



# THE STRENGTHS **SPRINGBOARD** IS YOUR ORGANIZATION READY?

**VINCENT TUCKWOOD**  
[vince@strengthspringboard.com](mailto:vince@strengthspringboard.com)



## Welcome

Jess stands, high atop this Athens cliff, staring out across the wide blue smile of the Mediterranean. Breathing steady, heart pumping, seeing the horizon yet unfocused on sight. In her head, she is already twisting, turning, somersaulting; precision movement and muscle memory. Far behind her, grueling sessions of practice and coaching, falling and failing, climbing from the pool bruised, humiliated; distant childhood memories of her first major belly-flop. But all that is passed, now she has only this moment for excellence. Far below, the expectant crowd – hushed in anticipation as her toes curl over the edge of the platform; the Mediterranean breeze buffets her ears. The horizon is diminished in her absolute focus on the descent. Judges await her, to rate her against those that came before and those yet to ascend to the platform. Degree of difficulty, technical skill, all of it tumbling out to a single number from each judge. Five-point-eight-six. Five-point-seven-three. To be decided. After the dive. Breeze from the left; slight, momentary. “Correct for that in the tuck,” she thinks. Enough. It is time to be who she is, what she can be. This moment, this dive, this pure expression of everything she has worked towards. Toes tense on the edge of the platform and her legs go into autopilot, flexing down and springing in return. She enters open space, high above the Mediterranean’s azure.<sup>1</sup>

Here’s my question. If asked, would the people in your organization report similar sensations at work?

*I don’t think so.*

And the data doesn’t support it.

On average, only around a third of workers completing the Gallup Q12® survey will strongly agree with the statement: *At work, I get to do what I do best every day*<sup>2</sup>. And more recent research by [The Marcus Buckingham Company](http://www.marcusbuckingham.com)<sup>3</sup>, suggests that commitment to strengths-based working is losing traction in the US and many other countries worldwide.

But you already know that, because you’ve passed the first hurdle and downloaded this introduction to the Strengths Springboard. If you’re reading a borrowed copy of this, don’t feel bad – just promise me you’ll come over to <http://www.strengthspringboard.com> anyway, OK? If you’re reading this and have no idea what I’m talking about, take a quick dive into the appendix here and make sure you follow up on the work of Marcus Buckingham, The Gallup Organization, and Gary Hamel.

Because the Strengths Springboard isn’t about Strengths... It’s about the Springboard.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on these incredible cliff divers, please take time to visit the World High Diving Federation at <http://www.whdf.com> - thanks!

<sup>2</sup> ‘12 – The Elements of Great Managing’ (Wagner, Harter, 2006)

<sup>3</sup> Watch the video at [http://www.marcusbuckingham.com/site/why\\_strengths/whyStrengths.php](http://www.marcusbuckingham.com/site/why_strengths/whyStrengths.php)



## Why the Springboard?

Let's run a little experiment.

Next time you're in a public place, a shopping mall, cinema, or maybe a restaurant – sit and watch the crowds walking past. Observe them. Let yourself drift in the energy that flows within and between them. Look at the way they hold hands, touch each other, maintain a certain personal space, smile, frown, laugh – marvel at just how uniquely human they are in the moment. And, as you sit watching the wildlife, maybe enjoying a grandé soy-skim latté, I'm pretty confident in saying that none of them will spontaneously perform a triple somersault with pike and half-twist before entering the water at a perfect perpendicular angle with no hint of over-rotation.<sup>4</sup>

For most people in most organizations, the idea of identifying, developing and living their strengths every day is as out of place as a diver trying to complete a routine without the aid of a springboard and swimming pool. The belief system doesn't support it. The structural reinforcement isn't there (unless you happen to know a shopping mall that has a diving pool in the middle of it!)

You know that strength is defined as a natural talent enhanced by the skills, knowledge and experience to accomplish near perfect performance. You also know that identifying and then building upon your strengths is the most sure-fire route to sustained individual success. Weaknesses are to be diminished and managed, for sure. Strengths, though... that's another story.

As you've gained that understanding, you've also learnt that a Manager who can support the development of your strengths, and flex your role and that of team-mates to make best use of strengths, is a critical asset to your organization.

You know that there are many tools available for people to identify their unique strengths set, from the self-awareness and commitment cycle described in 'Go, Put Your Strengths to Work'<sup>5</sup> to the more data-driven analysis of 'Strengthsfinder 2.0'<sup>6</sup> – when coupled with the intense focus on manager

<sup>4</sup> I'm right, aren't I? Come on... smile (life is too glorious not to!)

<sup>5</sup> 'Go, Put Your Strengths to Work' (Buckingham, 2007)

<sup>6</sup> 'Strengthsfinder 2.0' (Rath, 2007)

quality described in 'First, Break All the Rules'<sup>7</sup> and many more of the 549,788<sup>8</sup> books on management, the recipe for strengths-based working is pretty clear. In fact, when you look at things that way, we're not short of routes to identify, describe and quantify strengths – nor the methods by which an individual can deliberately shape their working and personal life to make better use of their unique strengths for a greater proportion of the time.

You know all this. Lots of people know this.

Yet, we still have the results I shared above: *only around a third*. We still have that confounding answer to the question of whether strengths-based working is a consistent reality for your colleagues: *I don't think so*.

In my experience of career coaching, team effectiveness, and colleague engagement, I've come to recognize pretty clearly when the individual commitment to building a strengths-based life is present. It just radiates off people. Get an interviewee talking about an example of where their strengths were in play and it shines. Or in the opposite, when someone is speaking from weakness... Well, as somebody who has a true passion for helping people and organizations reach potential, for me it's both heartbreaking and infuriating at the same time.

When people speak from a place of strength, they speak intuitively, from their gut and not so much from their cognitive self. However, if I were to ask them point blank whether they believed in strengths, there's a very good chance that it would be a different discussion altogether, much closer to dogma and received wisdom. Much closer to a statement of religious conviction. Much closer to "Yes, I do" or "No, I don't".

Listen to how people speak about strengths-based working in your organization (if they do at all). Does it sound like evangelism? Does it sound like an attempt at religious conversion? Does it sound like a bipolar day/night, black/white, right/wrong debate? I think it probably does.

And the reason it sounds like that is not down to strengths or the individual *per se*. It is a direct reflection of the society in which the individual exists. It is a direct reflection of the system in which the individual works. Or, in other words, the *organization*.

A passionate conviction to a belief system that is at odds with societal norms is a recipe for isolation, marginalization and fanaticism.

When it comes to strengths-based working, most organizations are forcing people to act, behave and identify themselves pretty much the same way as would members of a fringe cult.

So let's talk about the organization that forces such divides. The 'modern' organization is an artificial construct that runs counter to the natural energy streams running

<sup>7</sup> 'First, Break All the Rules' (Buckingham, Coffman, 1999)

<sup>8</sup> Amazon Books search for 'management', June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2009 – yes, there really are over half a million books on management – have you read them all? Do you plan to? I didn't think so :o)

through and between people. It's based on an industrial age, manufacturing construct, one where people are treated as automatons; flesh and bone machines to be optimized for a world where bigger, faster, cheaper, and more efficient is the order of the day. The industrialized organization had little time, nor need, for individuality. All it needed was to be able to swap the person in and out like a machine part that didn't suit the latest production batch.<sup>9</sup> When this view of the interchangeability of human skills is coupled with much longer-standing religious mythology of sin and redemption (everyone and everything is fixable), the outcome was never going to be geared to the pure diversity of human individuality.

Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the 'modern' organization calcified its belief system that fixing weakness was "*the way things are around here*." If we just figure out what's wrong with us, we'll be so much better! It should be no surprise that the 20<sup>th</sup> century was also the century of behavioralism and psychoanalysis.

