



AT ISSUE

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Glance at Weaknesses, Gaze at Strengths

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Imagine being able to spend a substantial part of each workday doing things you are good at and really enjoy. Imagine attending workshops and training sessions to get even better at something that is already a strength, rather than constantly working on your innumerable weaknesses. Imagine that your organization's culture focused on enhancement rather than remediation. Imagine that being true not only for you but for everyone you know, including your children.

A (Too) Quiet Revolution

Marcus Buckingham, co-author of several of the books listed below, would be the first to ruefully acknowledge that imagination is likely the only way you are viewing this idyllic state. Only 17 percent of workers in the United States and 15 percent in the United Kingdom say that they use their strengths at work. Worse, those statistics, gathered this year, are identical to the ones the Gallup organization gathered five years ago at the start of the 'strengths-based revolution'.¹ Is revolution the correct term when nothing happens?

It is depressing enough that people rarely get to spend time using their natural talents. It is worse still that the same Gallup polls indicated that of the people surveyed, only 41 percent believed that focusing on their strengths was the key to success.² Although statistics have not been gathered from educators, it is probably safe to assume that the percentage of teachers who believe they should be focusing on enhancing student strengths as much or more than they are remediating their weaknesses would be very low, perhaps a single digit.

Why We Focus on Weakness

Many teachers use a variety of learning profile assessments with their students at the beginning of a year in order to determine individual preferences. However, classroom activity changes very little as a result of this knowledge. What is going on?

It may be that learning profile thinking is simply difficult to operationalize. Perhaps we just don't know how to apply multiple intelligences theory, for example, to classroom work.³ Or maybe we don't honestly believe that helping students identify and use their natural preferences will make any difference to their performance when they go out to work. If that is the case, Buckingham's 30 years of Gallup data prove us wrong. Workplaces that allowed individuals to work through their natural strengths were 56 percent more likely to have higher-than-average customer loyalty, 38 percent more likely to have above-average productivity, and 27 percent more likely to report higher profitability.⁴

Perhaps educators see students as blank slates, not yet possessing clear-cut strengths or preferences, and needing to be introduced to everything before they are fully formed. That may be true, up to a certain age, although almost everyone can think of at least one child whose preferences seem to have been evident and unchanging since birth.

It may be that as a society, we have simply bought into the lure of transformation – the image of the beautiful butterfly emerging from the chrysalis, of the hero triumphing over the hardships of a long and arduous journey. The multi-billion dollar self-help industry promotes the limitless potential of every human being by suggesting that "if you can dream it, you can do it," as long as you are willing to work at eradicating every weakness of character and personality that might stand in your way.

Or perhaps, as Buckingham suggests, the real problem in getting people in charge to help others capitalize on their strengths is that the ones in charge have never had the experience of capitalizing on their own. Those with authority over others need to "put on their own oxygen masks first" and experience the satisfactions of working in ways that reflect their preferences and strengths.

Next Steps

Buckingham suggests an experiment. For the next week, every time you do an activity, record whether you found it enjoyable, negative or neutral. Watch in particular for those activities you feel drawn to, for the ones where you lose track of time, and for the ones where you are able to learn new ideas or new skills very quickly. Analyze the pattern of your responses and then slowly, incrementally increase the frequency with which you engage in the enjoyable activities.

This little experiment won't change the world, but it may allow you to imagine classrooms where all learners, including our most reluctant and struggling ones, will someday see schools as places that recognize, enhance and celebrate their strengths, not just attempt to 'fix' their weaknesses. |

Learn More about Strengths

- Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).
- Marcus Buckingham, *The One Thing You Need to Know... About Great Managing, Great Leading, and Sustained Individual Success* (New York: Free Press, a division of Simon & Schuster, 2005).
- Rosanne Liesveld and Jo Ann Miller, *Teach with Your Strengths* (New York: Gallup Press, 2005).

KAREN HUME IS CURRENTLY ON LEAVE FROM HER SCHOOL BOARD AND IS WRITING AND SPEAKING ABOUT EDUCATION. MORE INFORMATION IS AVAILABLE AT WWW.KARENHUME.CA

Notes

- 1 Zoe Roberts, "Lay Down the Flaw," *People Management Magazine*, October 26, 2006. www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/pm. Also available at www.marcusbuckingham.com
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 D.J. Matthews and D.P. Keating, "What We Are Learning About How Children Learn, and What This Means for Teachers," *Education Canada*, 39, no. 1 (1999): 35-37. Also available at www.hunter.cuny.edu/gifted-ed/articles/m&k_ed.shtml
- 4 Polly LaBarre, "Marcus Buckingham Thinks Your Boss Has an Attitude Problem," *Fast Company*, August 2001. www.marcusbuckingham.com