

**‘STRENGTHS’ LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME ~ RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS**  
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When deciding on the use of organisation resources for developing leadership and management practice, a number of questions need to be considered. The following responses to the questions are intended to develop my rationale underpinning the focus and process of the ‘Strengths’ Leadership Programme:

**1. Are you making the right decisions based on sound evidence when choosing from the range of strategies for leadership development?**

- The Gallup Organisation has been engaged in research investigating the nature of human talents and strengths since the early 1970’s. In refining this work from the emerging evidence they developed the hypothesis that: individuals gain more when they build on their talents than when they make comparable efforts to improve their areas of weakness.
- Clifton & Harter (2003) report on a Gallup database on workplace opinions developed in 1999-2001; it includes 2.24 million employees and 198,476 work units in 221 organisations, and provides the basis for several of their studies to access the characteristics of the most successful managers and work teams.
- Key findings include the most vital indicator underpinning productivity and employee engagement with their job to be a ‘strongly agree’ rating to the question: At work do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?
- Buckingham & Clifton (2001) report that only 20% of respondents across all types of work activities, and across different cultures (in excess of 65 countries), recorded a ‘strongly agree’ rating to the question about ‘doing what you do best every day’. Furthermore, the higher up the organisation the less frequently this rating appears.
- Rath (2007) reports the number of individual interviews forming the database to now be approximately 10 million, providing a huge resource to be continually mined for studies into factors that underpin the most successful managers and organisations. Just over 30% are now reporting a ‘strongly agree’ rating regarding using their strengths every day in their work.

**2. Why focus specifically on ‘strengths’ rather than fixing weaknesses?**

- Most of us have little real sense of our talents and strengths, as we are most usually encouraged to spend more time identifying areas of weakness and in fixing flaws. A strengths-based programme specifically aims to equip people to identify their areas of dominant talents, and to apply these as strengths in their current role.

- *Talents* are seen as your naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling and behaviour... they are either there or not... 'we should waste less time trying to put in what was left out, and spend more time drawing out what was left in'.
- *Strengths* are considered to be the near perfect performance in an activity; consisting of a combination of talents, knowledge and skills (only the latter two can be trained into people). The efficiency of training initiatives has been found to increase when focused on talents more than on weaknesses. Getting from +10 to +40 takes the same effort as getting from -10 to -4.
- Rath (2007) suggests that at its fundamentally flawed core the aim of almost any learning programme is to change people, most frequently trying to get us to become *who we are not*, which happens to be the path of most resistance. The key to human development is building on *who you already are*... the most successful people (as identified through the Gallup research) start by identifying their dominant talent, then add skills, knowledge and practice to the mix. In this way, talent then serves as an amplifier.
- One finding from studies into the database is that if you are not working to your strengths you are 6 times less likely to be engaged in your job; which has further implications for quality of service, and for staff retention.
- From the Gallup research Buckingham & Clifton (2001) found that most organisations are built on two flawed assumptions, with a predominant outcome focused on 'damage control':
  1. Each person can learn to be competent in almost anything
  2. Each person's greatest room for growth is in his or hers greatest areas of weakness

The coinciding two assumptions found to be guiding the best managers are more 'developmental':

  1. Each person's talents are enduring and unique
  2. Each person's greatest room for growth is in the areas of his and hers greatest strength
- The strengths-based organisation is where talents are focused and built upon as the primary focus of attention, and weaknesses are understood and managed.

### **3. Why focus attention on Team Leaders/Managers within the organisation?**

- The 'Investors in People' initiative serves to remind us that staff members are key resources to any organisation; this strengths-based programme wishes to focus attention on Team Leaders/Managers as the most valuable of these key resources. They are the people who provide the essential support to team and practitioner development, and occupy the bridge between organisation management and direct service delivery.
- Investment in supporting this group of people reflects the message that they are the most professionally experienced members of the direct

- delivery teams, and occupy decision-making positions that directly influence the care and support received by service users, through their influence over team culture and service delivery.
- These are the positions where the organisation should be striving to achieve stability in staff turnover because of the potential impact that change at this level usually has on the wider team.
  - It is the Team Leader/Manager who provides the nurturing support and supervision for colleagues within the team, but also has to be the conduit for higher organisation management decisions, policies and audit/monitoring. Balancing the needs of those above and below leaves Team Leaders/Managers precious little time for personal reflection and development.