Generations of leaders, managers and professionals grew up within that construct, assimilating those norms into their own management DNA.

And because words, symbols, behaviors, processes and systems grow to reinforce the belief system, for the vast majority of organizations, corporate normality – "*the way things are around here*" – just isn't geared to the development of strengths. In fact, most of what colleagues encounter every day is actually structured to do the complete opposite.

The issue facing strengths-based working is less one of personal conversion (if you want that, you can do no better than starting with the above referenced works) than of the environment in which the conversion takes place. It's not just the people, in other words, it's the super-structure that has been built to perpetuate out-moded beliefs.

And *that* is why the Strengths Springboard.

The Strengths Springboard is all about driving a belief system through lasting change in the super-structural building blocks.

If we were to ask Jess about her journey to that Mediterranean cliff-diving platform, we would hear experiences, relationships and learning with which we could all empathize. We would hear of childhood fun in the pool, hours in the water on vacation. We would hear of the early identification of talent, perhaps at High School, perhaps even earlier. We would hear painful memories of catching the low board counter-spring and how the shock traveled up her legs like she had broken her ankles. We would hear of coaching. Of spending time in the trampoline school, tethered to the harness while twists and flips were learned, practiced and perfected. We would hear of a lifelong, continuous graduation from pool edge, to low board, to 3, 5 and 10-meter platforms and beyond to the present day, more than 20 meters above

the Mediterranean. We would hear of the support system of team-mates, of being picked up when she failed, of reassurance and confidence, of hard lessons learned and wisdom gained.

We would, in short, hear the story of continual stretching of capability and strengths through consistent extension of the belief that the last dive can, and should, be bettered.

Jess' belief. Her team's belief. Her coach's belief. USA Diving's belief.

In short, a continuous belief system and support super-structure that placed Jess in the position to be able to achieve near perfect performance.

This is what the Strengths Springboard is about: the belief system that grows a strengths-based culture, and the words, symbols, behaviors, process and systems that reinforce that intent.



<sup>9</sup> With the absolute greatest of respect and urgency, I direct you to Gary Hamel's 'The Future of Management' (2007) to dig under the surface of this paragraph

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## Building the Strengths Springboard

“A NEW WAY OF THINKING HAS BECOME THE NECESSARY CONDITION FOR RESPONSIBLE LIVING AND ACTING. IF WE MAINTAIN OBSOLETE VALUES AND BELIEFS, A FRAGMENTED CONSCIOUSNESS AND SELF-CENTERED SPIRIT, WE WILL CONTINUE TO HOLD ONTO OUTDATED GOALS AND BEHAVIORS.”  
DALAI LAMA (B. 1935)

The Strengths Springboard rests upon 5 core beliefs (Fig 1) that are closely aligned with, and complementary to the personal belief in strengths-based working.

### The Core Beliefs of the Strengths Springboard

“The thing always happens that you really believe in; and the belief in a thing makes it happen”  
Frank Lloyd Wright (1869-1959)

**Belief 1:** There is no better place for me to do my best work

**Belief 2:** My strengths directly impact our customers for the better

**Belief 3:** Performance serves outcomes not activities

**Belief 4:** Control? What's control?

**Belief 5:** Celebration is not a scarce commodity

Figure 1: The Core Beliefs of the Strengths Springboard

In this section, I'll break down each of these five core beliefs, looking at the words, symbols, behaviors, processes and systems that may be either hindering or enhancing reinforcement.

Before we start though, I want to warn you that there are no easy fixes when it comes to belief, nor one magic bullet solution. You'll see me using the word experiment quite a bit – inquisitiveness and discovery are the first steps to challenging and reframing a belief system, and I encourage you to whole-heartedly experiment with absolute transparency as you build your Strengths Springboard.

So consider this an introduction, and a jumping off point for your own assessment and experimentation. Bring on the discussion and action – that is where belief is codified, understood and validated.

*There is no better place for me to do my best work*

“THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WHAT WE DO AND WHAT WE ARE CAPABLE OF DOING WOULD SUFFICE TO SOLVE MOST OF THE WORLD'S PROBLEMS”  
MAHATMA GHANDI (1869-1948)

*I am proud to be me*

Human beings generally don't like falling. Which is why so many thrill-rides make such a big deal of inducing the sensation of plummeting without the inevitable splat; the fact that we know there isn't a splat doesn't stop our stomach clenching up right into our throat, does it? Yup, human beings don't like falling.

Which is why high divers are so very special. They like falling. In fact, they like twisting, turning and flipping while they're falling. Every time they dive, they induce the sort of sensations that thrill-seekers pay through the nose for at theme parks across the country.

Why would they do that?

Let's try some words on. Fun. Happiness. Meaning. Freedom. Desire. Control. Competition. Challenge. All of those.

But the most important, I think, is *pride*. Pride in competition, pride in performance, pride in posterity.

The pride of legacy: “*I existed, I did something.*”

I'm not going to rehash Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs<sup>10</sup> here or delve too deep into the body of research and practice that's followed – though I will give a special nod to Victor Vroom and also the Porter-Lawler Expectancy Model<sup>11</sup>, specifically because of its differentiation of Extrinsic Outcomes (what I do, create, make, see happen) and Intrinsic Outcomes (how my work makes me feel). If you haven't delved into human meaning at all, I would direct you to ‘*The Happiness Hypothesis*’<sup>12</sup> as a jumping-off point.<sup>13</sup>

You don't need theoreticians to tell you that human beings aspire. Human beings have an ego. Human beings want to experience pride. A video of Dana Kunze's 172ft high dive<sup>14</sup> should be enough to convince you that people are willing to stretch themselves way beyond normality when they find personal meaning in what they're doing.

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<sup>10</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow's\\_hierarchy\\_of\\_needs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow's_hierarchy_of_needs)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.bola.biz/motivation/expectancy.html>

<sup>12</sup> ‘The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom’ (Haidt, 2006)

<sup>13</sup> I could make a really bad pun right now, but I won't!

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4uHkyMh9FW4>

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Yet, think about your organization – how often are people systematically given the opportunity to stand up with pride and say ‘*I did that!*’

I can guess the answer. Check your internal online news site. Check local meetings. Check corporate e-mail briefings. It’s highly likely that the only people either directly or indirectly having virtual or actual voice to make that sort of claim are senior leaders (though generally they will have the hubris to use the royal ‘we’).

How to provide an avenue for pride in self, for making a mark? Let’s think about it through the lens of the Strengths Springboard.

First, there’s the obvious: *Record Books*.

What would a version of the Record Books for your organization look like? Here are just three ‘*Maybes*’:

- Maybe it would be published performance records for each individual in the organization.
- Maybe it would be setting a near unattainable performance outcome for the given year, publicizing progress towards achieving it (think charity thermometer) and naming major contributors.
- Maybe it would be launching an innovation challenge with a sizeable reward to the individual or team coming up with the answer.

If you take the time to discuss what the Record Books would look like for your organization, I’m sure you could come up with many more than these three.

Identifying your version of the Record Books is a good first step, a focused downstream system that supports the belief: ‘*I will make my mark*’. Fundamentally, as I’ve explained above, that is the story of strengths-based living, the desire and commitment to pursue what is not normal, the belief that ‘*I am gloriously different and proud of the difference I make*’.

If that sounds like a statement of near-narcissism, it is.

Beyond the Record Books, though, how could you make near-narcissism OK in your organization?

Well, first of all, remember the central core of the ‘*modern*’ organization – deny that people are individuals, view them as interchangeable manufacturing assets.

