

## Building Strength-Based Organizations

Written by Scott Franklin (LCE), Life Cycle Engineering  
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**History has provided us with a couple of very powerful examples of what happens when the "right" people fill the "wrong" roles. Avoiding this mistake is a key to organizational effectiveness.**



History buffs often point to General Ulysses S. Grant and Winston Churchill as strong leaders. Were they, really?

The biographies of these men are immensely intriguing-and, in some aspects, eerily similar. Both had extremely successful wartime careers followed by far less successful civilian lives. Grant's presidency became mired in scandals and a five-year economic depression. Churchill failed to prove himself as an effective peacetime prime minister and resigned from office in 1955. What could they have done to be better leaders after their respective wars?

If Grant had only prosecuted his corrupt cabinet members or more skillfully addressed the issues that fueled the nation's lingering economic woes...? If Churchill had only been more diplomatic within his own country...? If they had, history might view their peacetime accomplishments more favorably. In the end, however, we remember them simply as two great, larger-than-life wartime heroes who failed to live up to their leadership potential later on. Could their biggest mistakes simply have been in believing that they actually had any talent at all for leading people when the fighting ended?

### **Right people, wrong role**

In building an organization, how do you avoid mistakes like these, where the right people end up in the wrong role? It is especially important to realize that the misplacement of a person is two mistakes, not one. Not only is the person NOT in a role where he/she can excel, but he/she

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also is preventing that role from being filled by the right person. From an organizational design point of view, the classic model calls for management to:

- Define the required activities necessary for each role.
- Assign individuals to execute these activities.
- Monitor performance of individuals and address problems.

How does this prevent the wrong person from getting into the wrong role and put the right person into the right role? It doesn't. Instead, this model relies more on trial and error and disregards the single most important aspect of great performance- individual talent. A much better model would be one that begins with individual talent and builds on strengths.

### The strength-based model

A strength-based organization is built upon three premises:

- All people are born with talents.
- Strengths are built on talents.
- Roles must play to strengths.

We see talent around us all the time-the musician who can quickly learn any instrument; the natural athlete who rarely loses;



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the attentive salesman who makes the buying experience enjoyable; etc. We see these people in action and think to ourselves, "I wish I could be like that." This is true almost any time we see someone do particularly well at something. But, there are only two important differences

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---

between us and them: (1) they have a talent that we don't; and (2) they have put years into developing their talent into strengths and we have just put in years.

Studies indicate that by age 15, individuals have become "wired" a certain way. Someone who is "Analytical" at age 15 will be "Analytical" at age 85. Someone who is strong in "Command" at age 15 will still be strong in "Command" at age 75 (where "Command" is the natural ability to take charge). Any naturally occurring patterns of thought, feeling or behavior are what we generally call a talent. The kid who is naturally good at math or the writer who can easily find the perfect combination of words have "talents" and, for better or for worse, such talents are not learnable or transferable.

Could you have "learned" to be good at math in high school? Yes-*sort of*-but to what level? Was studying hard ever going to make you as good as the math wizard who sat two rows ahead of you in class-  
*especially*  
*if he/she ALSO was studying hard?*

If so, you should have studied harder, hoping that the math wiz wasn't studying harder as well. In fact, why didn't you give up your entire social life and study nothing but math? Yes, you would have gotten better at it-  
*but to what level*

? On the other hand, what if your real talent were in writing? Spending hours getting "better" at math would have meant that you were NOT spending hours getting "great" at writing-  
*where your true talent really might be.*

### Running the real numbers

In Nebraska, in the 1950s, a program was instituted in the public schools to test the relative effectiveness of three different reading-improvement methodologies. The program was particularly interesting in that it resulted in three discoveries:

- All three methodologies were equally effective.
- There were significant differences among the teachers (i.e., some teachers were better than others). (Gasp!)
- The greatest improvements were made by students who were already the best readers. (Double Gasp!!) Top students showed improvement of over 900% (from 300 wpm to 2900 wpm). Slower readers also showed improvement, but it was small in comparison.

This last bullet-pointed discovery was a big surprise to many people, primarily because it had been so easy to believe that the greatest opportunity for improvement would have been in the

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area of weakness. Instead, as we now have begun to understand, an individual's true chance for greatness lies in his/her focusing on areas of natural talent. In other words, find what you are good at and focus on getting great at it.

