

# The Current State of Strengths Science and Practice

A RESPONSE TO “STRENGTHS-BASED COACHING CAN ACTUALLY WEAKEN YOU,” BY TOMAS CHAMORRO-PREMUZIC

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In a *Harvard Business Review* blog post from Jan. 4, 2016, Hogan Assessment Systems CEO Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic claims that strengths-based coaching can do more harm than good. He bases his claims on a somewhat misleading view of strengths-based assessments and development, and on a lack of attention to the research literature.

Although the author’s comments are directed at strengths coaching in general, Gallup was singled out more than once in the article and accompanying comments. We routinely encounter myths about our strengths-based approach, so let us be clear: We would never suggest that individuals, particularly in the workplace, should simply ignore their weaknesses. Doing so would be reckless, and we have stated this clearly and repeatedly in multiple forums.

Despite everything we have said in our books, articles and direct correspondence with other critics of the strengths-based approach, some continue to argue that Gallup advocates focusing solely on strengths and completely ignoring weaknesses.

Donald O. Clifton, Ph.D., initiated early work on strengths, and he received a Presidential Commendation from the American Psychological Association (APA) in 2003 as the father of strengths-based psychology and the grandfather of positive psychology for his efforts. Martin Seligman describes positive psychology as a supplement to the field’s traditional approach. He asserts that practitioners should be as concerned with patients’ personal fulfillment as they are with healing pathology and that interventions should do more than decrease misery – they should also “build the enabling conditions of life.” Strengths science answers questions about what’s right with people and augments traditional psychological science, which fixates on what’s wrong with people.

Gallup always has described *strength* as the product of talent, skills, knowledge, practice and effort. We have communicated this definition in numerous books, articles and other publications. In *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, author Tom Rath simplifies the equation to  $\text{talent} \times \text{investment} = \text{strength}$ . In this model, *investment* essentially means hard work and time spent on development. Given our focus on research and results, we clearly recognize the value of determination and effort.

Today, most of Gallup's consulting work focuses on helping individuals and organizations be more productive. We likely do more employee and customer engagement audits than anyone else in the world. We have spent decades helping organizations fix problems with bad management, leadership and hiring practices, among other things. Our book, *Human Sigma: Managing the Employee-Customer Encounter*, is devoted to improving organizational effectiveness and driving concrete financial outcomes. Several chapters examine the best ways to address organizational deficits. We are not aware of any part of Gallup's consulting model that suggests ignoring weaknesses. The last thing we would ever do is tell our clients to focus simply on strengths and forget everything else.

We earnestly invite critique and evaluation because of its potential to make our strengths science and practice better. We also provide candid feedback in an effort to reduce confusion, such as the following point-by-point response to Chamorro-Premuzic's claims. Please note that most of the content referenced in Gallup's responses has been publicly available for years.

**Contention No. 1: There's no scientific evidence that it works.**

Chamorro-Premuzic asserts that "the strengths-based approach to management is not grounded in science," and there are "no scientific studies ... to support the idea that developmental interventions are more successful if they ignore people's deficits or provide no negative feedback."

This assertion conflates two important issues. As we noted previously, Gallup does not endorse ignoring weaknesses. Excerpts from recent books, chapters and technical reports support Gallup's position on this issue. Some examples include:

- "Individuals gain more when they build on their talents than when they make comparable efforts to improve their areas of weakness." (*Clifton & Harter, 2003*)
- "A strength is mastery created when one's most powerful talents are refined with practice and combined with acquired relevant skills and knowledge. The CSF is designed to measure the raw talents that can serve as the foundation of strengths. Thus, the purpose of the instrument is to identify Signature Themes of talent that serve as a starting point in the discovery of talents that can be productively applied to achieve success." (*Asplund, Agrawal, Hodges, Harter & Lopez, 2014*)
- "In any occupation or role, it's helpful to know your areas of lesser talent. ... In many cases, simply being aware of your areas of lesser talent can help you avoid major roadblocks. ... You might need to establish systems to manage your lesser talents. ..."