So, it’s highly unlikely that anything that’s happened before now within a ‘*modern*’ organization is likely to provide the answer. We have to look to new things. New things. Hmmm...

Have you twittered? Do you have an avatar on Second Life? Are you using Facebook to maintain relationships across the globe? Do you blog under your own name, or a pseudonym? Several pseudonyms?

You would be surprised how many of your colleagues are doing those things.

It’s early Sunday morning as I’m writing this and I just nipped over to <http://www.wordpress.com> (where I blog as [BadConsultant](http://www.badconsultant.com)) to take a look at their current-state stats:

174,524 bloggers, 136,936 new posts, 34,591,912 words today. How many of those hundreds of thousands of bloggers might be one of your colleagues? How come their energy is so willingly spent in that direction but so difficult to engage to your corporate mission?

And why do ‘*modern*’ organizations spend so much time arguing whether social networking technologies are a) a distraction from productive work; b) a possible marketing channel; and/or c) the end of the world as we know it, rather than seeing the opportunity present within that energy?



For individual egos to flourish in organizations, first the organization must get over its own ego.

Give the virtual pen to the masses, demand trust, dignity and respect<sup>15</sup> and then let them run free. Do not, and I repeat NOT, create a blog where senior leaders alone are able to post articles – that is a subtle way of maintaining the ‘*modern*’ organization’s predilections.

Get senior leaders to use the same tools as everyone else does. With the same rules.

A little later on we’ll talk about some other aspects of technology, which may help you build your Strengths Springboard. For now, though, let’s keep it right where we are – the first belief rests completely on ‘*I can be proud to be who I am here*’, so:

- Give people the means to make the statement: ‘*this is who I am*’
- Give them the Record Books so that they may go down in posterity.

Once you’ve done that, it’s time to turn your attention to the organization itself.

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<sup>15</sup> like we do at <http://www.jobinions.com>

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## *I am proud to work here*

It's early 2009. Let's talk about what's changed. The financial system came to collapse in the past year, companies that were long considered institutions reached a sudden and shocking realization that they too were subject to the competitive rules governing everyone else, leadership (corporate, political, social) was shown to be out of tricks.

It's too early to say that we reached a turning point in capitalist norms in 2009 – that won't be proven until we are long into hind-sight – but it sure feels that way. And, long before the collapse, the writing was on the wall.

Take the *'War for Talent'*<sup>16</sup> which told us we would need to be prepared to meet the individual where the individual is. As Dr John Sullivan wrote in 2001<sup>17</sup> about talent sourcing: *"The war for talent is over, and guess who won? The candidates."*

Take Daniel Pink's 1997 Fast Company article, *'Free Agent Nation'*<sup>18</sup> which described how nearly 20% of American workers were self-employed – a proportion that has only increased since (to somewhere near 30%).

Take the companies described in *'Firms of Endearment'*<sup>19</sup>, that are leading the way in pursuing a different type of contract with their stakeholders; companies that speak of love, care, meaning and contribution.

Over the last decade, we have lurched from financial crisis to geo-political crisis and back again (dot-com bust, 9/11, the 'war on terror', financial meltdown), all conveniently enabling us to bury our heads in the sand and avoid the truth – organizations are largely unprepared to begin the discussion with what the individual wants, needs and desires to contribute.

The *'modern'* organization is still living its myth that it controls talent. It would be laughable were it not so pitiful.

Development of strengths is the most sure-fire route to sustained individual success. Talented individuals grow their strengths and minimize the negative impact of their weaknesses. I might paraphrase Dr John: *"The war for talent is over, and guess who won? People who consistently build upon their strengths."*

And, as Daniel Pink has subsequently shown<sup>20</sup>, if you can't meet the talent where the talent is, it will simply step away from your organization.

Think about it. The story used to be this:

*"Compromise your innate desire to do what you do best because a) we'll tell you what your career should be; b) complying with the organization will lead to safety; c) if*

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<sup>16</sup> 'The War For Talent' (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, Axelrod, 2001)

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.drjohnsullivan.com/content/view/169/36/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/12/freeagent.html>

<sup>19</sup> 'Firms of Endearment: How World-Class Companies Profit from Passion and Purpose' (Sisodia, Wolfe, and Sheth, 2007)

<sup>20</sup> 'Free Agent Nation: The Future of Working for Yourself' (Pink, 2002)

*you compromise now, you'll get to do it for more of the time some time in the future."*

This was largely another whispered myth from the *'modern'* organization: *"be safe, don't be different."* In that story, being part of the large, safe organization was everything. The risk of going far outweighed the risk of staying.

The financial crisis is changing all that. Loyalty is repaid with severance. A steady job in an institutionalized industry is as risky as that of a dot-com entrepreneur.

All of a sudden, for talented performers in the information, service and lifestyle economies, the risk of going looks pretty much like the risk of staying. Except that stepping out on your own – into the *Free Agent Nation* – you get to deliver your talent with meaning, ownership, accountability and for whichever company you feel like choosing.

The nature of the contract is changing, the free-agent, *'early adopters'* of the strengths movement are already leading the way: *"I'm going to do my best work, it can help your business thrive – will we have interesting, cool work to do together?"*

Is your organization ready to answer 'yes' to that? Can it lose the mythology – *"I, <insert senior leader's name here>, own the talent in my organization"* – and instead turn the 180° it takes to offer: *"this is a place where you can do your best work, regardless of whether you're an employee, partner, contractor or customer."*

Most people, when asked this question, will jump to the Purpose, Mission and Vision of the organization, and I'll cover that in a moment. Others will think in pure financial terms – i.e. that it's all about Porter-Lawler's perceived fair reward. I'll cover that in *Belief 5: Celebration is not a scarce commodity*.

If the first component of this belief is pride in the self, then I want that mirrored in the organization – make this a place that I truly, madly, deeply love to be involved, that I will wear as a badge of honor and not just another stop in the relentless building of my resumé.

Here are just some of the things which make people proud to donate their strengths to an organization:

- A product that improves life for others
- A product/brand that is clearly differentiated from its competitors as an aspirational life-style choice
- A corporate commitment to improve local communities through volunteerism and formal philanthropic endeavours
- A very clear commitment, not just words but actions, to a sustainable business model, especially in global organizations
- The willingness to meet me where I am

And it's this last one that is really at the core of the others.

More than anything, pride is linked to values – personal and organizational – and the extent they align with each other. So, gut-check your stated values – are they alive and thriving

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or written and ignored? Are they used in ridiculous trade-off disputes – “I see your People value and raise your my Performance...”?

Right about now, you may be beginning to wrestle with this, asking yourself: “This is all very well, but what’s the answer? What specifically will make people proud to work here?”

I would encourage you to get comfortable with that question as soon as possible. Because it doesn’t have an answer. Oh, hang on a second... Let me qualify that. It does have an answer (“Whatever senior leadership says”) but hopefully you’re beginning to get my drift now?

Leaders having all the answers is the greatest mythology of the ‘modern’ organization<sup>21</sup>. I’ll cover that a little later on.

Let me restate to be clear. I would encourage you to get comfortable with that question as soon as possible. Because it doesn’t have an answer that can be given from on high. Pride is a deeply personal emotion. You cannot tell someone they are proud. You can only engender pride.

So, here’s an idea the next time you ask that question: “What will make people proud to work here?”

Ask them.

It’s really not that complex.

Just ask them.

Think of it as a simple Start/Stop/Continue exercise. Run focus groups, or internal survey, or message board, or graffiti wall, or any other method of giving colleagues voice. Ask three questions:

1. What makes this a great place to work?
2. What would make it even better?
3. Where do we let ourselves down?

Listen for themes, listen for ideas, listen for colleagues who express passion in their responses, especially those who respond in the negative to the first question – the knee-jerk reaction of the ‘modern’ organization to such colleagues is usually that they are a problem. For the Strengths Springboard, those colleagues might just be shining a light into something you absolutely need to address. Or they might just be so pessimistic about your organization that they should be encouraged to get with the program or get out.

