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Strengths: A Global Language

Having a common vocabulary about employee talents helps people around the world work together more effectively

by *Brian Brim*

As technology continues to develop and expand, so do organizations. More than ever before, I find myself in meetings and videoconferences with managers and employees who are confronting the challenges of global expansion. Often, these meetings are themselves evidence of that expansion -- they occur in a vast range of time zones. I'm no longer figuring out the two-hour time difference between Omaha and Los Angeles; now, I'm talking with people who are starting their Tuesday while I'm just halfway through my Monday.

One of the main questions I get from businesspeople who have offices around the world is, "How can we connect our people?" This question isn't about creating better online meetings or more effective conference calling systems. It's more about emotional connections.

What they really want to know is, "How can we as a global company help people better understand one another and connect more quickly with each other?"

The answer is *strengths*.

Benefits of a strengths-based approach

When you first hear that answer, it might seem strange. But once you dig into it, it's the best answer. First, a strengths-based approach is safe. It gives people a sense that it's OK to open up and discuss things about themselves that they wouldn't normally share. Why? Because a strengths approach is about helping people understand how to leverage the most natural aspects of who they are as they attempt to tackle the different challenges they face.

Second, a strengths approach creates a common language, which is essential when a company workforce literally speaks different languages. Regardless of our



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native tongue or where we're situated in the world, using the language of strengths helps us understand what someone means when she's discussing her natural talents. (See "Strengths: The Next Generation" and "The Language of Strengths" in the "See Also" area on this page.)

Think about how quickly a manager could bring people together if he started a global conference call by asking all employees to discuss how they applied their greatest talents during the past week: Wouldn't an Achiever in Tel Aviv quickly relate to an Achiever in Taipei? Might someone in Brussels who isn't highly talented in the Strategic theme learn something from a colleague in Boston whose talents in that theme are particularly powerful?

At the heart of the strengths-based approach is the Clifton StrengthsFinder, a 180-item online assessment that measures a person's talents in 34 themes (such as Achiever and Strategic), then reveals the user's top themes. StrengthsFinder helps people understand areas where they have the most potential to grow and succeed. To date, the assessment is available in 23 languages, and more than 2.4 million people around the world have taken it.

When far-flung employees can discuss their top themes with others, connections happen. People find out why they think or behave similarly or differently from others. They discover how they can maximize their partnerships. As they do, positive energy is created among them.

Integrator and accelerator

In my discussions with businesspeople about how to apply the insights the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment provides, I frequently use these two words: *integrator* and

“When far-flung employees are able to discuss their top themes with others, connections happen.”

accelerator. These two words aptly describe StrengthsFinder because the assessment can become the glue that integrates different activities around the world; it also can accelerate the impact of these activities. Here are two examples of how this can happen:

- **Performance reviews.** In our own company, performance discussions have two common elements: One involves setting clear expectations; the other includes talking with people about how they can use their talents and strengths to meet those expectations. So, even though we have employees in offices worldwide, we can help integrate performance processes by using a strengths-based approach. StrengthsFinder also accelerates the process because it helps people focus on who they are and what they naturally do well as they drive toward meeting expectations. It helps them focus on outcomes rather than trying to be something they aren't.
- **Training and development.** Strengths can act as an integrator by providing a common language for employee development activities. It's especially helpful when employees are working to build on their greatest talents to create true strengths by adding the necessary skills and knowledge. Taking the Clifton StrengthsFinder can also help employees accelerate their development. In our company, new hires take the

assessment and receive a one-on-one coaching call with a strengths expert, which helps each person understand more about how to leverage his talents in his new role. And as he continues with his training, he'll use his StrengthsFinder results to build connections with his colleagues. This helps him jump-start his working relationships by giving him insights into how his colleagues think and act.

Recently, I worked with a group of new employees who came from eight countries. Though they came from different cultures and took on myriad roles, when we began discussing the results of the talent assessment, the room lit up. It didn't matter what country these employees came from; almost everyone was energized. In fact, this was the second highest rated session out of the 27 that they experienced. Of course, I'd like to think that was because of my incredible talents in the Communication theme, but I must admit that people simply love to learn about and discuss not only their unique gifts but also those of others.

So as I sat and listened to the discoveries people made that day, it became clear that, deep down, we all have a desire to know more about who we are, what we bring to the world around us, and how we can use our talents to relate to others. We share a common connection through our talents, even when they are different. Sadly, however, we aren't always asked to share them with others. Using the language of strengths helps jump-start those connections, even when we don't speak the same language and my Monday is your Tuesday.

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