1 Strengths-based Positive Coaching

Introduction to strengths

One of the biggest breakthroughs in both psychology and managerial and leadership thinking over the past decade has been in the area of strengths. Put simply, the strengths approach says that when it comes to developing people, there is more to be gained by building on their existing strengths than on trying to make good their weaknesses. This is a powerful and challenging message for all coaches and anyone interested in developing themselves and others. This chapter will look at how a coach can use the strengths approach.

The idea of working with strengths sounds simple but is often difficult in practice. For most of my 20 years’ involvement in leadership and management development, the focus has been on making good weaknesses, on plugging gaps, and on seeing weak areas as the key areas for development. It often seemed intellectually the right thing to do and for some years I would sit doggedly with clients helping them to work out how to get better at some area or areas of perceived under-performance. So often I noticed a drop-off in energy and motivation as my client acquired and resignedly agreed to an objective aimed at making good an area of weakness. Not only did motivation drop, but most often the objectives were not achieved.

This is not surprising if one takes the view that a person’s weaknesses in fact make them who they are – just as their strengths do. Weaknesses are part of a person’s make-up and it may be unrealistic to expect them to fully overcome a weakness that has always been part of them, still less to turn it into a strength.

The historical focus on weaknesses may partly explain why so many people are unhappy in their work. For the coach, it may also account for why there are so many clients who ‘wake up’ in mid-life and realize they have worked very hard for many years in a job that they hate.

Like many coaches and development professionals, when I came across the strengths approach, I felt instinctively drawn towards it. I felt liberated as I began to focus on what works and motivates rather than what does not. I experienced this liberation in my clients and in myself. To illustrate the power of strengths, try this exercise in considering real issues from the two perspectives of strength and deficit.
Exercise 1.1

A. Take a deficit focus

1. Think about an aspect of your work that you find burdensome and struggle to do well.
2. Formulate a 12-month goal for yourself to bring your performance in this area to an adequate level.
3. Notice how you are feeling.

B. Take a strengths focus

1. Think about an aspect of your work that you enjoy and are good at.
2. Formulate a 12-month goal to develop your competence in that area still further.
3. Notice how you are feeling.

It is likely that you felt much more positive considering your strength and how you could develop it than you did about making up for your weakness. In fact, working to our strengths feels better and is far more motivating than working with weaknesses. It is important for any coach to realize this.

Many people are unhappy and unfulfilled in their work. This is sad because they spend so much of their life there. I do believe that part of my role is to help them be happier and more fulfilled. It is not my responsibility, but it is my role. There are now some well-proven methods available to help clients develop greater well-being and personal growth at work, including the identification and use of strengths. There is a pragmatic basis too for this idealism, because happier, more fulfilled people in fact perform better in their jobs or find better jobs to perform in. So they benefit, their employers and clients benefit, and society benefits.

This may seem a big claim for a strengths approach, but it is important to think big. I am impressed by the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology who have a ‘Strengthening the world’ project in Calcutta. They have found through substantial research and in practice that working with strengths can bring powerful changes including greater happiness, confidence, energy and resilience as well as less stress (Linley et al. 2010). Every time I come back to research of this kind, I am once again impressed by the power of the argument made, and exasperated at how slowly the findings are being adopted by individuals and organizations.

Key figures in the research on strengths

The key figures in the research on strengths are:
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- Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton
- Martin Seligman
- Alex Linley and the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP).

We will now discuss their theories and their work and how these have been used in positive coaching.

**Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton**

Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton had a long association with the Gallup organization. From their research, they developed a list of personal strengths against which a person can be measured. Their work is significant because it begins to distinguish between innate strengths and skills which have been developed. This approach is helpful for a coach because it enables us to move clients beyond limited thinking based on current roles and skills which they may do well, but from which they gain little enjoyment or fulfilment.

Their questionnaire is called the Strengths Finder.

**Example 1.1**

Armin is an excellent coach and management consultant. In the past, he trained as an accountant and was very successful, rising to board level. However, for Armin, ‘board’ was synonymous with ‘bored’ – he became an excellent finance director but was unfulfilled and drained by his work. After a couple of sessions with a new coach who helped him identify his strengths, he resigned and enrolled for a coaching qualification. He says he would never have done this by himself.