Either way, you won’t know until you listen to them.

Get the ideas flowing, empower teams of colleagues (not leaders) to build meaningful changes – give them 30 days for action with measurable results, then give them another 30 days for the next steps. Rinse and repeat until pride is rampant.

Harness their energy – remember, people want to be proud! Involving them in making something better is a route to pride

in itself and directly supportive of pride in self. It is the “we did that!” that wraps around “I did that!”.

### *And why, exactly, should I care?*

The unattainable. The pursuit of the perfect dive against ever more stringent judging standards. The chance to be part of something so much bigger than yourself.

Imagine stepping up to an Olympic dive and thinking of the long history of tradition and performance and believing you’re the one who may take it even further. Or even just being part of the lineage.

Something bigger than the self.

It is a fundamental human need to belong.

But when the world went purpose, vision and mission crazy in the mid-late 90’s (sometime between half-past-Paradigm-Shifts and quarter-to-Social-Networks), so many organizations got it so wrong.

Once again, it became the story of the leader not the led: “If we define the purpose clearly,” the thinking went, “people will have no choice but to willingly fall in line. If they get my ‘why’ then they’ll stop being different to me.”

Some hope.

In fact, what happened was the complete opposite, the gradual (and sometimes shockingly sudden) erosion of whatever belonging there was. Because these attempted calls to unity happened alongside the globalization of the workforce, outsourcing to the Far East, and the slow demise of traditional manufacturing industry in the west. So, just as organizations were trying to paint a picture of why belonging was the norm, that loyalty was a good thing, with the other side of their mouth they were whispering that there was no return in loyalty. That belonging wasn’t worth the effort.

Is it any surprise that the acronym WIIFM (What’s In It For Me?) became so prevalent at around the same time?

But it got worse, very publicly the leaders of those same organizations were being shown up as committed to wholly less altruistic outcomes than the most laudable of purposes. Think Enron, think Worldcom, think Tyco.

So, when leaders actions indicate that they don’t believe their own words<sup>22</sup> and the words themselves are interchangeable – bland homilies that anyone could have pulled from an average fortune cookie – is it any surprise that people just don’t WANT to belong to the ‘modern’ organization? And certainly don’t see why or how they can grow their strengths in such a soul-less artificial, inauthentic social system?

Imagine if you stepped onto the high dive platform and found out that all the Olympic records were made up. How would it feel?

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<sup>21</sup> And, like, soooo twentieth century!

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<sup>22</sup> Or, as my friends in IT often say “eat their own dog-food”, though I’m still not really sure that I get what they mean!

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People want to belong and, when it comes to the Strengths Springboard, they truly want to belong to something that will take them further, higher and beyond their own concept of themselves and their impact on the world.

So, don't compromise on purpose, don't compromise on the meaning of your organization – not if you want to entice and keep colleagues who are driven to grow their strengths. If your purpose, vision and mission are really just more expensive statements of the status quo<sup>23</sup>, then don't expect them to appeal to anyone other than those with a vested interest of perpetuating a culture of averageness (see later). That means low-to-average performers, retired-in-place time-servers and leaders without an original idea of how to identify, drive and succeed in creating meaningful change.

And you thought that Purpose, Vision and Mission Statements were written so that you'd have something cool to put in the annual report!

Make them big, scary and profound. Make the mission unachievable.

Ask your customers to generate it. Ask your employees to generate it. Test it not for accuracy but for the amount of trepidation it creates. If people aren't reacting with a *"Really? Is that really what you think we're going to try and do?"* then your mission isn't stretching enough.

As for vision? Well. Does 2009 bear any relation to what we thought it would be back in 2006? For some of the reasons described earlier, we all know that the answer to that question is a categorical NO.

So what use is a vision? What use is it really?

Except to create hope, and a commitment to make that hope come alive.

That's what the Strengths Springboard has to say about vision. It has to be the catalyst of hope. People who develop their strengths and manage their weaknesses are operating in a space of increasingly-realized yet never-ending hope.

Why not ask them to generate the vision?

Post these questions in your online news journal, or on a notice-board, or at a team discussion.

- *As you know, our Purpose is to... <insert purpose here>... How will we know when we're making it happen?*
- *What will it feel like to be part of a company doing that?*
- *What will have changed from what we are now to make the mission achievable?*

Once again, listen to what they say, identify ideas, empower groups – tear down the barriers and obstacles that they tell you about, build the future – the status quo is already out of date.



Instill these three core aspects: Pride in self, pride in the organization and the belonging created by commitment to something bigger than the self and you'll be a long way to driving the first belief of the Strengths Springboard. You will be closer to hope: for a better self, a better organization and a better world.

When hope is holistic and integrated, many more of your people are likely to say: *"There is no better place for me to do my best work."*

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<sup>23</sup> Because consultant words are very costly on a per letter basis

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## *My strengths directly impact our customers for the better*

“NEVER TREAT YOUR AUDIENCE AS CUSTOMERS,  
ALWAYS AS PARTNERS.”  
JAMES STEWART (1908-1997)

### *Knowing me, knowing you*

It doesn't matter how you look at it. If you're competing in the 10-meter platform event, then you need a 10-meter platform. And you need to be skilled at diving at 10-meter height.

True, you may also be a whiz at the 3-meter and low springboard BUT the fact remains that you need, absolutely need, to be skilled at diving from the 10-meter platform.

And that means that you will have to have practiced at 10-meters, with regular access to a platform, to a coach who understands how to get you doing just what's necessary to dive from 10-meters.

In other words, if you believe that you are a 10-meter diver, then the super-structural support had better support that belief.

The same goes for strengths-based working. Put simply the dive is the customer and the customer is the dive. That's the only purpose of strengths in an organization. To deliver the mission. That's the belief: *My strengths directly impact my customers for the better.*

Through the lens of the Strengths Springboard then, this belief rests upon rendering the customer transparent – *who do we serve?* – and then organizing strengths around that customer.

Organizations have to some extent improved in the former – beginning to move away from a *'customer knows best'* servile service orientation to, in the best of cases, a more involved view of customer engagement described in *'Human Sigma'*<sup>24</sup>. Not that there isn't room to go, though – so always check the assumption that you have adequately articulated your customer.

It's more in the second part of the Strengths Springboard view – of organizing strengths around the customer – that most organizations come up short. A little later on, I'm going to spend some time on the fallacy of the *'modern'* organization's addiction to role descriptions, however right now I want to focus on the customer.

Let's presume that you know who the customer is. Do you know what it is your people do that delights your customers? And that means the *'what'* of what they do, as well as the *'how'*.

And before we even step into the territory, it doesn't just mean focusing on the customer interface – sales reps,

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<sup>24</sup> *'Human Sigma: Managing the Employee-Customer Encounter'* (Fleming, Asplund, 2007)

service agents, etc. – which is undoubtedly critical but NOT all-encompassing.

As an example, think of the iPod. For every sales channel by which Apple's landmark product is available, a huge part of the reason it sells so widely and remains the leading brand and product in its field is as much due to the strength of Apple's:

- Designers – think cool
- Engineers – think miniaturization
- Imagineers – think major product reinvention every 2 years
- Recruiters – think talent
- Marketers – think cool

And the list goes on<sup>25</sup>. Strengths aligned at every level of the organization to take the customer to a new level of understanding and product loyalty – NOT just the point-of-sale customer interface.