- It is also essential to try to become more conscious of any ‘blind spots’ that are caused by your talents. ... People with dominant Consistency talents might focus so much on keeping the steps uniform that they ignore the overall outcome or goal. ... So while our talents primarily serve to keep us on track, they can at times derail our pursuits. ... The key is for you to be aware of your potential *and* your limitations.” (*StrengthsFinder 2.0*, pp. 22-24)

We also are not aware of any other leading strengths researchers who advocate ignoring weaknesses. For example:

- In *Strengths Coaching With Leaders* (Linley, Woolston & Biswas-Diener, 2009), the authors posit an integrative understanding of strengths and weaknesses, and a decision process for revealing weaknesses to render them irrelevant.
- “Research findings from positive psychology are intended to supplement, not remotely to replace, what is known about human suffering, weakness and disorder. The intent is to have a more complete and balanced scientific understanding of the human experience — the peaks, the valleys and everything in between.” (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005).
- “Understanding our strengths, articulating our values, knowing where we belong — these are also essential to addressing one of the great challenges of organizations: improving the abysmally low productivity of knowledge workers. ... Effective organizations put people in jobs in which they can do the most good. They place people — and allow people to place themselves — according to their strengths.” (Drucker, 2000)

Regarding the supposed lack of scientific evidence of the efficacy of strengths-based development, Gallup has published many studies, peer-reviewed (cited first) and otherwise. (A list of selected references is attached.)

Examples of Gallup-related research include:

- In 1999, Schmidt and Rader published a meta-analysis in *Personnel Psychology* of an extensive database of 107 predictive validity studies. The interview examined in this study was found to be a valid predictor of productivity, sales, absenteeism and job tenure. It is a typical example of the raw material from which the Clifton StrengthsFinder (CSF) content was developed.
- In 2002, Harter, Schmidt and Hayes published “Business-Unit-Level Relationship Between Employee Satisfaction, Employee Engagement, and Business Outcomes: A Meta-Analysis” in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*. The opportunity to use one’s strengths — to do what one does best each day — is a core predictor of workplace engagement, which in turn is a core predictor of a range of business outcomes.
- In 2010, Harter, Schmidt, Asplund, Killham and Agrawal published the paper “Causal Impact of Employee Work Perceptions on the Bottom Line of Organizations” in *Perspectives on Psychological*

*Science*. The researchers observed that the strongest causal path from work perceptions to financial performance was for the employee engagement item, “At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.” Having an opportunity to “do what I do best” is tied to the employee’s strengths.

- In 2011, Harter and Stone published “Engaging and Disengaging Work Conditions, Momentary Experiences, and Cortisol Response” in *Motivation and Emotion*. Research results demonstrated the effects of working conditions and employee engagement on momentary affect and physiology. Engaged employees had much more positive affect at work, and their affect did not vary much between working and nonworking days. The engagement element with the most consistent relationships to momentary experiences at work was, “At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.” At random intervals, these employees were also asked if they were using their strengths, and the employees who agreed with this statement were also much more likely to agree that they had the opportunity to do what they do best every day.

Scholarly volumes have published numerous reviews of Gallup’s research.

Recent examples include:

- In 2003, Clifton and Harter published “Strengths Investment” in *Positive Organizational Scholarship* edited by Cameron, Dutton and Quinn. The authors note: “In a study of 10,885 work units (308,798 employees) in 51 companies, work units scoring above the median on the statement, ‘At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day,’ have 44% (1.4 times) higher probability of success on customer loyalty and employee retention, and 38% (1.4 times) higher productivity of success on productivity measures.” They also note multiple case study examples of the benefits of strengths interventions.
- In 2004, Hodges and Clifton published “Strengths-Based Development in Practice” in Linley and Joseph’s *Handbook of Positive Psychology in Practice*. They discuss several case studies of the benefits of strengths initiatives and show examples in various settings: absenteeism, grades and tardiness among urban high school students; GPA gains among university students; productivity improvements in a Toyota parts warehouse; performance improvements in a Florida hospital; multiple linkages to employee engagement; and improvements in various psychological measures such as hope, well-being and confidence.
- In 2009, Hodges and Asplund published a chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology and Work* on applications of strengths-based development to various organizational objectives. They included multiple empirical examples of individual and organizational improvement.

- In 2012, Asplund and Blacksmith published a chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship* on how organizations can drive performance through strengths-based development practices. It showed productivity gains from strengths initiatives.
- In 2012, Louis wrote "The Clifton StrengthsFinder & Student Strengths Development: A Review of Research." This paper highlights studies that demonstrate evidence of strengths-based interventions improving student GPA, absenteeism, hope, academic engagement, retention and other outcomes.

