

Leveraging from a strengths-based approach

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“Cultivate a deep understanding of yourself – not only what your strengths and weaknesses are but also how you learn, how you work with others, what your values are, and where you can make the greatest contribution. Because only when you operate from strengths can you achieve true excellence”

Peter F. Drucker

The strengths-based approach

Individuals looking to achieve true excellence - and the fulfilment that comes through working with one's strengths - need to focus on the four aspects of the strengths-based approach:

- 1. Personal preferences (VIA characteristics)**
The things that the individual is interested in and naturally drawn to, which reflect their intrinsic priorities and values
- 2. Individual skills (Signature strengths)**
The extrinsic talents and skills that the individual demonstrates
- 3. Strengths energy source (Core Beliefs)**
The emotional motivation that drives strengths-based behaviour
- 4. Personal strengths story (Narrative)**
The synthesis of the individual's preferences and skills into a strengths narrative that reflects and drives their cognitive style and strategic worldview



While most of us have some awareness of one or more of these different aspects of ourselves, the integration of all four parts into a cohesive strengths-based approach is often a little more challenging. For those aiming for high performance, however, it's a critical part of being an effective leader.

Starting from your preferences and skills

The first step is to identify your personal preferences and individual skills. Organisationally-embedded feedback processes that use strengths-based models to drive personal development can help facilitate this process and provide valuable insight for those starting to explore their strengths.

For example, the **Values in Action (VIA) Assessment** identifies twenty four strengths that have been found to be universal – characteristics that define what's best about people.

These are classified into six key areas: wisdom & knowledge; courage; humanity; justice; temperance; and transcendence.

Scientifically validated and based on positive psychology, the VIA Assessment will help you identify your personal preferences – characteristics that you are naturally drawn to and that reflect your intrinsic priorities.

For those exploring their individual skills, the Gallup **Strengthsfinder** identifies thirty-four themes of talent. Ranging from achiever to relator, futuristic to restorative, these themes are clustered into four key areas: executing; influencing; relationship-building; and strategic thinking. The Strengthsfinder can help provide granularity about the extrinsic talents and abilities that you demonstrate.

How emotion drives strengths-based behaviour

Even with insight about our preferences and skills, we're often not consciously aware of the energy source that makes strengths-based behaviour possible. This emotional fuel comes from the limbic system in our primitive brain - the seat of our **Core Beliefs** and personal motivations.

Core Beliefs are deep-seated perceptions that we all have about the world in which we live, work and play. They impact how we think, feel and behave, as well as how we interact with people and our general view of the world. Driven by emotions, these world views or filters are effectively survival patterns that influence everything we do, from the type of car that we buy and the sort of house we live in through to the life partner that we choose. They also impact our work life, influencing every decision we make in whatever role we may play. An overview of the nine Core Belief patterns appears below (see Diagram 1).

In essence, your Core Beliefs provide you with the motivation and emotional fuel you need to get things done. Knowledge of how to work constructively with and harness this energy to drive strengths-based behaviour is therefore a critical part of the strengths-based approach. Awareness of how your Core Beliefs affect the way you operate is also important. The way you best manage your Core Beliefs in daily life will depend on how much stress you are experiencing.

At best, when stress levels are low, your Core Beliefs act as an unconscious filter; they shape the scope of your awareness, your unconscious focus of attention

Emotion drives our strength-based behaviour, and this emotional fuel comes from our limbic system

and give you the energy you need to deliver on your priority areas. The upside is that this helps you manage the vast quantities of information you receive every day. The down side is that it inevitably leads to cognitive bias that you have to learn to manage.

Diagram 1: The Nine Core Belief Worldviews

The Nine Core Belief Worldviews: Every one of us has three of these Core Beliefs

Core Belief Profile 1 – Perfectionists *Focus: Integrity/Clarity*

Driven by the belief that you must be good and right to be worthy. Consequently, are conscientious, responsible, improvement-oriented and self-controlled, but also can be critical, resentful and self-judging.

Core Belief Profile 2 – Givers *Focus: Influence*

Driven by the belief that you must give fully to others to be loved. Consequently, are caring, helpful, supportive and relationship-oriented, but also can be prideful, overly intrusive and demanding.

Core Belief Profile 3 – Performers *Focus: Achieving Results*

Driven by the belief that you must accomplish and succeed to be loved. Consequently, are industrious, fast-paced, goal-focused and efficiency-oriented, but also can be inattentive to feelings, impatient and image-driven.

Core Belief Profile 4 – Romantics *Focus: Elite Standards*

Driven by the belief that you must obtain the longed-for ideal relationship or situation to be loved. Consequently, are idealistic, deeply feeling, empathetic and authentic to self, but also dramatic, moody and sometimes self-absorbed.