Think about your organization design. Have you detailed work outcomes and how they directly align to your customers experience with your product. No, well do not pass 'Go', do not collect \$200, until you have. When you're done doing that, step into the next paragraph.

So, now you've got the outcomes, what are the strengths that most guarantee that those outcomes are delivered on time, within budget and to requisite quality standards?

How do you get at that?

Line up, metaphorically of course, all the workers delivering those outcomes. Who does it best? Who does it worst? What are their strengths? What are the differences in their strengths? What differentiates great from not so good?

One quick caveat to that step: do not (and I mean NOT) sit a group of leaders in a room and brainstorm what the lists of strengths should be. They will get it wrong. They will base their judgments upon what they think made them successful (an opinion that is totally, completely and utterly replete with rater bias and self-love). You need to make sure that this strengths identification is pragmatic and fact-based – do not try and approach it through theory.

Got that list?

OK. Now it's time to reorganize so that strengths are grouped together (not to mention hiring, retaining and developing for those strengths, though that should be obvious, I hope!) with the encouragement to maximize what they do and how they do it. The sky – or, more accurately, the customer possibilities – are the limit!

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<sup>25</sup> And has many more *'think cool'* sections, I'm sure!

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### *Who is our best customer?*

So we have our 10-meter diver on the 10-meter platform, planning to do a 10-meter dive. How do we get that diver to deliver excellence?

Score one to you if you mentioned practice. Score five if you mentioned coaching.

But score fifty-three if you mentioned working out what a great 10-meter dive looks like before doing anything. And an extra ten bonus points if you added what would look even better than a great dive.

If you scored sixty-three points, feel free to read this next section to see whether it confirms or confounds your expectations. I plan to do the former and the latter all at the same time.

What does a great dive look like? A little later on, I'm going to spend some time on standards and the search for excellence, so that's not what I'm after here.

In any organization, the Strengths Springboard will tell you that a great dive is simply that set of strengths which will deliver more from your very best customers.

The rest of the customers? Well, that's the average dive. The great dive, though, that's ALL about the best customers.

So, as we just talked about, the first trick is to organize strengths around the customer, making sure that the support super-structure puts the right diver on the right platform. But then you need to go further.

Which customer (or customer type) generates the most revenue for cost of service? Which customer generates the least?

If you can't measure that, don't go any further until you can – because anything else is subjective, rater-biased nonsense, and deeply indicative of the 'modern' organization's belief system.

But let's say that you have successfully identified where your investment is generating the most revenue. Let's say you know who your very best customers are.

Do you:

1. Have your strongest performers serving them?
2. Let them know that they're your very best customers?
3. Check-in with them to identify just which of the strengths you identified in the previous section actually make the difference to them?
4. Reposition your colleagues so that the right strengths-sets are with the right customer?
5. Focus development of strengths upon those identified by your best customers?

Through the lens of the Strengths Springboard, this is not general training and coaching. This is the dissection of a

single dive into its component parts and then a relentless focus on the optimization of each twist and turn.

If that sounds like 6-sigma, then I'm not too disappointed. However, this is exactly where the Strengths Springboard and the 'modern' organization part company. Optimisation of things is the norm in those organizations, but the idea of people optimization or people innovation... Well, it's rare to find a company that applies the same spirit of optimization to anything remotely human – which is why HR systems are so template driven and compliance-seeking; once again, the human is an object to be managed like plant and machinery.

In a moment, we're going to discuss the time-span within which a dive occurs and the scoring system that's applied, before I do that though, we have to focus on how intuitive, strengths-based working takes root.

And that, quite simply, is through focused, disciplined practice with focused, disciplined feedback and focused, disciplined coaching.

Divers don't learn by reading about diving. They learn by diving and correcting, diving and correcting, diving and correcting.

The biggest risk to strengths-based working is to assume that because a colleague is acting in the area of strength, a) it doesn't need development; and b) tomorrow will look pretty much like today. Neither of those are the case.

We learn from being pushed out of our comfort zone. So growing strengths by continually pushing people beyond their comfort zone should be the norm.

In terms of optimizing, then, it's about repetition of what works but also the microscopic focus on each aspect of the strengths that meet customers' needs; the refusal to settle for 'what worked yesterday'.

In any other realm, this would be a case where Pareto's 80:20 rule would kick-in – and the 'modern' organization would probably settle for 'enough to get the customer to buy' – but in the Strengths Springboard, there is always room to grow stronger.

Build the muscle memory of the dive through practice and feedback. Repeat what works, fine-tune it, go beyond your own limits.

Rinse and repeat. Relentlessly.

### *Can I have a personally meaningful goal, please?*

How long does a high dive take?

For a 10-meter dive, you may be able to count 2 seconds from the moment the diver leaves the platform. From lower boards, good luck trying to count. Me, I'm always too busy trying to get breath just watching them!

If you've ever watched a competition, you'll have heard the term 'Degree of Difficulty (DD)'. The diver pre-submits his planned dive and DD is calculated based upon pre-existing tables. Judges score the dive based upon DD.

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OK, that seems fine. Except that USA Diving lists the formula for DD as:

$$DD = A + B + C + D + E$$

Where:

- A = Somersaults
- B = Flight Position
- C = Twists
- D = Approach Group
- E = Unnatural Entry (doesn't apply to twists)

Think about it for a second. 5 variables make up a single outcome measure against which the diver is scored. In less than 2 seconds.

Talk about a focus on performance.

Yet, despite talk of achievement, in most organizations performance systems<sup>26</sup> reside on subjective opinion and very little in the way of measured outcomes.

The closest many organizations get to individual measurement is the grouped average – for example, the customer satisfaction rate for call center A, compared to call center B.

Imagine if the result of a diving competition went along the lines of *“on average, the team of divers from the Ukraine scored 5.3 on a DD of 2.3, therefore Mikhaili Yurbanov wins GOLD!”*<sup>27</sup>

I hope you're with me in saying that would be patently ludicrous, and if not, it's probably not worth reading much further – though I do encourage you to stick with me.

How many of you have sat in an annual performance calibration discussion trying to force-fit a whole department of colleagues into a linear ranking, based on nothing more than whether someone elsewhere in the department (their manager, team-mates, customers, senior leaders) have adequately articulated their opinion of how the year has gone; from their vantage point, obviously<sup>28</sup>.

Measuring an average score across a whole population is a recipe for average performance. It is as simple as that.

Systematically, average scores serve leaders. They allow authority figures to survey their kingdom and assess whether the whole will be successful. And that's fine – those leaders answer to the board, to shareholders and to the world for the performance of their kingdom.

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<sup>26</sup> And by that, I mean the human system, not an online template to capture lots of words with questionable meaning!

<sup>27</sup> Please note that I just invented the name Mikhaili Yurbanov. If it means something rude in any language, I apologize. Similarly if Mr Yurbanov is a real person, I apologize – unless you're a really good diver, in which case you fully deserve that gold medal!

<sup>28</sup> Not that there would ever be anything such as rater bias in any organization system, right?

But leaders being able to monitor the kingdom does not support strengths-based working – in fact, as illustrated above, it actually drives towards average-based working. In the averageness created by most performance systems, anyone perceived as pursuing difference from their peers is categorized as putting the whole at jeopardy – not a good thing.

Let's talk about one system that intended to put objectivity into the system: *Balanced Scorecards*.

First, a definition:

*“The Balanced Scorecard (BSC) is a performance management tool which began as a concept for measuring whether the smaller-scale operational activities of a company are aligned with its larger-scale objectives in terms of vision and strategy.”*<sup>29</sup>

Kaplan and Norton's breakthrough work<sup>30</sup> to define a coordinated suite of measures that could both predict (leading) and measure (lagging) performance opened the door for significant theory and practice to develop meaningful ways to link individual performance to strategic intent.

