from the VIA survey) and a section is reserved for discussion of the employee's dreams, hopes, wishes and career aspirations. This positive outlook has been well received by the supervisors, who are happy to discuss positive things with their employees, as well as by the employees themselves, who now look forward to the performance appraisal as it entails having a positive developmental discussion with their supervisor. Anecdotally, managers and employees have told us that this shift towards the positive has improved the institution's work climate and helped them provide even better care for their patients.

At Normandin Beaudry consulting actuaries, strengths-based management was jolted into existence with a kick-off conference which was held during the lunch break, with all the employees in the same room. Before the conference they had been invited to complete the VIA Survey, and then asked to bring their results with them to the conference, at which all the different strengths were presented and the research results on the positive effects of strengths use discussed. Then, on demand, teams could ask an organizational psychologist to help them implement strengths-based management by identifying synergies between strengths portfolios and by allocating tasks according to strengths. To make sure that these self-regulated initiatives by different teams percolated through and sank into the organization's culture, we changed a few questions in their performance review. For example, questions which were added for the employees are: 'To what extent is my immediate supervisor knowledgeable about my strengths?' and 'To what extent does my immediate supervisor give me tasks which are aligned with my strengths?' This simple change gave a stronger voice to the employees and initiated many conversations on strengths, mostly regarding how they could be better known and used in the workplace. It took about a year to develop a common language and to answer all the concerns, questions and preoccupations about strengths-based management, but it is now part of the culture. The main outcome associated with strengths-based management is that it has become part of the vocabulary and reflexes of the organization. Any decisions about mandates, roles, clients or services are now addressed with strengths. They have a matrix of different levels of responsibilities (e.g., junior or senior employees, leaders and partners) with different tasks, and all their decisions are aligned with the employees' strengths, which are known to everyone. According to Normandin Beaudry, the keyword that describes this whole process is 'propelling'. It propels employees to give their best, moves leaders forward so that they energize themselves and their team to help clients, and also helps clients to be at

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Table 14.1 Results of the *Normandin Beaudry consulting actuaries* engagement survey before (2012) and after (2015) the implementation of strengths-based management.

	Results (%)	
Engagement survey questions	**2012**	**2015**
I clearly understand what is expected in my role at work.	85	90
My talent manager gives me enough information (instructions, tips) so I can do my job.	70	85
The work I do is important to the success of my team.	83	99
My colleagues and I are demonstrating solidarity and cooperation at work to achieve our goals.	86	91
When possible, I am entrusted tasks/responsibilities that match my strengths and my interests.	88	88
For managers: When possible, I try to assign tasks/responsibilities in line with the specific strengths and interests of the members of my team.	84	86

their best and create healthy workplaces. To prove this point, the internal engagement survey compared results from 2012 (before strengths-based management was introduced) and 2015 (after the implementation; see Table 14.1). Results show that Normandin Beaudry were able to maintain or increase their engagement survey scores, which they had thought would be hard, if not impossible.

This company implemented strengths-based management inside its own walls, but they also started educating their 150 client companies about the added value of strengths identification and use in their non-monetary rewards. Along with their direct compensation and benefits recommendations, strengths-based advice was given concerning indirect compensation, that is, elements which motivate employees but cannot be easily quantified in dollars.

These examples (among many others that we could have given) reinforce the idea that strengths-based performance appraisal can lead to positive outcomes for employees as well as for organizations, and can be implemented in different economic sectors (e.g., health, consultation firms), with employees of all ages (we had employees who were 18 to 68 years of age) and with varied backgrounds and training (e.g., accountant, nurse, actuary, physiotherapist).

Strengths-based Team Development

One of the most effective ways to fully harness the potential of the strengths approach in the workplace is through strengths-based team development, a task perfectly suited to leaders or persons in a position of influence. A wide array of interventions and processes are available to help teams develop their knowledge and use of their strengths and increase their performance (Buckingham, 2007; Linley, 2008; Linley, Willars et al., 2010). Generally, these processes revolve around three fundamental steps, which can be managed by the leader: (1) strengths identification, (2) strengths affirmation, and (3) strengths

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Box 14.6 Strengths identification debriefing questions

1) What do you think about your results? Are you surprised? Or does it confirm what you already knew about yourself?
2) Which strengths do you think best represent you? Why?
3) Are there any words or sentences that particularly stand out to you in these descriptions? Why?
4) In what kind of activities would you say you are at your best at work? Does it refer to any strengths in your results?
5) Are there any other strengths or talents you feel are not represented adequately in these results? Which ones?

optimization. In the following paragraphs, these steps will be described and examples will be given to show how they can be conducted.

The first step in any strengths-based team development initiative is to identify each team member's strengths. The preferred method is usually the use of psychometric instruments, as it is a simple, quick and motivating first step, and it can be further complemented by colleagues' comments afterwards. In this first step, the team leader invites all members to complete the chosen online assessment and asks them not to share their results with each other. In the following days, she meets each team member for a discussion about the latter's strengths. The objective of this discussion is to conduct a small debriefing with the member regarding his results on the strengths assessment, to gain a deeper knowledge of his strengths in general and to prepare for the next step (which will involve sharing his strengths with the other members). In order to do so, questions such as those provided in Box 14.6 can be asked. These one-to-one meetings are usually very much appreciated by team members, as they are eager to talk about their results and find the overall process interesting and stimulating. The positive mood that ensues sets the tone for the following step.