### **An abundance of talent**

It is easy to believe that talents are rare, probably because we have more nontalents than talents. It is only in comparison, however, that talents are rare. The truth is that we are surrounded by an abundance of talent. Unfortunately, most of us in positions of management have been trained to focus on weaknesses as our greatest opportunity of improvement-mainly because weaknesses are easy to see and the perceived gap is more obvious. Talents, in contrast, often are hidden or unrecognized when glimpsed.

To build a strength-based organization, it is important to raise our skill level in recognizing talent. Signs of talent include:

- Rapid learning: The ability to quickly master an activity is a classic indication of a natural talent.
- Satisfaction: Finding satisfaction in either performing a task or in the successful accomplishment of an activity is another talent clue.
- Yearnings: A strong desire to try something also can signal underlying talent.

### **Building talents into strengths**

Imagine if you have the opportunity to send only one of your employees to a training course. Would you be better sending your lowest performer to a remedial course or your best performer to an advanced class? If your goal is to have everyone meet a minimum standard, then "fixing" the lowest performer may be what's required. But, if your goal is to increase your competitive edge, you need to send the best performer to the advanced class.

Quite simply, focus your training budget on your highest performers and build their talents into strengths. This does not mean that you should ignore weaknesses-they must be identified and addressed. Remember, though, that the core of a true weakness is a non-talent.

In most cases, a non-talent is irrelevant. We all have lots of non-talents and, for the most part, no one ever notices. It is only when we put a non-talent on display that it becomes a weakness. If a shortcoming in an individual's performance is found, is it based on lack of talent (a true

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weakness), lack of skills or lack of desire? Lack of skill and/or desire can be addressed directly-but a lack of talent is different. You can't really fix a lack of talent, or, to be blunt, put in what God left out. When faced with a lack of talent, the options include:

- *Getting good enough to get by:* It is not that a person can't improve in an area of non-talent, it is just that the improvement will be hard to come by and take greater effort. If someone is not a good public speaker but needs to be able to address a group, then practicing enough to get by may be necessary.
- *Creating a support system:* If a person knows where he/she needs help, it is important for him/her to develop a support system on which to rely for assistance.
- *Finding a partner:* Great partnerships are incredibly effective. A classic example is the technical visionary partnering with the savvy business manager.
- *Redefining the role to exclude the non-talent:* Enough said.



### Matching strengths to roles

The third characteristic of a strength-based organization is the matching of strengths to the role. This generally is done in one of two ways.

In the first way, many roles (especially unique roles/single-person roles) can be redefined to exclude individual non-talents. A business unit leader might be wonderful at managing the people in the group, but less talented at recognizing market trends. This situation calls for redefining the role and assigning strategic planning elsewhere.

The second way to match strengths to roles is to ensure that a role has clearly defined

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outcomes and very flexible methods. The classic example where this is done right is in sales (i.e., "Role-Salesman, Goal-\$500K monthly sales"). Someone could be a "numbers-game" salesperson who makes as many calls as possible in an hour or a relationship builder who focuses on select opportunities. It doesn't really matter, as long as he/she consistently meets the \$500K monthly sales goal.

### Hindsight

Understanding the concept of the "strengthbased organization" and the foundation of great team performance built upon individual talent makes it easier for us to understand the dilemmas faced by Grant and Churchill as they tried to lead peacetime societies. If they could join our discussion today, no doubt they, too, would readily admit that they were much better suited to filling their wartime positions. It is pure conjecture as to what drove Grant and Churchill and their desire to seek the high offices they did at the conclusion of their wars. If we could hazard a guess, though, it would probably be that it was the lure of the offices rather than a love of the actual day-to-day execution of a political system that drove them. The continual compromises and deal-making necessary to be effective in a peacetime environment played to neither man's aggressive, "total victory" nature. In fact, both men struggled in their respective systems during their careers prior to their wars. It was only in wartime environments that their strengths were perfectly suited for their respective roles.

If Grant and Churchill had been truly honest with themselves, they would likely have realized that peacetime politics was not their talent and continued pursuit of high office was in neither their nations' nor their own best interests. How are you and your organization building on your strengths? **MT**

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