

Something inside, SO STRONG

Aviva's approach to talent management asks managers to focus on their strengths, not their weaknesses – and it's producing startling results, writes **Gail MacIndoe**

Strengths-focused coaching was developed at Aviva out of the passion of Adam Eaton, director of group management development, and myself. We wanted to introduce a new focus to leadership development that would inspire and motivate individuals and produce tangible benefits for the group.

I discovered Strengthscope, a strengths assessment tool, after starting a coaching pilot. Working with James Brook and Paul Brewerton of The Strengths Partnership, a joint venture between Blue Edge Consulting and Positive Development Partnership, we developed a different approach to coaching based on the idea that the awareness and creative deployment of strengths overcame performance blocks and opened up opportunities.

For Aviva, an international financial services group, this approach lies at the heart of enhancing performance excellence, growth and employee engagement. It supports our new approach to talent management that broadens the traditional definition of talent to include all employees, while recognising that individuals' development needs vary.

We believe that we can achieve the greatest benefit by developing people's natural strengths, rather

than focusing on weaknesses – from which people never excel.

While we cannot achieve this quickly for our 59,000 staff, we can begin to make a difference with our senior management.

As Eaton says: "The strengths philosophy has enriched development conversations, insight and self-awareness, combining to produce great results."

What are strengths?

Strengths are activities that we enjoy (that strengthen us), not necessarily what we are good at. An employee might be an excellent organiser but dislike the activity. True strengths leave people feeling uplifted, energised, fulfilled and confident. We are often drawn to them and find them easy to do. Yet many people, even experienced leaders, are not good at identifying their strengths because from a young age the focus is on correcting our weaknesses.

Self-discovery is key to an individual capitalising on who they are and finding ways to carve their role to play to their strengths. As Gareth Jones says: "Be yourself – more – with skill."¹

Gallup's 2001 (Clifton StrengthFinder Profile) poll² revealed that only 20 per cent of us claimed to be able to use our strengths every day. Only 17 per

cent now typically spend "most of our time" playing to our strengths. Top and high-performing teams are built around their strengths and use them more than 75 per cent of the time.

People can only excel where they have a competitive advantage. Some people are reluctant to focus on their strengths because they believe they need to be all-rounders to succeed, but exceptional performers are not all-rounders. They learn to apply their strengths well.

Our strengths are fairly hardwired by the time we reach our teens. Fixing weaknesses is important, but does not lead to outstanding performance – it only prevents failure.

Weaknesses need attention, but once individuals have clarity about their strengths they can use them more productively and minimise the impact of weaknesses.

The benefits

Alastair Ham, Aviva's group organisational development director, says: "All the time you're not playing to people's strengths you are underperforming as a business. Strengths is about maximising organisational performance and individual fulfilment. Just how exciting would it be to have an organisation with 59,000 fulfilled and happy employees delivering great customer service?"

"Strengths-based management is such a simple concept, yet achieving it is one of the hardest things we could ask people to do. It goes against just about everything we've ever learnt in life. One day I think we'll all look back and think: 'It's so blindingly obvious, how come we ever thought it was sensible to work any other way?'"

The importance of identifying strengths is also recognised by Norwich Union, an Aviva company,



which, in conjunction with CAPP (the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology), developed a strengths-based approach to recruitment.

Since implementing this process, Norwich Union General Insurance has seen staff turnover figures halve, according to Karen Stefanyszyn, head of organisational development at Norwich Union.

Righting 'wrongs'

At Aviva, coaching has helped a number of senior managers to recognise their strengths. One director realised she had focused on fixing what was "wrong", resulting in her losing confidence, rather than playing to the strengths she had been hired for. She introduced the approach to her team, who found they could become more effective and motivated by reallocating staff to different tasks.

It can be difficult to recognise our strengths because they come so naturally to us. One client felt there would not be enough "stretch" if he were to work on what he was good

Why Strengthscope?