Except.

The majority of organizations see the equation from the wrong end. Because the belief system says: *“if only those pesky kids would understand our strategies, they'd make sure our average metrics meet leadership's intent.”*

The diver focuses on the dive. The strong performer focuses on using their strengths to impact the customer for the better. Unfortunately, most balanced scorecards don't realize this. They serve the leader not the performer.

How about a balanced scorecard that did both?

A specific, measurable outcome at the individual level that contributes to a meaningful average at the group level.

Is it so hard to imagine a world where strategic (customer) objectives are translated into functional objectives, and finally to individual SMART objectives?

*“But we already do that!”*

Well, if that's true, congratulations! But for many making that statement, the truth is more likely to be that you're deluding yourself that you're doing that. And here's the acid test.

Pull the performance section of any colleague's annual review<sup>31</sup>. OK. Read it. Read it again. And once again.

And there's the problem. If you have to read it, then it isn't a measurable outcome.

*“But Vince, it's not possible to identify measurable outcomes at the individual level!”*

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<sup>29</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balanced\\_scorecard](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balanced_scorecard)

<sup>30</sup> 'The Balanced Scorecard' (Kaplan, Norton, 1996)

<sup>31</sup> Presuming they have one – if they don't then I sincerely hope you didn't just make the claim that you're using individual outcome metrics?

If I may be allowed to be so blunt<sup>32</sup>, yes it is, you're just too lazy, fearful or deluded to be doing so<sup>33</sup>.

Let me explain. And I'll start backwards. As I've explained above, organization performance systems serve the leader, aggregating performance to make sure the kingdom can be monitored. That is how the 'modern' organization works. The delusion exists: "we are already measuring performance because the leader knows what's going on overall".

Organizations serve the leader, they do not serve performance.

And, like all delusions, once it is challenged and shattered, the only thing that remains is fear. Fear of what? Fear that people won't like the idea of having to manage. Fear that we'll get distracted from performance trying to work out what to measure. Fear that, at the end of the day, we might just find out that the majority of colleagues are coasting, that the majority of results are produced by a small minority of high performers who have been carrying everyone else forever. Fear that we might find that we're paying low performers with long service much more than the colleagues producing the goods. Fear that the colleagues producing the goods might just up and leave when the inequity is rendered clear. Fear that the very act of identifying all of this will expose the fact that the leader who has been overseeing those healthy average metrics might just be shown up as a naked-emperor who has built a career upon a platform of averageness while telling a story of high performance.

Yes, individual outcome measures can induce quite the amount of fearful reactionaries.

Which leads to laziness. It takes commitment, energy and a pretty strong chin to do the work to identify meaningful individual performance measures. It really does. And when the effort to do so is ranged against the overwhelming weight of the average culture, you should know that it has the potential to be truly exhausting work. It's much easier to seek solace in the averageness and not push to break it open. And, if you are an advocate for strength-based working but aren't prepared to push, then that truly is disinclination to activity or exertion. Which is the definition of laziness<sup>34</sup>.

But if you're willing to put in the effort, you just might catapult your organization to a culture of strengths-based working. Like the first time a diver steps on a springboard and realizes what it feels like to have the boost of expectations being lifted. Individual performance outcomes are critical to re-gearing the 'modern' organization's belief system – it will only be when you can show that the people growing strengths and minimizing weaknesses are out-achieving those who aren't that you will gain traction.

Here's how to identify individual performance outcomes in a nutshell. It's a 5-step process:

1. Identify the big, average functional objective – which I'm going to assume is aligned with the customer per the above
2. Ask the leader/manager accountable for that metric: "Of your colleague population, who are your absolute best contributors... and who are your absolute worst?"<sup>35</sup>
3. Once you have that, ask the leader how they know, what is the differentiator upon which they're basing the judgment? Keep asking that until you get to a measurable factor
4. This is the hardest step. Take the measurable factor identified in 3 to the colleague population identified in 2 with a simple statement: "we intend to measure and differentiate individual performance based upon contribution to our customers using the following metric – what do you think? Is there a more specific and measurable outcome-based metric you would suggest? Let's discuss." Then... Well, er, discuss!
5. If you do 1-4 with the absolute conviction that you are going to end the day with a single, measurable, meaningful outcome then you will do exactly that – start measuring it, keep measuring it, use it in goal-setting, internal benchmarking (because the only benchmark that matters is that you beat yesterday's performance tomorrow), performance reviews and all reward and recognition.

That's the five step process. It's simple but, I'll say it again, it is really hard work, which is why that qualifier is at the start of step 5 – if you don't intend to do it, don't play at doing it.

Once you've established a rhythm of measurement that allows individuals to see how they impact the customer, you'll be able to assess what poor, good and great performance outcomes look like, think of this as the DD for the Strengths Springboard – because once people begin to grow and deploy their strengths towards measurable outcomes, you really will be establishing a culture of excellence. You will have set standards. More on that in a moment or two, though.

<sup>32</sup> And I'm writing this, so I guess I may :o)

<sup>33</sup> Bear with me, I'm not often that rude without a reason – I apologize if I've offended you

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/laziness>

<sup>35</sup> There is a 2(a) here – Fight down the urge to hit somebody when you get into debating that it's really difficult to do this step – because everyone contributes – stand hard, get the best and the worst

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## Performance serves outcomes not activities

“YOU WILL NEVER UNDERSTAND BUREAUCRACIES  
UNTIL YOU UNDERSTAND THAT FOR  
BUREAUCRATS PROCEDURE IS EVERYTHING AND  
OUTCOMES ARE NOTHING.”  
THOMAS SOWELL (B.1930)

### *No ropes, please*

Think of Jess standing there on the cliff platform, getting ready to dive. Put yourself in her head. Visualizing her planned routine, feeling the breeze and intuiting where and how it will affect the dive. Aware of the crowd but not focused upon them. If you're in her head, you know that the movements are pre-planned, and that she will rely on months of practice to execute them to near perfection.

I'll let you get really focused on what it means to be Jess in the zone.

Got it?

Now imagine that she dives, only to find that someone has attached a rope to her ankle and is trying to pull it to make her twist in the dive. Imagine that the rope goes over to someone in the stands, not close enough to talk to her, not close enough to understand the conditions. This person on the end of the rope just pulls it to make her twist on command.

How good do you think her dive will be? No matter how expert the rope-puller may be in diving, how good will the dive be?

Unfortunately, for millions of people at work, performance feels like trying to do a dive while someone tugs on a rope attached to their ankle. It's one of the most central myths of the 'modern' organization: *a manager controls performance*.

In the next few pages, we're going to focus on many aspects of how the rope exists in organizations. Role descriptions, manager quality, leadership vision but before we can even go there, we have to get a basic grounding.

The diver owns the dive.

Many other people and groups may have a vested interest in the dive, may long to see Jess fail or succeed, but don't let that confuse the picture.

The diver owns the dive.

And in organizations, the performer owns the performance.

No-one else.

Yet in the 'modern' organization, the story continues to tell itself: *I own these people and control their every move*. If it didn't, there wouldn't be a market for the 915,186 books I mentioned earlier.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> And isn't it possible that there are so many books precisely because 'modern' management is contrary to human behavior, which

So, let's look at the area of performance ownership through the lens of the Strengths Springboard. What support superstructure needs to be in place? What does it look like?

Performance management.

In most organizations the annual cycle of goal-setting, manager review, performance assessment and final rating is probably one of the most reviled and useless wastes of time that colleagues, managers and leaders are conscripted into each year.

And here's the thing: It doesn't make a blind bit of difference, because in the 'modern' organization, the performance management process (and system) is directly intended and geared to support the culture of averageness described earlier.

