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## Strengths Success Story: Using Focus and Maximizer

**How a human resources executive employed these talent themes to keep engagement on his team high while cutting costs and headcount**

*by Brian Brim and Tim Simon*

*Perhaps the most powerful way to understand how effective a strengths-based approach can be is to listen to the stories people tell. Through their stories, we can see what happens when people shift their focus from fretting about what they perceive as their inadequacies to capitalizing on their talents -- or from who they aren't to who they are. Harnessing their natural ambition results in greater success, often more than they had thought possible. What follows is the first in a series of stories about how individuals have improved their performance by building on their greatest talents.*

Brad is a human resources executive who not only is committed to building a strengths-based organization, but he also has seen tangible results from doing so. Brad is a relatively recent "convert" to the strengths philosophy. Like many of us, he had gone through much of his life trying to fix what he considered his weaknesses.

Let's take a quick look at Brad's past. His Boy Scout troop leader would get a bit frustrated with Brad because he tended to daydream when he was supposed to be listening. And while the other boys were tying knots, Brad would have a handful of rope and no idea what to do with it. Instead, he'd have a lot of questions about the need for the knots and how they were used on ships.

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Later, in high school, Brad got into serious trouble for turning in his English and history papers late. He always finished them, and they were always very good, but his written work was never finished when assignments were due. After a lengthy conference about time management with his principal, two teachers, and his parents, Brad buckled down and concentrated on getting homework done on time, though his papers weren't as good, and he never got every assignment in by the deadline. It was frustrating for everyone, especially Brad, who put a lot of emotional energy into fixing his time management problem.

By the time he started college, Brad was well aware that he was only getting a

little better in most of his areas of weakness, but for some reason, weakness fixing seemed to be the main area of focus. The problem was that when he worked on his weaknesses, he improved to become merely passable in those areas at best. Although he was praised for his progress, these incremental improvements never helped him achieve excellence.

### **That explains a lot**

Many years later, Brad is now running the human resources department for a company that employs thousands of people. His company invited us to conduct a session on strengths, explaining the theory that underpins a strengths-based approach and how individuals can use it to increase their performance. Everyone took the Clifton StrengthsFinder, an online assessment that measures a person's talents -- the ways in which he or she naturally thinks, behaves, or feels -- in 34 categories called themes, then reveals the user's Signature Themes (his or her top five themes), such as Achiever, Strategic, and Relator.

Brad was intrigued by the strengths concept, so much so that he called his introduction to his greatest talents "life changing." For Brad, the hook was that talents push people to excellence rather than mediocrity. Trying to improve is always a worthwhile endeavor, but trying to develop in areas where you truly have potential for strength creates much more meaningful results.

Brad was excited to learn about his Signature Themes, and he went to work to put them into action. He understood how StrengthsFinder helps people discover where they have the most potential to grow and succeed, and he immediately grasped how his talents had shaped his life -- and why spending so much time attempting to fix his weaknesses had shortchanged his areas of potential.

For instance, Brad's fifth theme is Ideation, which describes the tendency to produce new ideas. It's one of the reasons why Brad was known for spacing out (and why, to this day, he thinks it is more helpful to know how a knot is used -- and envision other possible uses -- before learning to tie the knot). He would often get more excited about the implications of what he was learning than the thing itself.

Furthermore, Brad's top theme is Maximizer, the drive to take good things and make them great. He was late with schoolwork not because he was a slacker but because he couldn't bear to turn work in until it was as good as it could be. StrengthsFinder also indicated that his second theme is Focus, the ability to set goals and stay on course, and Brad suspects that probably saved him. If it hadn't been for his talent in setting objectives and zeroing in on achieving them, he'd have been overwhelmed by the demands that weakness fixing put on him.

Brad realized that all the well-meant encouragement he'd received about fixing his weaknesses had resulted in puncturing his ego -- and possibly diminishing his abilities. After StrengthsFinder helped Brad become more conscious about how he was applying his talents, particularly in Focus and

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Maximizer, he was able to gain clarity about his goals and put more energy into achieving them. What's more, he discovered that he was able to help others do the same, which became a way for him to use his talents to build deeper and more meaningful relationships. Brad realized that the more he understood others' talents, including those of his boss and his team, the deeper his relationships grew.

### **Putting strengths to work**

Just before Brad participated in the strengths learning session, he was charged with re-engineering his company's HR department to drive better talent recruitment, stronger performance management, and higher employee engagement. But that was the easy part: Brad was also expected to cut HR costs by 20% and employee headcount by 10%.

Armed with insights from his StrengthsFinder assessment, Brad used his Focus talents to help him create timelines with his team. When people with a lot of Focus talent get on track, they find it easy to stay there, so Brad deliberately used his Focus talents to maintain the team's trajectory. That was helpful to everyone, as there were a number of corrections, changes, and roadblocks along the way.

Later, Brad concentrated his Maximizer talents on ensuring that his team's sights remained high despite the company's job reductions. This wasn't an easy task; it's tough to get people to focus on excellence when they may be fearful of or demoralized by job losses around them.

First, Brad asked his employees to share the results of their StrengthsFinder assessments with him. This gave him a better understanding of his employees' talents. He used these insights to help his employees apply their own talents to improve their performance in their roles. In other words, he maximized them (and probably used a lot of Ideation along the way too). The end result was that the people still on staff after the 10% cuts were made were happier and more productive, even though they were actually doing more work than they had been doing before.

Meanwhile, Brad relentlessly relied on his Focus talents to meet deadlines and stay on course. He gave himself permission to hand off or refuse work requests that robbed him of time to meet his cost- and job-cutting objectives.

Ultimately, Brad was able to accomplish his re-engineering efforts within 12 months. His hard work helped the company reduce costs by approximately \$26 million and increase revenues by 15%. These numbers far exceeded the objectives that had been set for Brad and his team.

### **Don't generalize**

Brad's story is not unusual. Like many stories we hear, Brad's success came from learning to consciously apply his talents to the challenges of his role. In the end, he achieved greater results than he expected.

Often, people credit success to hard work or their team. That's a little simplistic. Gaining clarity about our talents can help us learn from and replicate our successes. Brad found that clarity, and it helped him to succeed -- not only in reaching his own goals but in helping his company reach its goals too.

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