Core Belief Profile 5 – Observers *Focus: Analysis/Depth of Technical Knowledge*

Driven by the belief that you must protect yourself from a world that demands too much and gives too little to assure life. Consequently, are self-sufficiency seeking, non-demanding, analytical/thoughtful and unobtrusive, but also can be withholding, detached and overly private.

Core Belief Profile 6 – Loyal Sceptics *Focus: Loyalty/Scepticism*

Driven by the belief that you must gain protection and security in a hazardous world you just can't trust. Consequently, are themselves trustworthy, inquisitive, good friends and questioning, but also can be overly doubtful, accusatory and fearful.

Core Belief Profile 7 – Epicures *Focus: New Opportunities*

Driven by the belief that you must keep life up and open to assure a good life. Consequently, are optimistic, upbeat, possibility- and pleasure-seeking and adventurous, but also can be pain-avoidant, uncommitted and self-serving.

Core Belief Profile 8 – Protectors *Focus: All or Nothing*

Driven by the belief that you must be strong and powerful to assure protection and regard in a tough world. Consequently, are justice seeking, direct, strong and action-oriented, but also overly impactful, excessive and sometimes impulsive.

Core Belief Profile 9 – Mediators *Focus: Minimising Conflict*

Driven by the belief that that to be loved and valued you must blend in and go along to get along. Consequently, are self-forgetting, harmony seeking, comfortable and steady, but also conflict avoidant and sometimes stubborn.

As stress levels increase, so too does the activity in your limbic system. In this situation, your Core Beliefs drive emotional reactivity to things that you perceive as a threat. Initially, this takes the form of a ‘pinch’ – the experience of being triggered emotionally by something or someone. If it continues, or if the threat is sufficiently significant, an extreme emotional reaction will lead to a ‘crunch’. This is such an intense emotional outburst that it can sometimes lead to employment termination or legal action.

Unfortunately, when the dust and the limbic activity settles, whether hours or years later, it can take a long time to rebuild relationship or fix the decisions made in this ‘crunch’ state. This progression from cognitive bias through to pinch and, ultimately, crunch is known as the Limbic or Core Beliefs Continuum (see Diagram 2).

Managing our core beliefs is critical because they play a very significant role in our lives, and have the potential either to drive us to great heights or lead to a rapid descent.

Individuals who successfully leverage from their strengths learn what motivates them at a core emotional level. They harness the energy of their core beliefs, while simultaneously counteracting their cognitive biases and managing their emotional reactivity.

These are skills that the most effective leaders have mastered, which increases the effectiveness of both their decision-making and interpersonal interactions.

Putting it all together – your strengths narrative

Traditionally, we used to think that if you wanted to change behaviour, all you needed to focus on was the action itself and provide positive or negative reinforcement to support the desired outcome. With the benefit of neuroscience, we now know that the critical starting point is, in fact, your story (what neuroscience calls your narrative).

This is because changes in narrative and identity ultimately drive sustainable behaviour change. In the context of leadership and performance, this means that

your ability to work with your strengths will depend, in large measure, on the cohesiveness of your narrative about yourself – your personal strengths story.

Through our unique experiences in life, we each



develop an **area of mastery** (also known as an **archetype**) that reflects a thematic integration of the things that interest us and those that we’re good at. The eight areas of mastery are outlined in Diagram 4.

Our archetype drives our conscious focus of attention (our passion or signature strength), our cognitive style and our strategic approach in life. It can be seen as a

The most successful leaders leverage from their strengths by harnessing the energy of their Core Beliefs while simultaneously counteracting their cognitive biases and managing their emotional reactivity

particular way of thinking that we’ve spent over 10,000 hours mastering and has consequently become second nature – our innate strengths position. For many of us, the perspective of our Archetype is our strengths narrative.

Importantly, however, your true ability to leverage from your strengths emerges when your strengths narrative extends beyond simply your cognitive style and strategic worldview and also incorporates the other three aspects of the strengths-based approach. Once you integrate your motivations, preferences and skills into the narrative, the result is a powerful driver for strengths-based behaviour.

The most successful leaders have a clear, conscious understanding of all four aspects of themselves and have integrated them into a coherent strengths narrative. This is one of the underlying keys to their success, and an important step towards achieving both true excellence and personal fulfilment.