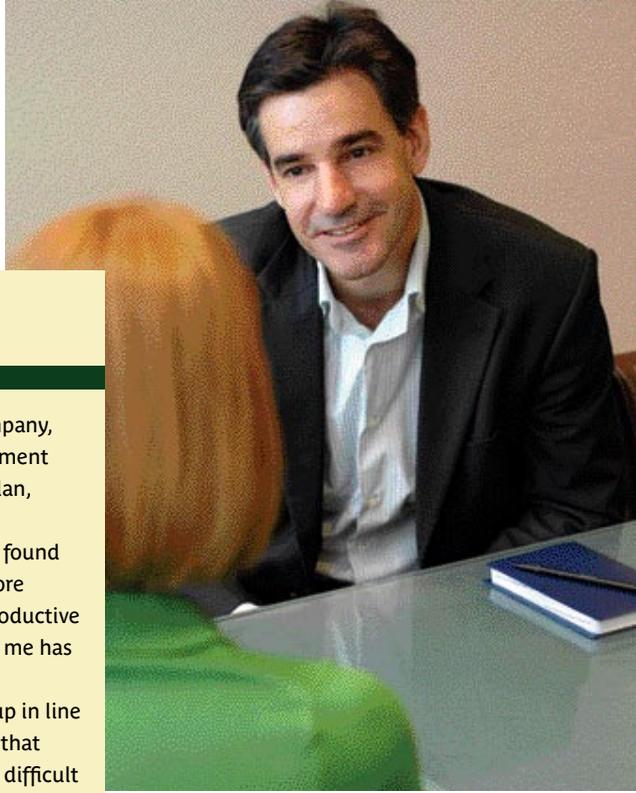
Strengthscope provides a comprehensive measurement of an individual's strengths. The questionnaire measures a person's work-related strengths and has the option of including feedback from colleagues. The report and debriefing with a certified coach help the respondent to identify their most significant strengths, along with ideas on how to put them to best use. It also helps the person to deal with performance blocks and weaker areas by thinking about these through a more positive, strengths "lens".

The tool examines 22 strengths and identifies the "significant seven" for each respondent. The richness comes from exploring what these mean for each individual, using specific examples of when they have performed at their best and why.

"We felt that other strengths assessment tools didn't meet the needs of industry or the coaching community so we set about developing Strengthscope," says Paul Brewerton, co-founder of The Strengths Partnership and co-designer of Strengthscope, along with James Brook, former head of talent at Yahoo! Europe.

Brook recalls: "As well as ensuring first-class psychometric properties, we were keen to make our tool relevant to industry, accessible, and with a distinctly European flavour. We have found that strengths assessment using Strengthscope provides a solid starting point for a strengths-focused approach to coaching, which encourages coaches to help their clients apply their strengths at work more effectively."

www.strengthscope.com



One person's experience

Craig McKinlay, head of channel and sales development at RAC, an Aviva company, found that strengths-focused coaching had a dramatic impact on his development even though he initially felt it was at odds with his individual development plan, which was focused on improving areas of weakness.

"After many years spent focusing my development needs on weaknesses, I found strengths coaching really refreshing and innovative," he says. "It felt much more natural to focus on the things that I am good at so that I can be both more productive and satisfied at work. Becoming mindful of the activities that inspire or drain me has helped me to plan my time so that I can be more effective."

After focusing on his own and his team's strengths he reorganised the group in line with their individual strengths. He also developed people management skills that have enhanced his ability to empathise and motivate the team and deal with difficult situations more confidently.

The programme produced many improvements in McKinlay's personal skills that will have a tangible impact on the bottom line. His line manager, Frank Wilson, says: "The strengths-based coaching has produced the most significant improvements that I have seen from a candidate on a management development programme."

As a direct result of the course, McKinlay has further improved his wider business understanding and networking skills. This has created an opportunity for a new initiative that has the potential to produce an additional 3,000 new memberships this year, with an associated extra £250,000 in revenue.

at. Another was good at seeing new opportunities but felt it was not his place to make suggestions.

Coaching helped him see he was depriving himself and his team of advancement, so he contributed more and mentored colleagues.

On the other hand, overplayed strengths can become weaknesses. For example, someone who is highly results-focused could "steamroller" others to get things done or create stress for themselves by failing to delegate.