Again, other researchers also have published evidence of the efficacy of a proper strengths-based intervention. Most do not have access to the same kind of data Gallup receives from its clients, but their findings are nonetheless generally consistent with what we have seen. Examples include:

- In 2005, Seligman et al. tested several positive psychology exercises in a placebo-controlled study and found that "using signature strengths in a new way" led to improvements in happiness and depression. Mongrain and Anselmo-Matthews replicated the happiness findings in 2012.
- Govindji and Linley (2007) found that people who used their strengths more reported higher levels of self-efficacy. Proctor, Maltby and Linley (2009) reported similar findings in a separate study of university students.
- Linley, Nielsen, Wood, Gillett and Biswas-Diener (2010) showed that strengths use is associated with better progress on goals, which is in turn associated with enhanced well-being.
- Over a six-month period with a community sample of 207 people, those who used their strengths more reported lower stress levels. This was the case at the baseline period, where strengths use was associated with less stress, and also over the three-month and six-month follow-ups, where higher strengths use predicted lower stress over time (*Wood, Linley, Maltby, Kashdan & Hurling, 2011*).
- Analysis of the Ego Resiliency Scale with Realise2 shows that strengths use is associated with higher levels of resilience for 50 of the 60 Realise2 strengths (*CAPP, 2010*).

### **Contention No. 2: It can give people a false sense of competence.**

Chamorro-Premuzic states, "It is likely that strengths-based feedback will only enhance people's deluded self-views," and that "strengths approaches focus too much on the individual out of context."

This is an incorrect characterization of Gallup's strengths-based development programs. The CSF technical report states, "CSF's intended purpose is to facilitate personal development and growth. It is intended and used as a springboard for discussions with managers, friends, colleagues and advisers and as a tool for self-awareness." In programs designed to promote strengths-based development, feedback is often accompanied by instruction,

experiential learning and mentoring activities designed to help people make the most of their talents (i.e., develop strengths associated with occupational or educational roles). CSF results are clarified through conversations and reflection, not as the fanciful, context-free endorsement of the respondent's wildest fantasies, as Chamorro-Premuzic would have one believe.

Because the focus is on individual development, we do not norm CSF results. In the early days of CSF, Gallup provided normed scores, but we determined this to be counterproductive to our purpose of within-person development.

We should discuss research by Louis (2011) here as it demonstrated that strengths feedback alone, without a developmental experience such as coaching, may not always be beneficial. Specifically, strengths feedback may spark a fixed mindset instead of promoting a growth mindset associated with strengths development. Because of this study, we advocate that each person who completes the CSF be offered a developmental experience that builds on his or her talents.

**Contention No. 3: It leads to resources being wasted on C and D players.** The author quotes the Gallup website: "All employees have strengths — the unique combinations of talents, knowledge, skills, and practice that help them do what they do best every day. These strengths provide employees and employers with their greatest opportunities for success."

We designed the CSF and associated coaching programs to help individuals maximize who they are and become their best, most productive selves. Again, strengths-based interventions focus on within-individual development. Rather than comparing each individual with some normative ideals, strengths feedback and coaching are designed to help anyone who wants to put in the effort to improve.

It is possible that some of those "C" and "D" players are underperforming because they are miserable, mismanaged or simply inexperienced. Chamorro-Premuzic notes the prevalence of these negative conditions in the modern workplace. We believe that a positive intervention ameliorates these impediments to performance.

In our experience, most companies do not have a clear idea who their "A" players are or what makes them such. It is even less common for organizations to know who might be an "A" player if transitioned to a different role. In fact, organizations often move star players out of roles in which they excelled and into roles for which they are poorly suited (e.g., managerial roles) because the organizations do not have accurate information about their strengths.

**Contention No. 4: Overused strengths become toxic.** The author states that positive qualities will become toxic if they are overused or expressed in excess.

When we encounter this idea of "toxic strengths" or "derailers," critics typically use the example of the dominant or aggressive personality type to illustrate the problem. The argument goes that accentuating this

characteristic, which is the claimed consequence of focusing exclusively on strengths, can kill a person’s career. This is likely true. But what about other talents or traits? Can a leader be “derailed” by being too good at strategic thinking or being too effective at building relationships?

Gallup designs programs to help participants manage their development in a realistic way, believing that each of the CSF themes has what our coaches refer to as *balconies and basements*. Balconies are the positive characteristics usually associated with a theme. For example, a balcony for the Discipline theme is efficient planning or high accuracy. A basement for that same Discipline theme is behavior that is judgmental, overbearing or overly rigid. Awareness of our natural tendencies and a purposeful focus on our most important goals help us avoid these basements while still building on the positive applications of the same themes.