**Martin Seligman**

Martin Seligman was a world authority on depression and, at a point in his academic career when many people are coasting downhill to retirement, he decided to switch his focus to people when they function well, rather than when they don’t. His work, leadership and energy have become fundamental in the development of the positive psychology school.

Seligman was the force behind the development of another analysis of strengths – the one based on values which are held to be of importance in most world cultures. It is helpful for coaches and consultants who work across national, ethnic and cultural boundaries, where wider applicability of findings in one country cannot always be guaranteed. It is also useful because it connects personal values to what a person actually does. When values and action are aligned, when a person acts in accordance with what they really
believe and value, then they are happier and more successful. The problem for coaches is that many of our clients don’t believe this, and a lot of them could not articulate their real values if they were asked: ‘What are your values?’ Typically they will give a ‘right’ or very safe response such as ‘truth’ or ‘integrity’ which is not much use for real alignment. Having a framework of this kind enables the coach to get to the client’s real values and strengths and therefore to help them perform better.

To most coaches, these findings seem blindingly obvious, but I believe that it is of great importance to have the blindingly obvious tested at times. Many coaches get by using techniques and tools which have no objective validity other than a self-professed assertion that ‘they work for me’. Since coaching commissioners and clients are increasingly asking for evidence that coaching works and that it is based on rather more than one individual’s experience, this kind of assertion is no longer good enough. Today’s coach needs to know about research into important areas such as happiness, motivation and strengths and to be familiar with the models or questionnaires which have arisen from that research.

The questionnaire Seligman has developed is called Values in Action (VIA).

**Alex Linley and the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP)**

In his landmark book *Average to A+* (Linley 2008), Alex Linley talks of the ‘culture of mediocrity’ that is the result of traditional approaches to leadership development, particularly in the use of the process of 360° feedback. The typical 360° feedback process involves a manager asking their boss, their peers and their subordinates (sometimes other groups like clients too) to score him/her on a range of alleged competencies for the job or the organization. They are subsequently presented with a colourful bar chart recording scores for each group against each competency. Linley notes that when considering the result of such inventories, most subjects and their coaches or managers tend to take the higher scores for granted and focus their time and energy on the lower scoring items. They then prioritize these in the resulting ‘personal development plan’. The effect of this, say, a year later, is that lower scores may rise a little and the stronger scores will tend to drop because effort is going elsewhere. The result is an attenuation of scores, with the scores tending to move towards a mid-point. This pattern is illustrated in Figure 1.1.

I have to confess that I have worked with 360° assessments for many years, and developed several of my own. I had always felt uncomfortable about using them, because I did not feel they were really getting to the heart of a person’s best performance and they rarely enthused people. It was common, for example, that an individual would discount the areas in which they scored well but react strongly to the lower scores, seeing them as personal
criticism rather than useful information. Inevitably we focussed on those lower scores. Linley has helped me to understand what was going on and how, by focussing on weaknesses, a person puts energy into something that de-energizes them and which they are unlikely to perform at more than an adequate level. At the same time, they take their attention and energy away from what they do well and are motivated by.

This is the wrong way to address the problem. Better to pay some attention to low scoring areas that could be problematic if not addressed, but focus more on a person’s strengths and how even the higher scores might be increased. **Focus on strengths not weaknesses is the key.** In fact, Linley’s research strongly indicates that a focus on strengths leads to higher performance for
the coachee. How much more engaging, motivating and successful it is to identify strengths and then build on them.

Exercise 1.2

Think of something you love doing, ideally something that you are naturally good at and which people have always noted about you. That is probably a strength. Now think of two or three ways in which you could make that strength even stronger. How does that feel? Notice the motivational power here. Notice too, perhaps, if you had some resistance to identifying the strength or to actually working on it. Where does that come from? How can you reduce the impact of this resistance?

In 2009, Linley and his colleagues at the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP) published another strengths questionnaire, the ‘Realise 2’ (see Figure 1.2). This is not just ‘more of the same’, but is more comprehensive, and more useful for coaching purposes, because it seeks to distinguish between true strengths and learned skills. The definition of a ‘strength’ is therefore fundamental here. This is what Linley says a strength is:

It is a pre-existing capacity that already exists within us. It is something that comes naturally. Using a strength feels authentic. It is energizing to use a strength. Weaknesses, in contrast, often drain us.