#### **4. What does the organisation expect from a Leadership/Management course?**

- The academic marketplace provides a wealth of Leadership & Management courses that organisations can nominate and fund their staff to attend. The majority of these are well equipped to develop knowledge of models, theories and specific management techniques (e.g. financial management, health & safety or human resources management). Through further post-graduate academic qualifications they also aim to support potential promotion into higher service management positions.
- Pfeffer & Sutton (2006) quote a leading American CEO, who suggests 'the most successful leadership development programmes develop people by providing them with experience and feedback on that experience'. This challenges you to think: are you genuinely developing your most valuable resources/assets, or are you more focused on raising understanding of theories and models? This may be as blunt as asking: are you investing in people to stay, or the risk of investing in them to move on?
- The intention behind developing a strengths-based programme is that organisations are not only buying in the 'what', but more of the 'how' of developing the natural talents and strengths of its key personnel. It is based in developing greater participant commitment to the programme through an increased ownership of it. This can be achieved through focusing on individual participant strengths, and applying these to their specific jobs rather than teaching a prescribed set of management theories on an external course. The focus shifts more to developing the raw materials and reflecting on real experiences.
- Anecdotally (from a small sample), a majority of Team Leaders/Managers want to be supported to do their current job more effectively, rather than being hurried into taking the next steps into service management. Further academic qualification is of less value in this instance, as they are largely people who already have some level of academic achievement; but validation of the time and effort to count towards requirements for Continuous Professional Development hold greater value.

- This is not to deny that some Team Leaders/Managers have a clear idea of a pathway into service management, for which more academically focused post-graduate management courses would be more desirable.
- The challenge to organisations is to accurately identify the different aspirations in their key personnel, and then access a flexible range of resources to meet the different development needs.

#### **5. What value do you place on the development of a stable critical mass of Team Leaders/Managers acting as a supportive and creative peer group?**

- A critical question about the allocation of resources to leadership development is: are you investing in people to move upwards in the organisation, and in some cases outwards when vacancies do not exist, and is this the optimum strategy for enabling stability in your staff at the crucial Team Leader/Manager level?
- A primary aim of a strengths-based leadership programme is to motivate, develop and retain key individuals, supporting their effectiveness in their current roles through a mixture of workshop and workplace activity.
- However, the focus on delivering a programme with an organisation in-situ is also to enable an appreciation of each others complementary talents and strengths that can be accessed through a shared peer group experience.
- This peer group could also provide a valuable creative resource for thinking through and resolving future organisation issues applied to team and service development.

#### **6. What are the downsides & disadvantages to this type of programme?**

- This depends entirely on your own answers to the previous questions.
- This approach focuses on developing people to find their own solutions to challenges, rather than equipping them with quick fix management solutions to problems or the latest models of management theory.
- This approach focuses more attention on developing confidence in personal abilities rather than teaching new techniques... it is more about practice development than it is about human resources or health & safety issues.
- It could be a catalyst for changes in some organisation cultures... shifting the thinking to building a culture of thinking around what works rather than a preoccupation with fixing what doesn't (it could challenge the status quo).
- Learning needs to be seen more as a process rather than an event... training needs follow-up practice development support to embed ideas through into changes in practice.
- It is about defining the right outcomes, focusing on people's strengths, and enabling them to find their own solutions.

- Developing a peer group will strengthen the collective voice of this group of people, which could provide constructive challenges to a top-down management culture of decision-making.
- Finally, the strengths research needs further refining. Pfeffer & Sutton (2006) suggest that some of the focus on talent is over-rated, as the research attention takes place 'after the event'. They remind us that it is not just about talent, good people and good solutions are also a product of luck and graft. Clifton & Harter (2003) recognise that the mining of Gallup research databases has not sufficiently compared outcomes of 'focus on weaknesses' v. 'focus on strength & managing weaknesses'; and more is needed on investigating how enduring various strengths interventions are.

## **References**

Available as part of the programme.