**Contention No. 5: It doesn’t address the real problem workplaces face.** The author makes the following claims:

- “The strengths movement exudes an inexplicable degree of optimism.”
- “It therefore seems a little odd, even intellectually irresponsible, to ignore our limitations and shortcomings.”
- “If the focus is on making people more competent, productive, or effective, managers and decision makers should work instead on mitigating people’s weaknesses.”

To support these contentions, the author quotes Stanford University Professor Jeffrey Pfeffer’s recent book, *Leadership BS: Fixing Workplaces and Careers One Truth at a Time*: “Workplaces in the United States and around the world are, for the most part ... filled with dissatisfied, disengaged employees who do not trust their leaders; leaders at all levels lose their jobs at an increasingly fast pace ... and the leadership industry has failed and continues to fail in its task of producing leaders who are effective and successful, and it has even failed to produce sufficient talent to fill leadership vacancies.”

First, Gallup almost certainly has unparalleled data on the situations Pfeffer describes. We have extensive knowledge about the state of workplaces around the world, and that knowledge is sobering. Only 30% of U.S. employees are engaged at work, and what’s worse is that over the past 12 years, this low number has barely budged, meaning that the vast majority of employees are failing to grow and contribute at work. Gallup’s strengths interventions are designed to address one of the most troubling problems in the workforce — employee disengagement. Knowing employees’ most powerful talents helps one understand how to best position them for success.

Given the troubling state of employee engagement in the U.S. today, it follows that most managers and leaders are not creating environments in which employees feel motivated or even comfortable. We have written about this in great detail, and interested readers can consult our reports on the global workplace, for example, to learn more. We note it here to emphasize that we are not only aware of the failings of most workplaces but that we are

almost certainly in a far better position to assess those failings than anyone else. This hardly constitutes “ignoring limitations and shortcomings.”

Does the strengths movement exude an inexplicable degree of optimism? A focus on strengths does proceed from the simple notions that we all have some things that we are better at than others and that we would be happier and more productive if we spent more of our time doing those things.

But is this “inexplicable”? There is ample evidence — some of it included above — of the importance of strengths in promoting human development. Gallup and many others have documented how strengths development increases one’s awareness of one’s strengths, and the subsequent increase in self-confidence it produces might have long-term implications as well, according to a landmark 2008 study led by Judge and Hurst. They studied the self-evaluations of 7,660 men and women between the ages of 14 and 22 in 1979. Then they kept track of these participants over the next 25 years and repeated the measures, which included questions about career success, job status, education and health, in 2004.

The researchers found that people with higher self-confidence in 1979 ended up with higher income levels and career satisfaction in 2004. What they discovered about the link between early self-confidence and physical health may be even more surprising. When asked about health problems that interfered with their work, the group with low self-confidence in 1979 reported almost three times as many health problems in 2004. By contrast, the group with high self-evaluations in 1979 reported having fewer health problems in 2004 than they did 25 years before.

The results of this study suggest that people who are aware of their strengths and build self-confidence at a young age may reap a cumulative advantage that continues to grow over a lifetime. A preliminary Gallup analysis (using the same longitudinal panel from Judge and Hurst’s study) suggests that people who report having a chance to use their strengths in the workplace gain a similar advantage. Our research team found that people who had the opportunity to use their strengths early on (between the ages of 15 and 23) had significantly higher job satisfaction and income levels 25 years later.

These outcomes highlight the value of leaders knowing their own strengths and also reveal how important it is for leaders to help others uncover their strengths as early as possible. If an organization’s leaders can help each person capitalize on this cumulative advantage, it is likely to create more rapid individual and organizational growth.

So what about the idea that people are more productive if they work solely on mitigating their weaknesses? In a study of 19,187 employees from 34 organizations across seven industries and 29 countries, the Corporate Leadership Council (2002) found that when managers emphasized performance strengths, performance was 36.4% higher, and when they emphasized personality strengths, performance was 21.3% higher. In



contrast, emphasizing weaknesses led to a 26.8% decline for performance weaknesses and a 5.5% decline for personality weaknesses.

Gallup repeatedly has found similar results with respect to employee engagement: That is, employees were far more likely to be engaged if managers focus on their strengths and not their weaknesses. Sixty-one percent of employees whose managers focus on their strengths were engaged, and only 1% were actively disengaged. In contrast, only 45% of employees whose managers focused on weaknesses were engaged, and 22% were actively disengaged. Both types of managers outperformed those who ignored their employees, however.

There is no evidence that strengths-based coaching may weaken people. There is, however, an abundance of empirical support for the development of employee strengths to promote engagement and productivity in the workplace.

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