

## ***MANAGERS SHOULD FOCUS ON STAFF STRENGTHS***

Engagement is all about creating a positive environment, culture and working conditions to capture the employee's commitment and discretionary effort. So, why is it that, when it comes to performance management and development, we managers persist in looking to address our people's weaknesses, or to put it more kindly, their development needs?

When people are recruited into organisations it is on the basis of what we perceive to be their strengths in terms of their skills, knowledge and attributes. So it makes no sense to me that once there are on board, we start to focusing on trying to identify and turn around their weaknesses. If we accept the premise that engagement only occurs within a positive work environment, we should concentrate our efforts on developing and maximising on people's strengths thereby creating a more positive experience for them.

Positive psychology is a relatively new field named in 1998 by Martin Seligman. It involves the scientific study of those strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive. In the world of work and management the promotion of productive and supportive workplaces which foster engagement and commitment is grounded in positive psychology.

Peter Drucker was a strong advocate of a strengths-based approach to management. Organisations should, he said, develop their people by making high demands on them based only on their strengths. CAPP (The Centre for Applied Positive Psychology) makes a strong business case for a strengths-based approach to performance management. It cites recent research which found that this approach results in a 36% increase in performance contrasting with a 27% decrease in performance with a weakness focus. They also found that highly engaged staff reported using their strengths 70% of their time while Gallup studies showed that top managers spent disproportionately more of their time focusing on developing the strengths of their people rather than their weaknesses. Thus, leveraging individual and team strengths can lead to higher engagement and thus greater organisational performance.

Adopting a strengths focused approach to managing clearly calls for an understanding of what constitutes strength in a work context. The Strengths Partnership is a leading authority on this area and they define strengths as "underlying qualities that energise us, contribute to our personal growth and lead to peak performance". They have developed a useful assessment tool called Strengthscope™ which comprehensively measures 24 performance-critical work-based strengths broken down into four clusters:

**Relational:** strengths relating to maintaining productive relations

**Thinking:** strengths relating to gathering information and making decisions

**Emotional:** strengths relating to how emotions are managed and expressed

**Execution:** strengths relating to delivering results

A clear understanding and awareness of an individual's strengths, using a tool such as the one just described, can form the basis of a performance development discussion where these strengths can be optimised to achieve organisational goals and outcomes for all concerned.

So, as the old song goes.....“you've got to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, latch on to the affirmative and don't mess with mister-in-between”. All together now!