Diagram 2: The Core Belief Continuum: From Best to Worst

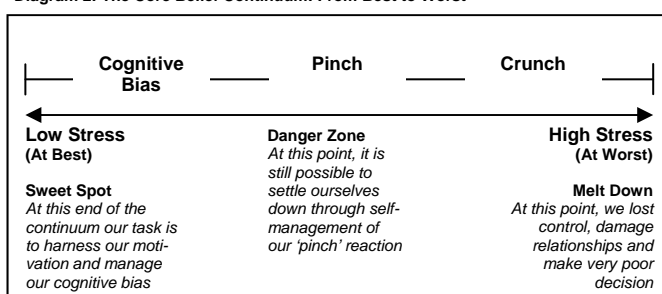


Diagram 4: The eight areas of mastery

Role	Area of mastery	Value this role brings to the team
Explorer / Motivator (Crusader)	The Explorer / Motivator's area of mastery is pathfinding, an ability to conquer new territory. This means that they thrive on danger or unknown territory, or creating new frontiers. As long as the crusade aligns with the stated vision, Explorer / Motivator's will undergo enormous short-term pain for long-term gain. They will be the ones who blast through to achieve the results. This makes Explorer / Motivator's excellent for starting up businesses or projects, for rejuvenating dead concepts or creating new visions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent for leading the charge on any new project or idea. • Excellent for energising great teams of people who need courage, reassurance and energy. • Excellent for pushing the boundaries and dislodging people out of their comfort zone. • Keeps people accountable.
Practical Problem Solver (Commander)	The Practical Problem Solver's area of mastery is their ability to effectively solve problems that are complex, undefined and constantly changing. They are excellent at managing large groups of people in high-stress, dangerous or crisis situations. The Practical Problem Solver is practical and creative and can solve anything 'on the hop'. The Practical Problem Solver is the natural leader when the 'right' emergency action is needed and there is no time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will take over any situation requiring strong authoritarian and practical leadership and management. • Excellent with medical emergencies, disaster clean-ups and hostage situations. • Can cope with the blood and guts of the battlefield or any emotionally charged situation where calm, 'people centred' but authoritarian leadership is required. Perfect when there are many people, many tasks and literally hundreds of problems cropping up moment by moment. • Great for doing the fix-it jobs to keep the show going.
Promoter / Strategist (Chancellor)	The Promoter / Strategist's area of mastery comes from their ability to build bridges between people. As a consequence they develop powerful interpersonal strategies and so can achieve their objectives with very little disruption. The Promoter / Strategist has the ability to influence entire organisations without anybody triggering resistance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to navigate their way through highly political environments. • Can achieve any set of key objectives with the least exposure, cost or risk. • Excellent for promoting the work of the team or organisation to other stakeholders outside the organisation. • Excellent for negotiation.
Encourager / Facilitator (Bard)	The Encourager / Facilitator's area of mastery lies in their ability to develop meaning for situations or events and in their ability to integrate information and to heal. This means creating a passion for the future, giving life meaning, healing old psychological wounds and integrating knowledge in a powerful way.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can heal old psychological wounds so that people can get on with the present. • Can get an amazing amount done quickly. • Can create passion and enthusiasm for new direction and give hope. • Can give any pursuit meaning and purpose – a sense of being worth it.
Auditor / Organiser (Treasurer)	The Auditor / Organiser's area of mastery lies in their ability to create order, systems and stability. This means keeping a calm head in emergencies, grounding new opportunities or settling down situations, people and teams when there is too much ambiguity. In transition, the Auditor / Organiser creates clarity and certainty.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can de-emotionalise and depersonalise highly charged situations. • Create clarity, certainty and assurance that things are in control. • Excellent at keeping an audit trail.
Visionary / Planner (Navigator)	The Visionary / Planner's area of mastery lies in their ability to 'see' what is ahead and to prepare for it now. This means creating the right systems, anticipating the problems, researching all relevant data and ensuring blind panic is turned into beneficial and useful planning. They also understand the importance of every team member playing a central yet different role.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fantastic for creating strategic plans – all the scenarios and details are considered. • Excellent for planning and establishing new ventures. • Excellent for consulting on and preparing for imminent disasters. • Excellent for ensuring the chain of supply is maintained and all the details are considered. • Excellent role clarification with the team or organisation.
Driver / Completer (Judge)	The Driver / Completer has the area of mastery of turning talk into action by demanding absolute clarity and focusing on what can be done NOW to get things on the road.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent for energising a team. • Brilliant resource at the beginning of a project for sourcing suppliers, products or people. • Excellent for new projects or processes where trial and error is necessary to get the right answer. • Will create a 'task oriented', problem-solving team environment by taking the emphasis off the people and placing it on the task at hand.
Creative Change Agent (Architect)	The Creative Change Agent's area of mastery lies in their ability to bring the people, the processes and the vision all into line. This congruence is the basis of good organisational development skills. This means checking that the vision is relevant and understood by the team, checking the processes are practical and are able to support team members, and that these practical processes are followed. While practical, Creative Change Agents have the ability to think conceptually, with abstract ideas or philosophies that are complex and ungrounded.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to bring the abstract reality to practical reality. • Can create organisational congruence where systems, vision and people are all aligned. • Can create clear and practical systems and practices that are suitable to the situation and that work. • Are by their very nature an organisational change agent. • Will lead a group forward – after a disaster.