Failing to manage weaknesses can result in the wrong person in the team performing a task – when it is someone else's strength. If an area of weakness is critical to a person's role, there are a number of possible solutions: they could use one of their strengths as leverage, create a support system or find a complementary partner.

As a result of the success of the coaching pilot, Aviva now provides

coaching on one of its leadership development programmes, which forms part of the Aviva Leadership Academy, led by Adam Eaton.

"Strengths-based coaching has enabled us to show a direct return on investment (ROI) and fits with our purpose: to equip our future leaders with the skills to define context through insight and self-awareness," Eaton says. "Showing a tangible business benefit is very powerful when talking to line managers."

This is supported by course evaluation by Graham Borley from the Talent Management Academy, which found that the programme

was showing an ROI ratio of greater than 14:1. "The research showed that not only was the programme delivering significant ROI but also that strengths-focused coaching was the most significant contributor," he says.

The next step is to spread the benefits across the organisation. So far, the approach has been piloted in the UK – the next challenge is to expand this to the rest of the non-UK based programme attendees and to assess its effectiveness in different cultures, Eaton says.

"Programme graduates are strong in their support and feel the approach has made a real difference," he adds.

Jez Bezant, head of business management at Morley Fund Management, another Aviva company, says having regular coaching sessions in parallel with the leadership development programme enabled him to look at his strengths and behaviours while he was working, rather than in one

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isolated teaching session, and modify them along the way.

“This has had a much longer-lasting effect and revealed things I already knew about my abilities, but was probably trying to hide.” ■

Gail MacIndoe is an executive coach and learning and development manager at Aviva

References and further information

1. R Goffee and G Jones, *Why should anyone be led by you?*, Harvard Business School Press, 2006.
2. M Buckingham, *Go put your strengths to work*, Free Press, 2006.

● Increase your understanding of psychological theories in coaching by enrolling in the CIPD’s postgraduate certificate in the psychology of coaching. www.cipd.co.uk/training/CPC
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About Aviva

Aviva is the UK’s largest insurer and Europe’s leading life and pensions provider, ranking fifth globally. It manages assets of £364 billion and serves 40 million customers in over 25 countries.

Top tips for maximising strengths

● Lay the groundwork

Few organisations have fully integrated strengths into people management. A client’s line manager should be aware of the strengths philosophy to maximise the chances of success. A strengths focus should be integrated into appraisals, selection and succession planning.

● Assess your client’s strengths

Use a robust tool such as Strengthscope to ensure that clients gain insight and clarity about their natural, core strengths. This provides a solid basis and a shared language for subsequent conversations.

● Make it personal

Use the strengths profile to dig deeper into each strength. Ask clients to keep a diary about what energises them.

● Expect discomfort

Most people are initially uncomfortable when discussing their strengths and may need time to reflect.

● Encourage clients to share

One of the strongest reinforcers of a strength is when valued individuals notice and mention it.

● Stick with the programme

There will be times when a client loses faith and reverts to ruminating over deficits and gaps. You may need to reinforce their belief in the approach.

● Don’t ignore weakness

Focusing on strengths can produce clarity about a weakness and help the client plan to overcome it.

● Consider “strengths overdrive”

Help the client to build an awareness of when to use their strengths and when to keep them in reserve or use them in moderation.

● Assess progress

A ROI measure or progress metric can help both the organisation and client to assess progress and business benefits objectively.

● Consolidate and expand

Consolidate and record findings about strengths before helping the client to extend their deployment.

● Go for the “stretch”

Help clients to explore ways to build on their strengths and ways of putting them into practice so they feel they are developing.

● Carve out a role that plays to strengths

Don’t wait for the manager to offer the perfect role – it is an individual’s responsibility to become more self-aware and to start shifting the focus of their role. As a coach you will have to help manage expectations, but small changes open up lots of possibilities. Encourage them to volunteer for a project, help a colleague or take a course that builds on their skills.

● Do unto others as you would have them do unto you

Once the client has experienced playing to their strengths, encourage them to help their team members and peers to find their strengths and put them into practice.

Aviva/The Strengths Partnership