

A Case Study on Strengths, Engagement, and Culture: What are we learning?

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The culture you create matters: it either facilitates and supports organizational success or undermines and inhibits it. What's more, your culture profoundly affects your employee's wellbeing, either positively or negatively, impacting your organization's effectiveness. Gallup's strengths-based, engaged approach is a response to enhance the workplace culture and the health and wellbeing of those in it. In this training, the participants looked at some of the benefits and components of building a strengths-based, engaged culture—what it is, what it is not, and ways to help drive it deeper into workplace cultures. The result is that individuals, businesses, teams, and entire organizations can be at their best to maximize results and provide quality service and products to their customers.

The conversation was rich. According to the sponsoring organization, they had their largest crowd, and more so, no one left early—they were engaged. The host said, “As simple as this metric of measurement may be, it is our best gauge of success—do people show up, are they engaged, and do they stay to the end. In this event, yes! This event, according to our standards, was a success. Thank you!”

Four insights I gleaned from this experience. The first was the people's hunger for a strengths-based focus and positive engagement. At this stage in the pandemic, employees look for meaning, purpose, and significance in their work. They want to be part of something bigger than themselves. With mental health, emotional strain, social isolation, financial shocks, and the caregiver responsibilities that employees face, their performance over the long haul is affected. Consequently, leaders are searching for ways to care for their employees' health and wellbeing. They are asking how they can take care of their employees to deliver organizational results. According to business literature across the spectrum, mental health is becoming our next pandemic. If people in the workplace are not mentally and emotionally engaged and their wellbeing tended to, results and performance suffer.

Second, when participants were invited to remember their best day at work, it generated excitement. The questions that guided the exercise were: 1) How would they describe it? 2) What made it great? 3) How did they feel, and 4) how might they get more of it? The conversations were spirited as they recalled those wow moments in their daily work. Furthermore, through this exercise, they were given agency to reimagine how they might create more meaningful experiences in their workplace, and how their strengths themes inform their natural capacity for excellence.

The questions tapped into what my friend and colleague, Al Winseman, a Senior Learning and Development Consultant at Gallup, offered me about behavioral economics in a nutshell, setting the stage for strengths and engagement. *Who we are* is linked to *what we do best, our strengths*; *what we do best* is related to *how we feel*, and *how we feel* informs *how we perform*.

Third, according to Gallup, culture is the way the employees and leaders live and accomplish their work. Sociologist Brené Brown commented culture is “the way we do things around here” (2012, p.174). Cultural change has to do with two components: 1) the organization, which includes technology, structure, and processes, and 2) the human side of change or human agency. My hunch is that transforming culture comes down to people and their choices to modify behavior, systems, structures, practices, and ways of being. It must be top-down and bottom-up. Moreover, culture changes through the interaction of structure and people. No one understands the precise interaction of personal agency and structure. Still, we know that both matter and enhance or constrain human agency, thus, affect health, wellbeing, and performance in the workplace (Brubaker & Gilliam, 2021). The truth is strengths and engagement at their best are not about changing the culture but helping organizations harness and amplify the best parts of the organizational culture.

Fourth, we discussed ways to drive a strengths-based, engaged approach more profoundly into the culture. Every organization is different—some make changes quickly; others take more time. Some use a formal, top-down approach, while others approach changes more organically. The process is non-linear, multilayered, and complex. Reading and responding to the currents of culture is an art and a science. No cookie-cutter approaches or checklists exist to affect culture, wellbeing, and health. The following are some components that help drive a strengths-based, engaged approach deeper into the organizational culture. These include realizing: 1) that however or at whatever entrance point into the system strengths and engagement take, at some point, the CEO or Executive Sponsor must buy-in or embrace it. 2) The CliftonStrengths assessment (CS), if possible, should be made available to all employees and must be more than a one-and-done experience. 3) Often, an important step is to have a strengths workshop in the workplace by a qualified, Gallup-certified coach, consultant, or trainer for employees, managers, and leaders. 4) After the initial training, ongoing internal and external coaches and champions need to be available, especially for managers. 5) The strengths-based engagement needs to be woven into performance management, feedback, reviews, and other internal programs. 6) Moreover, leaders are encouraged to track learning, development, implementation, and results and be ready to recalibrate. Your organization’s ability to build on, adapt to, and pivot on your strengths and manage your weaknesses is part of a thriving, resilient organizational culture.

How do you know strengths and engagement have become part of your culture? Edgar Schein, the culture guru from MIT, stated, “If it is successful, people like it, and it becomes a norm, then you can say it has become a culture change.” (Schein, 2016). As you work with culture, engagement, and strengths, a friendly reminder: “The purpose of a company (and our focus strengths, engagement, and culture) is not to create a nice culture but to function in the economy, to provide goods and services” (Schein, 2016).

You cannot be who you are not, but you can be more of who you are. Culture, strengths, and engagement are an ongoing conversation as are the action steps, calculations, and recalibrations that accompany them for organizational effectiveness.

References

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