So a crucial factor is that, when we use a true strength, we feel energized. As a coach, part of our role is to notice when what is portrayed as a strength is accompanied by the energy or not. Typically this energy will be shown by a shift to more positive, upright, centred body language, by looking up rather than down, a stronger, more consistent tone and more energy in the voice and the body of the client.

Figure 1.2 Realise 2
Exercise 1.3
When you are next coaching a person, perhaps on a career matter or a choice they need to make, get them to talk to you about a success or how well they are doing a particular task or role. Observe their energy as they speak and feed this back.

Work with them to identify whether this is a true strength or merely something they have learned to do well.

So the CAPP research provides much more than a definition or one simple list of strengths. In fact, it sorts a person’s responses into four categories:

1. strengths which the person is using;
2. strengths which they are under-using;
3. learned behaviours – things they do well but which do not energize them;
4. weaknesses.

I have noticed that for many people the results here can be challenging.

Example 1.2
The Realise 2 report for Michelle suggested that ‘empathy’ was a learned behaviour for her. Michelle was rather surprised and said that friends and colleagues always said what a nice person she was – kind, helpful, friendly. She could not see how this empathy could be learned. Nonetheless on further discussion, it became clear that, coming from a highly technical, operational background, Michelle had had to learn empathy to be a successful manager – and she had worked very hard on it. What then emerged was that, at times, she could overdo the empathy (perhaps because it had not come naturally) and fail to play to her real strengths in planning and strategy development. At times, in fact, the overdone empathy was sometimes received a bit like ‘painting by numbers’ – it seemed false, although it was genuinely intended. Michelle has now strengthened her contributions to business meetings, behaving more assertively, and her stock has risen considerably.

This is not a recipe for ‘anything goes as long as it’s a strength’. Areas of weakness can be strategically important, for example, a weakness in planning might become a fatal flaw in many jobs and it does need to be addressed. But, for the coach, it is important to know that we are at our best and our most authentic when we major on our strengths.
Working with strengths

There are several strengths inventories you can ask your clients to complete. I have seen that the best coaches and indeed the best trainers in psychometric and other instruments have a deep personal understanding of what they take their clients through. To really understand any of these questionnaires, you need to have completed them yourself, to have worked on digesting the results and to have taken action as a result. I know several ‘development professionals’, who claim to coach too, and who peddle questionnaires of all kinds without having really thought through what they really mean or how a person can actually use them. If you are familiar with the Myers Briggs Type Indicator © or other potentially insightful questionnaires, you may, like me, have experienced the overly short session with a superficial explanation, insufficient time for digestion and poor answers to valid questions. This tends to leave a person thinking ‘interesting … but so what?’ To use questionnaires well as a coach, you need to be able to explore them in depth with your client and therefore you need an in-depth understanding of them yourself.

Of course, inventories are not the only way to get at strengths. There are a number of ways to draw them out, here are some of the best known:

- At My Best
- 360º assessment
- Lateral thinking

**Exercise 1.4 At My Best**

A version of the well-known ‘Peak Experience’ exercise, this is a simple but highly motivating exercise used by many coaches.

1. Invite the coachee to identify two or three occasions when they have been at their best. The occasions can be of any duration from a few minutes to a year. It is important that being ‘at your best’ is meaningful to the coachee, not an attempt to impress or conform to what others think. Neither is it a comparison with others – one person I did this with talked about learning to ride a bike, aged 43. For them, this represented courage, perseverance and a commitment to learning – and the fact that many people learn to ride before they start school was irrelevant.

2. Get them to talk about the experience, re-living it as vividly as possible as they go.

3. Note down every example of a possible strength they display as they talk.

4. After they have talked about the events, invite them to consider the list you have noted down and to hone it into four or five areas of strength which characterize them at their best.
Because of the privileged nature of the coaching conversation, you will probably also become aware of strengths the coachee displays just in talking to you about their issues. You can feed these back to the coachee for their consideration. This exercise generally leaves the coachee feeling very positive, in fact, for many coachees, just acknowledging their own strengths can be an inspiring and motivating step.

