

# ***Building a Strength-Based Culture***



Image by Claudia Dea

By Dr. Chance T. Eaton

"Oh my God this is boring." I was 100 miles into a trip hauling feeder cattle to the Midwest. The scenery was fine, but I just couldn't sit behind a wheel for such long periods of time when it felt like there was so much more to life. My trucking partner Nate disagreed. One night while we were driving, he got on the radio and asked me, "What was that word you once used for when you feel in flow, like you are really in it?" I said, "Not sure – was it 'euphoric'?"

"Yes, that's it – euphoric," Nate said. "I feel euphoric driving a truck late at night, no one else on the road, a tall Mountain Dew and country music."

I thought, "This guy is crazy. Who could possibly feel euphoric doing this crappy job?" I didn't know why one person could love something that I absolutely despised; nor did I have any education or skills to ponder the question. The only background and education I had was business school and the farm/ranch for work experience. And I knew my role at that time was to be a good truck driver, moving feeder cattle from the northern plains to Midwest feedlots and adding economic value to our company by doing my job.

It is almost amusing to look back at that time knowing what I know now. The reason he was euphoric and I was not is simple: Nate was playing to his strengths, and I was not. He liked the routine, structure, order and predictability – the *consistency*. Nate looked forward to driving the truck; when he was driving, he felt confident and in flow, and when he returned after a long trip, he felt rejuvenated. I, on the other hand, was distressed just thinking about another long haul. Driving it took tremendous effort, and when I returned, I felt exhausted and weak.

A strength is any activity that makes you feel stronger. You get excited as you anticipate the activity; you feel confident and in flow while doing it, as if time passes by quickly; and when the activity is complete, you feel rejuvenated and strong. A weakness is any activity that makes you feel weaker. You feel distress as you approach the activity, it takes tremendous effort to accomplish the task, time feels as if it's standing still and upon completion you are exhausted and weak.

The most effective people on this planet, throughout time, engage in self-awareness to uncover how they are fundamentally built. They become reflective and take notice of what makes them feel strong – be it

implementing solutions, organizing data, selling ideas, performing, leading, solving problems, investigating, serving people, building, using their imagination, etc. They take the time to know where they are wickedly talented and where they find the most joy. The most effective people don't stop there; they continue to invest in their talents with additional knowledge and skills. When you play to your strengths, you unleash energy, focus, confidence and commitment. The greats all know where they are strong and how to continue growing and investing in their strengths, and they have fun doing it.

In the workplace, we know that incorporating your strengths has enormous positive outcomes. For example, when employees have the opportunity to do their best at work as a result of playing to their strengths, they are six times as likely to be engaged at work and three times as likely to be engaged in life in general (Gallup, 2012). The Human Capital Institute (2016) reported that when organizations emphasize strengths, there is a 38% higher probability of success on productivity measures and a 44% higher probability of success on customer loyalty and employee retention.

Further research on teams focusing on strength-based development from Gallup (2012) has shown the following:

- Teams that focus on strengths every day have 12.5% greater productivity.
- Teams that receive feedback specific to their strengths have 8.9% greater profitability.
- Turnover rates are 24.9% lower for employees who receive strengths feedback than for those who do not.
- When managers take an active role in focusing on their team members' strengths, there is only a 1% chance that they are actively disengaged at work.

What is disappointing is that companies rarely play to their team members' strengths. They encourage their teams to work on their weaknesses and become well-rounded. Only four in 10 employees actually use their strengths at work (Gallup, 2017). If the ratio were to move to eight in 10, organizations would see an 8% increase in customer engagement, a 14% increase in profitability and a 46% reduction in safety incidents. At some level, it makes sense that companies don't incorporate a strength-based philosophy; companies don't exist to build their employees – they exist to fulfill their mission and, ultimately, to maximize stake-

holder value. To be successful in a competitive market, companies place great attention on measuring performance by assessing job duties and competencies. Further, managers place their focus on exposing and fixing employee weaknesses as an intervention to improve job-performance ratings.

The reason why companies and managers are fixated on fixing weaknesses is that we are still operating from the industrial paradigm. In the industrial paradigm, every person plays a small role in creating a finished product. Urgency, thoroughness, speed and quality are highly valued, and people are just another cog in the wheel to accomplish the task. People are literally looked at as things, assets, capital and resources. This is the very reason why we are still fixated on improving our weaknesses in order to create greater efficiencies. By doing so, we'll fill in the gaps of productivity and become more consistent – hence the well-oiled machine. As we move into the knowledge era, we are starting to see that humans can't be seen as a sheer resource; they are complex beings, each with unique talents waiting to be unleashed.

Fixing their weaknesses will get an employee's performance only so far. Author Marcus Buckingham (2008) shares a story about Shaquille O'Neal's experience with the LA Lakers. Shaq was renowned for his poor free throw shooting percentage with the Orlando Magic. He spent a lot of energy and time working to improve this part of his game. When he moved to the LA Lakers, his new coach, Phil Jackson, told Shaq that he could spend a little time practicing free throws but should focus most of his time and energy working on his inside game. Shaq replied that he was one of the best centers in the NBA and could be even better if he could improve his free throw percentage. Phil agreed that he was one of the best centers in the NBA but said that if he focused on and improved his strength of being a big inside player, he could be one of the best centers of all time. Playing to your weaknesses will only get you so far; the biggest return on investment will always come from playing to your strengths.

I think a lot of managers are flat out scared of having to deal with human complexity and truly leading people. The human being is so multifaceted, whirling with unique motivations, talents, past traumas and subjective values and beliefs. It is much easier to treat people all the same (like cogs in a wheel), measure for performance and place focus on improving weaknesses. Managing for efficiency is a much easier gig than leading for effectiveness. If managers continue to stay stuck in the industrial paradigm by managing for efficiency and focusing only on weaknesses, they will get left behind.

The next-generation companies are taking note of the growing knowledge economy, listening to the needs of the millennial generation and receiving quality leadership education. They are opening up to the fact that humans are not a resource, not an asset – they are not a thing. They are seeing the sheer complexity of the human being and looking to unleash the untapped potential that every employee possesses. They see that when you help employees understand their unique strengths, ensure that they are in the right job and then provide them with the knowledge and skills to fully express their talents, they unleash energy, confidence, ownership, motivation, engagement and total brilliance.

As it turns out, my strengths don't involve the need for consistency, unlike those of my trucking partner Nate. My strengths include learning, helping people develop and thinking strategically. I also know that the companies I work for may not know how to use strength-based strategies, so it is ultimately up to me to incorporate my strengths into my day-to-day living. Specifically, each week I intentionally set two Strong Week Goals. I look for activities at work where I will express my needs for learning, helping people develop and thinking strategically. This keeps my juices flowing and makes me more confident, self-efficacious, hopeful, optimistic and resilient. I anchor to what makes me great, and I press the gas. I do this – and so can you.

My advice for you is to take the time to identify what makes you great. An easy way to get this ball rolling is to take multiple personality assessments. You will begin to see a tapestry of how you are built and what motivates you. The Clifton StrengthsFinder in particular is my first recommended assessment. The first step is to get very clear about your strengths and to start investing in the knowledge and skills to create a compounding performance effect. Second, set goals each week around your strengths, as this will keep you leaning forward with contagious hope and optimism. This helps remind you of where you are talented and builds motivation and momentum for upcoming situations and opportunities. Third, if you are in a management role, be the leader that your employees deserve. Help them to identify their strengths, and build teams that are diverse but saturated with individuals playing to their strengths. The industrial paradigm is dying, so become a next-generation company by building a strength-based culture.

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