Think norm distributions. Think calibration. Think bottom 10%. Think 'Below expectations', 'Meets expectations', 'Outstanding performance' or any other of the labels that get applied to 3, 4, 5, 6, 9 point scales. The illusion of performance differentiation, based on subjectivity and not objective, measurable outcomes (you did read that [last section](#), right?) All of it wrapped up in the carrot and stick mythology of the 'modern' organization.

Through the lens of the Strengths Springboard, though, performance intent becomes decoupled from reward mechanisms.

I'll pause to let that sink in.

Or maybe I should say it again.

Through the lens of the Strengths Springboard, performance intent becomes decoupled from reward mechanisms.

That, right there, may be close to heresy for the 'modern' organization.

As Jess stands on the high platform, getting ready to spring into open space, which of the following is more likely to be going through her head?

- Nothing, just her breath in her nose
- A mantra she repeats before every dive
- "I've got to watch the twist into the tuck, I keep leaning to the right"
- "I must get the medal, I must get the medal, I must get the medal"

And the answer is... It may be any of the statements, depending on how far Jess has gone in honing her dive.

If you have ever experienced 'flow'<sup>37</sup>, however, you'll have a sense of which is most likely to be characteristic of strengths-based performance. Here's a clue: it's about as far from 'medal, medal, medal' as it could possibly be.

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evolved over centuries on the basis of mutual reciprocity, not command and control?

<sup>37</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flow\\_\(psychology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flow_(psychology))

Sure, in preparation for the dive, Jess may be the most insanely competitive person in the world. When she surfaces in the pool, her immediate reaction may be to turn to the board to see the scores. But in that moment of the dive, performance is decoupled from reward mechanisms.

So it is in the organization that adopts the Strengths Springboard:

- Freedom to act in the moment...
- ... focused on outcomes that deliver success for customers...
- ... drawing upon strengths that have been specifically developed because they support excellence...
- ... and the trust that rewards will follow, and not guide, strong performance.

**Personal Manifesto**

**My customers are...**  
<best customer here>

**I make our customers stronger by...**  
<the strengths that make the difference>

**I am delivering...**  
<the individual outcome metric>

**I am getting stronger by...**  
<the strength-development areas I am consciously working on>

**Don't forget to do this...**  
<the things that work and that I've already mastered>

**Try not to do this...**  
<how do my weaknesses show up and what can I do to minimize the impact>

Figure 2 – Personal Manifesto

And it's that final bullet that is the most confounding. The remainder of this paper will be chiseling away at how you build that trust.

### *Turning a role description into a personal manifesto*

How much energy does your organization spend on forcing conformity?

Dress codes? Time-clocks? Standard Operating Procedures? Decision protocols? Role mandates? Customer handling scripts?

There was a time when all that made sense, the time of the 'modern' organization – when industrialized manufacturing demanded that delivery times, product quality and cost of goods sold were reproducible, scalable and predictable. For manufacturing organizations, that is still largely the best way to run your business<sup>38</sup>.

But for many of the organizations trying to compete in the service, knowledge and lifestyle markets that are emerging, those same 'common sense'<sup>39</sup> artifacts described above are slowly starving the potential to generate and grow revenue.

The 'modern' organization created the artifacts – SOPs, Role Descriptions, etc. – precisely to introduce and control reproducibility in human action. If your organization doesn't produce reproducible products, though, does any of it make sense? If your products are ideas, service or lifestyle

<sup>38</sup> Though not the ONLY way, you don't get off the hook that easily

<sup>39</sup> Used here in my definition: Things we take for granted and have never challenged because they've always been that way

choices, then creating sameness is actually a recipe for business failure.

All those organizations that control every aspect of working and then make the claim they want to increase entrepreneurial behavior.

*How do you manage an entrepreneur?*

Hopefully that question gave you pause for thought. Because if you're in a large, 'modern' organization you're more than likely living the madness that ensues when people believe there is an answer that is not: *you can't*.

Performance serves outcomes not activities.

Role descriptions capture activities not outcomes.

Role descriptions support the culture of averageness.

Role descriptions describe conformity.

Do you really want role descriptions when they will starve your business of the oxygen of human imagination and initiative? Do you really want to define

what people can and can't do, when all evidence from your customer base says that they want to be anticipated, delighted and surprised by your organization's offering?

Really?

How about doing away with the role description and instead holding people only to those individual outcome measures described above?

What if every person in your organization had to complete this personal manifesto (Fig. 2) and post it next to their phone, work-station, or on their desktop?

The diver owns the dive; the performer owns the performance. Compare the above to the role description common in the 'modern' organization (Purpose, key accountabilities, organization relationships, budget controlled, etc.) Which one reads more like it belongs to the performer?

If ownership of performance is the aim, why on earth are we forcing people into boxes that serve the organization?

Relentless focus on outcomes and not activities can only be achieved by gearing the performance to the performer.

Fundamentally, that is at the core of the Strengths Springboard.

So, why not try it? Take a group of 50 or so colleagues who have identified their strengths, customers and individual outcome measures:

- Ask them to write a personal manifesto as described

- Ask them to share and discuss their manifestos with each other, to help each other focus in on what makes the difference
- Publish their manifestos
- Have them check in regularly (monthly is good at a first pass) on how they're living up to their manifesto, what they're learning and what they've done to improve

Listen carefully to what people learn about each other and about their customers in these discussions. It's highly likely that you will never have heard a similar level of insight, energy and excitement when previously discussing role descriptions<sup>40</sup>.

That's the energy of the Strengths Springboard coming through – when the support super-structure is focused on performance, and that performance supports outcomes not activities, you tap into a differential level of engagement.

And, when it makes sense, measure the outcomes of this group of 50. Are they doing better? Have they increased focus on what counts? If they have, hurrah! If they haven't, it may just be because the bar isn't high enough.

Let's look at that now.

### *Standards and the search for excellence*

At any level of competence, competitive high diving is incredibly difficult. It's not something you can just up and decide to do. You work towards it, advancing in both capability and difficulty levels. To you or I, even the lowest ranked degree of difficulty would be near impossible. All right, let's be honest... Impossible!

But divers don't judge themselves by our standard. Instead, they compete with each other based upon recognized standards of excellence, assessed by competent judges who provide multiple viewpoints of dive quality.

Let's break that down through the lens of the Strengths Springboard to see what we can learn:

- Competing to recognized standards of excellence, not with other divers
- Competent Observers
- Multiple viewpoints of performance quality

Why is this approach to performance so effective? It does, after all go against much of the 'modern' organization's mythology of 'win-lose' competition, doesn't it?

Competition against recognized standards of excellence makes performance the end, not the ego of the performer. There's no hiding when you are performing against the DD scale, no low-ball goals or bluffing of outcomes. You either nail the dive or you don't.

<sup>40</sup> Let's face it, in most organizations, Role Descriptions are simply a comfort blanket for where to lay blame when things go wrong

When performing against recognized standards of excellence, you either perform or you don't.

And when those performance standards are based on outcomes, it's much easier to assess when to raise the bar and by how much.

If your strongest performers are consistently reaching a performance plateau, but leaving the rest behind, then it's not a good time to ramp up high-end targets by 10%. If the majority of your colleagues are lagging your high performers by 30%, however, it is time to turn up the heat on the average expected outcome. Once the majority catches up to your high performers, then it's time to up the standard of excellence. Stretch your high performers to set a new level of performance; they won't want to become merely average and will find a way to exceed the best they've achieved before.

The competition becomes to meet and exceed the standard, not other colleagues – and celebrating that performance ethos is essential. I'll cover this further in the 5<sup>th</sup> belief, [Celebration is not a scarce commodity](#).