**Example 1.3**

I was coaching a teacher working on a higher degree and getting rather bogged down. Her focus was entirely on the problems and blocks she faced and she was beginning to feel she was ‘not cut out for this’. At one point she began to talk about how she had set up special sessions for some of her less able students. Suddenly she came alive, her face took on more colour, she sat upright and smiled – and she talked quickly and articulately about what she was doing. I fed back to her what I had noticed and she realized then just how important that aspect of teaching was for her and she was able to accept that she had real strengths in empathy and a strong sense of justice. This re-motivated her to finish the study because she could now bring these strengths and values more prominently into her research.

Another way to get at strengths is through 360º feedback. Although I have highlighted the potential for inadvertently focussing on weaknesses, these surveys can be used positively to identify and build strengths. There is of course a danger that you will tend to get the cerebral responses (the ‘right answer’) which could include learned skills rather than true strengths. Spotting the energy then is crucial to distinguishing real strengths from learned behaviours. Whether the coach uses feedback, inventories or conversation, they do then need to move the learning forward to next steps.

**Lateral thinking**

While a coach may be taking a positive approach and encouraging their clients to do so too, this does not mean they need to drop rigour from the process. Edward de Bono, the lateral thinking guru, stresses (de Bono 1990) that in being creative and indeed in thinking better generally, we need to engage both the left and right sides of our brain. Leaving aside whether this notion is biologically correct or merely an analogy, it is useful to keep in mind that creativity and divergent thinking (often associated with the right side of the brain) need to be channelled by some rules and boundaries (the ‘left’ side). For this reason I use a structured approach for working with strengths based on the CAPP model. Because strengths coaching and thinking is new to many clients, I have found some structuring to be useful.
**Strengths assessment**

Having done a strengths assessment, you can take each area of strengths in turn, starting with the most positive.

**Strengths you are currently using**

The main focus here is for the coachee is on maintaining and, where possible, making even greater use of these strengths. Typical questions around these are:

- How are you currently using this strength?
- How useful is it in this organization [work situation]?
- What scope do you have to use it more?
- What specifically can you do to use it more?

**Strengths you currently under-use**

These need to be used more if the coachee is to become more effective and fulfilled. They are a major area to focus on in a strengths coaching session. Typical questions may be:

- Which of these strengths are you using at least to some extent? How can you do more of this?
- Taking the ones you use little or not at all, which ones could be used right now or in the near future? What can you do to bring them into play?
- Which ones have least scope for use right now? How could you use them elsewhere?
- How may you be stopping yourself using these strengths?

**Dealing with the learned behaviours**

It is not always possible just to stop doing things – the accountant I mentioned earlier could not just ignore the month and year ends while he considered a career change. However, there are key questions that can be raised nonetheless:

- Which of these can you just stop doing?
- Which can you get others to do who do have the relevant strengths?
- If you have to do some of them, how can you spend less time and energy on them? What would be ‘good enough’ here?
Above all, the coach needs to discourage the coachee from striving hard to turn one of these into an outstanding strength, because they won’t manage to.

Areas of weakness

The good news is that it’s OK to have weaknesses. In fact, I have found that in accepting my own weaknesses, I am better able to accept my own strengths – not easy coming from a traditional English background! It is likely that many of our weaknesses have been with us throughout our lives – and that often the same weaknesses were noted early on by friends, family and teachers. So there’s no point striving to be something we are not. The real aim for a coach in this arena is to challenge the client to let go and reduce the need to operate in areas of weakness. This is not about irresponsibility or abdication, but rather to enable the person to become the outstanding performer that is within them. Some useful questions to ask:

• To what extent is this really a core part of your job?
• Who else could do it?
• How can you get it done without doing it yourself?
• What would happen if you stopped doing it?