The second step consists in the affirmation of strengths in the team. This step involves the presentation of each team member's strengths, followed by a discussion in which the objective is to acknowledge these strengths and make them better known and understood in the team. In order to do so, the team leader can facilitate the discussion by going around the room and asking each member to present his results on the strengths assessment and to comment on them (e.g., Does he agree with the assessment results? Is he surprised? Which strengths represent him particularly well? Are there any nuances to be made? How do these different strengths relate to his work? Can he provide some examples?). During this process, the person is also free to present any other strengths or talents that were not included in the original assessment and the other members are encouraged to complete the explanations provided by the person. This active presentation, discussion and validation of each other's strengths is a very powerful team process, as it allows the individuals to present their areas of expertise in a humble way, to gain an external confirmation of their strengths from their peers and to explain, with the help of examples and answers to questions, where their maximal contribution to the team resides. At the end of this discussion,

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a team chart representing all the strengths present in the team can be made and distributed to every member. This affirmation step allows the team to appreciate each other's strengths and to have a significant and constructive discussion on this important topic, a process which is rarely done.

The third and final step is to optimize the use of strengths in the team. At this stage, it is up to the team to determine how they can maximize the use of each member's strengths and to devise tailored strategies for that purpose. A good way to start is to review the teams' current objectives and projects, and to try to see how the different strengths could be better used to achieve team goals. Some teams will find they can rearrange the way tasks and responsibilities are allocated and create a better alignment between individual strengths, roles and responsibilities. Some teams will find they can develop complementary partnerships, where some members' strengths are used to help other members' weaknesses. Other teams will find new projects they can develop on the basis of their particular configuration of strengths. In all cases, many opportunities for strengths optimization will be found and it will be essential to structure them appropriately so that they can be taken full advantage of. It is important at this step to keep in mind that a strength is not only about performance, but also about energy and interest. Therefore, tasks must be allocated in consideration of this; otherwise the team risks draining its members in the long run. Furthermore, particular care must be taken to make sure that any new work configuration is not unfair (e.g., imposing a higher workload on a member, assigning all the enjoyable tasks to some members and all the boring ones to others) and that it allows members who need to develop different competencies opportunities to do so (that is, it must avoid the situation in which a member cannot develop a particular competency because it is always assigned to a specific person).

In order to keep this approach active, it will be important afterwards to conduct regular meetings in which team members will have the opportunity to discuss the advantages, disadvantages and adjustments to be made that relate to this initiative. In such meetings, a particular attention can be directed towards strengths overuse and underuse, fairness, and professional development opportunities. As new projects and tasks develop, it will be important to keep these habits alive, by allocating responsibilities according to strengths, encouraging complementary partnership, giving positive feedback about strengths and making strengths visible (for example, in some companies employees display their top five strengths on their office door, others include them in their email signature). With time, strengths will become an integral part of the team's culture, as members will develop a strengths vocabulary, collaborate more fluidly based on their strengths and become used to a strengths-based management style.

A Healthy and Performant Workplace is One in which Strengths are Identified and Used

By now, we hope that reading this chapter has convinced you that the combination of strength identification, use and development – in all their varieties and possibilities – forms a winning approach to both performance and well-being and that it is a new paradigm which would benefit today's and tomorrow's workplaces.

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Many books (e.g, Buckingham, 2007; Rath & Conchie, 2009) and articles (e.g., Linley & Harrington, 2006; Kaiser & Overfield, 2011) have been written on how to be a strengths-based leader, but the main takeaway message at any level of intervention is that individuals, leaders, teams and organizations who operate at their best know their strengths and use them wisely, intensely and for long periods of time. To exemplify this idea, research has shown that highly engaged staff report using their strengths 70 per cent of the time (Biswas-Deiner & Garcea, 2009) and that strengths use is something which can be increased through relatively short but structured interventions (Dubreuil et al., 2016; Forest et al., 2012). Thus, not only does it lead to positive results but it can be increased as well. It seems feasible that using this path will create happy-productive workers and companies, as strength use is an active ingredient which has been linked to well-being and performance (Clifton & Harter, 2003; Dubreuil, Forest & Courcy, 2014; Harter et al., 2002; Harzer & Ruch, 2013, 2014).

Giving training on strength-spotting and strength use to a growing number of workers and companies (see the example of *IBM Australia* on the VIA Institute for Character website) will hopefully bring to the general public the benefits of the cutting-edge research positive psychology is presently doing. While doing so, we might simultaneously get rid of the century-long paradigm of fixing deficiencies and move on to a new paradigm of creating abundance. It is our hope that strength identification, use and development become the new normal, in leadership roles specifically and the workplace more generally, so that this popular saying applies to (almost) everyone: 'Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life.'

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