I have come across many leaders in many sectors who get bogged down with their weaknesses when they don’t need to. Here is a personal example:

Example 1.4

Some while ago I set up my own business. This entailed the usual business processes including making payments and invoicing clients and keeping track of the finances generally. Now I knew from many years experience that I find it difficult to do all of this stuff. I understand it intellectually, but when I have to do it, I do it badly and I feel drained and burdened. I turned to a colleague for some coaching around all this and realized that I was playing to my weaknesses. I quickly found someone who was actually delighted to help me with this, in fact, I was surprised that anyone would be enthusiastic about small business finance. I had become trapped in my own world, striving to do things I was not good at, which drained me, and believing that no-one would actually want to take this on.

So the finances still have to be done but maybe I don’t have to do them myself. Herein lies a major lesson for coaches working with senior leaders in organizations – the leader needs to ensure things get done, not do them.
Example 1.5

I was coaching the chief executive of an IT company. She consistently struggled to find the time to do the long-term even medium-term strategy, to think about next year and the coming five years, to produce innovation, and so on. What was happening was that she spent far too much time firefighting. Although she was an IT project manager by background, a lot of the problems were related to the highly technical aspects of the work they did. She realized that she was spending far too much time trying to understand technology from a very low starting base and unconsciously being drawn into identifying solutions to systems crashes, etc. In fact, she had highly skilled people who could do this much faster and better than she, but who had stopped bothering because she micro-managed everything so tightly. Moving her back to her project management skills, we found that by adopting the role of overall manager – the person who had to ensure delivery of the service, but not the fixer, she was able to re-orientate her time and become the real leader she needed to be.

The leadership–performance link

There is other well-founded evidence which supports a strengths-based approach. For some 40 years, George Litwin and Robert Stringer (1968), Warner Burke (1992), Daniel Goleman (2000) and others have researched the notion of work group climate. Essentially the climate in a workplace is ‘what it feels like to work around here’. A climate can feel cold and rainy or warm and sunny. A more positive climate is experienced when a person receives clarity about their role and job, is set high (but not impossible) performance standards, is given recognition as a person and for what they do, is given accountability for delivering, and feels part of a team. What is particularly important for a coach here is that very consistent research across multiple sectors shows that the more positive the climate is, the more these things are in place, the better the motivation and the better the performance – whether that is measured by profit, turnover, customer satisfaction, innovation, etc. The second key finding is that despite the many excuses we hear from managers for poor performance in their teams, the most important factor by far in building a positive climate is their behaviour as the immediate line manager.

So our clients are generating climates around them whether or not they realize this. It is they above all else who are generating that sense of clarity and high performance, that recognition and teamwork. So what could be more positive and motivating than having your boss get you to focus on and build up your strengths? Being acknowledged for things you are good at and which energize you, and being helped to do more of them and develop them.
And for the coach, what could be more important than helping your client to understand better the climate they are creating at present and thus to generate an even more positive climate: it works at a human level, and it generates better performance. This is a major challenge for those many clients who find themselves trapped in micro-managing and fire-fighting. In their desperation to rescue performance, they create a cold, grey climate and, paradoxically, sow the seeds of demotivation and poor performance.

To be clear, this does not imply a focus only on what is good and ignoring what is poor. Setting performance standards and giving clarity can be tough at times. Creating a positive climate is not a soft option – but it is a good business proposition.

**How to use strengths**

In an empirical evaluation of positive psychology approaches, Seligman et al. (2005) identified two particular techniques that have been shown to produce lasting results. One is to use signature strengths in new ways and the second is to regularly identify ‘three good things in life’. I have built the first of these into a new coaching technique to work with strengths.

**Exercise 1.5**

I have referred to a number of inventories of signature strengths. This is where to find them:

- **Values in Action (VIA)** developed by Seligman himself and available free on his website: www.authentichappiness.com
- **Strengths Finder** developed by Buckingham and Clifton which is available via a code inside their book *Now Discover your Strengths*.

The good thing about these inventories is that they are objective and have been validated and shown to hang together well. Seligman’s in particular has also been developed to avoid cultural bias. In each case, the inventory highlights between four and seven of your top strengths.

Use one of the above questionnaires or, as an alternative or complementary route to strengths finding, use the ‘At My Best’ methodology outlined on p. 19:

- From these, you can help your client to prioritize the list into their top four to six strengths as they see them.
• Then, looking at the work the client currently does, you can use a Strengths Wheel (Figure 1.3) to plot them. Take one segment for each strength and label it. Consider the centre of the wheel to be a score of ‘0’ and the outer rim a score of ‘10’. Now ask the client to place two marks (ideally different colours) in each segment indicating (1) how far they currently use that strength in their work; and (2) how much scope there is for using that strength at work. The bigger the gap between the current use and the scope, the higher the priority in targeting that strength and the greater the return.

• Invite the client to note the key gaps and to begin to identify ways of making greater use of these priority strengths in their work. The example for a client in Figure 1.3 shows that some strengths offer a greater scope for development than others. These are likely to be the places to start.

• Get the client to commit to using these strengths (or at least one to begin with) in new ways, every day for the coming week. Ask how you can support them and keep them accountable in this.

The ‘three good things in life’ technique (Seligman et al. 2005) is also useful. It can sound a little simplistic but he has based it on research findings, and I have tried it with a wide range of people to great success. In particular, it is a useful technique when a person is feeling rather low or stuck. You simply ask...
them to take a moment each evening for the next week (or longer) to write down three things to be grateful for that day. As a precaution, you may invite them not to list things cynically such as, ‘I was grateful to get through the day’, but to focus on things they did or that happened which were genuinely positive, for example, instead of that cynical response, to say ‘I am grateful that I left work on time and got home in time to see my family.’

Seligman et al. have found significant psychological benefits from this exercise including a reduced susceptibility to depression. I have used a verbal version of the technique, asking clients to recount positive experiences for which they are grateful and responding with appreciation in my turn. I notice that at first many clients find it hard to identify good things for which they are grateful, but that they very soon learn to spot them. As the client develops turning their attention to the positive, they experience more regular positive emotion and so break the negative thinking cycle.

**Criticisms of and concerns about using the strengths approach**

Although the evidence and experience in favour of a strengths approach are powerful indeed, it is important not to discount the potential obstacles in the way for a coach. Many individuals and managers are wedded to the weaknesses approach, somehow feeling that this is the ‘real’ work to be done.

It seems that many people have a predisposition towards what is negative and this seems to be hard-wired within them. Under pressure, they tend to default to a failure setting. In fact, clichéd assertions like ‘there is no failure, only learning’, and ‘we allow people to make mistakes’, are easy to make but very rare in practice. At times of recession and change they tend to disappear completely.

Because people, including our clients, tend to have this propensity for negativity, it is important to be aware of it and to spot it when it rears its ugly head. Some of the ways you may spot it include:

- Statements beginning ‘yes but’ or ‘mind you’.
- Difficulty in stating what they want or setting a goal.
- Recounting the problem when you ask a question about options or what next.
- Moving the eyes from looking up to looking down.
- A sigh.

In these cases, it is useful to bring this shift to the client’s attention so that they can begin to spot and handle negative patterns in their thinking. It is of course useful for the coach to do a reality check on actions sometimes,
especially if the action seems rather unrealistic. But as a general rule, a ratio of 3 or more positive emotions to one negative seems to keep the balance (Fredrickson 2010). What is clear is that part of the coach’s role is to help the coachee keep in a positive state, focusing much more on strengths than weaknesses.

**Summary of strengths**

- Strengths are capacities a person has which they are instinctively good at and which energize them when practised.
- There is considerable research showing that a focus on strengths yields better results than a focus on weaknesses.
- We all have an inbuilt negativity bias which a coach can help to overcome by accessing the client’s resourcefulness and positive emotions.
- A coach works better from a strengths-based, positive mindset in relations to both the client and themselves.
- There is something deeply authentic in a person acknowledging their own strengths and building them more into their life.

**Conclusion**

This research by Seligman, Linley and others offers robust evidence and learning which is of major importance for coaches. It suggests that we need to focus on people’s existing and most natural strengths more than we do on their weaknesses, but that we need to help people manage those weaknesses so that they do not become ‘fatal flaws’ as Zenger and Folkman (2002) term them. To be outstanding in what they do, our clients need to leverage those core or ‘signature’ strengths they already have and not waste energy on things they will never be, or want to be, good at. Most of the coaches and clients I know think that is a good idea.