Over time, the constant review of outcomes and taking an 'inch-worm' approach to raising standards of excellence will increase the performance levels of your whole, and encourage development of strengths to better meet the needs of customers.

Even with this approach to outcome standards, though, in most jobs performance cannot be measured purely on objective outcomes. Except in rare situations, there will always be the need for some level of subjective assessment.

For example, the stereotypical high achiever that leaves a trail of broken and damaged colleagues in her wake. Or the sales representative who steals his co-worker's clients. Or, in more positive circumstances, the online support agent who generates additional, unexpected revenue from an existing customer simply through showing a genuine interest in the customer's family.

In the 'modern' organization, the assumption was always that the manager knew how the performer did it. In that conveyor-belt, gravy-train, reproducible world, managers were largely super-technicians, promoted on functional expertise, using their teams as extensions of their own brains and hands. The net result is that many managers rate colleagues not on "how does the performance compare to the standards," but instead upon "how does the performance compare to how I would have done it."

Think back on our discussion of Degree of Difficulty – think of the five variables that make up that score, and then reflect on the intuitive thinking described in 'Blink'<sup>41</sup>. Do you think that diving judges base everything on hard, empirical data? I don't think so. In the short time-span of a dive, it's impossible for them to do so.

Yet they are skilled enough to rate the dive. They have tuned their intuitive assessment processes so that it supports and is supported by the objective measurement. And now, with the advent of video replay, technological advances enable even

<sup>41</sup> 'Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking' (Gladwell, 2007)

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greater accuracy of judgment. They are, in other words, competent observers, able to view the *'what'* and *'how'* of the dive and compare it with recognized standards. Even if they are nowhere near competent in performing the dive themselves.

How many of your managers are capable of doing that?

In this rapidly changing world, where yesterday's skill-sets are out of date today, let alone tomorrow, how does hierarchy prepare anyone to provide a rounded judgment of performance?

How much of your managerial training, coaching, mentoring or experience focuses on the specific skill-set of competent observation? How many of your managers, if asked, would be able to describe subjective rater bias, its impact on assessment of others and how to control for bias in observation systems? How many of them could name their implicit assumptions?

No, I didn't think the answer to that would be positive either.<sup>42</sup>

It is essential that you take observation into account alongside objective outcome measurement, but equally essential that you don't limit that observation to the manager only.

Which is where multiple, competent viewpoints come in. The more, the better. If you have the resources to do so, capturing holistic stakeholder feedback on a consistent, regular basis throughout the performance cycle is the best way to achieve this.

Stay focused on the outcome the colleague is trying to achieve. How does that outcome relate to:

- Customers?
- Team-mates?
- Manager?
- Leader?
- Suppliers?
- Partners?
- Community?
- Society?

How could you find out the impact of the colleague on the stakeholder<sup>43</sup> in question? Customer satisfaction survey? Team-assessment? 180°, 360°, 720° feedback?

There are multiple ways to achieve this, and the trick is quite simply to choose the ones you'll use and do them, regularly.

*"But Vince, which measures are the most important?"*

Not to belabor a point I made earlier but... er... How about asking?

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<sup>42</sup> Immediately, I would suggest looking into how you might grow that capability

<sup>43</sup> And you wouldn't even think of asking a stakeholder who had no interest upstream or downstream of the colleague's performance, would you?

Don't make it more difficult than it needs to be. Adding complexity isn't winning, outcome-based performance is!

Gather a group of the stakeholders in question and set up the following discussion:

- *"We are asking our colleagues to deliver <insert the customer outcome here> – as you have an interest in how they perform, we'd like to discuss how you would judge that our colleagues had done their best work."*

Discuss behavioral examples – what would the colleague be saying and doing – i.e. what the stakeholder in question would be able to perceive.

From this exercise you will likely derive a long-list of important factors. But be prepared, many of them will be motherhood and apple pie, many of them will be minimum standards of performance<sup>44</sup>.

Through the lens of the Strengths Springboard, we're interested not so much in basic competence, but instead near perfect performance. On-time delivery is not enough<sup>45</sup> – on-time delivery with something extra, or early delivery out-of-the-norm... *That's* what we're looking for. Keep pushing hard – what level of performance would be near impossible to achieve? What would it look, sound and feel like?

Ultimately, your intent will be to ask the stakeholder to rate the colleague on a 5-point scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree) for a small number of questions, such as (e.g.):

- *Every time we speak, <Colleague name> provides at least 3 ideas for how I could use <product name> that I hadn't considered before<sup>46</sup>*

Once you've narrowed the differentiating behaviors down to a short-list<sup>47</sup> use such items as ongoing performance monitoring, preferably after every interaction but at minimum on a quarterly basis. Keep track. Openly publish the scores.

And as soon as your organization's average score tops 4.0 on the 5-point scale, get the stakeholders back in a room and ask what would be the next level, because there is always a next level. It is time for the *inch-worm* to make an entrance once more!

Setting the standard for excellence, using competent observation based upon multiple stakeholder viewpoints and encouraging competition to beat the standard, this is how you

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<sup>44</sup> E.g. "The service representative paid attention and didn't take personal phone calls while serving me"

<sup>45</sup> Though it surely would be for the *'modern'* organization

<sup>46</sup> Please, please, please do NOT just lift that statement or make others up that seem to be like it – the consultation and involvement of the stakeholders is essential in building the performance infrastructure of the Strengths Springboard!

<sup>47</sup> And I do mean short, anything greater than 5 suggests that you haven't spent enough time sorting the critical wheat from the average chaff

can ensure that performance serves outcomes, not just activities.

But even this isn't good enough if the colleague isn't free to give her very best performance. Let's look at what might be in the way and how to deal with it.

## Control? What's control?

"THE STORY (IS) ABOUT THE COMMON PERSON WHO IS ABLE TO RISE TO THOSE ACTS OF FREEDOM ... AND ODDLY ENOUGH, HISTORY HAS NOT CELEBRATED THEM."  
TIM ROBBINS (B.1958)

### Checking-in not checking-up

Think back to that image of Jess trying to dive with a rope tied around her ankle. Hopefully it still seems as absurd as it did back then? Well, let's take it a little further and dig into the belief: *Control, what's control?*

Hopefully by now, I've managed to convince just one little corner of your thoughts that if you get a clear, specific focus on customers and the outcomes that are meaningful/critical to them, then encourage colleagues to first meet and then exceed outcome-driven performance standards, you'll begin to create an environment where strengths-based working can flourish.

Play it right and you will see a virtuous cycle begin to form: *Aspire → Succeed → Aspire → Succeed → Etc.*

But that doesn't mean that the cycle will be self-fulfilling, or maintenance free. It's true that, in some rare organizations<sup>48</sup>, a control-free culture has been created but none of us should be naïve enough to believe that a quick flip of the Strengths Springboard switch will magically change a century's-worth of the 'modern' organization.

We have to change the nature of performance relationships – particularly that of the manager-colleague.

First, let's speak openly of beliefs that are enshrined in the 'modern' organization: *Theory X & Y*<sup>49</sup>. McGregor proposed this motivation theory in the 1960's and it has become so deeply baked into subsequent theory, management science and practice to be taken for reality<sup>50</sup>.

The 'modern' organization built its Taylorist utopia on the Theory X assumption that employees were lazy, work-avoiding, ambitionless drones that had to be energized, organized and controlled by the manager.

<sup>48</sup> Do whatever you can to learn about the working culture of WL Gore and Associates

<sup>49</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory\\_X\\_and\\_theory\\_Y](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_X_and_theory_Y)

<sup>50</sup> You do know that reality doesn't exist, right?

In Theory Y organizations, however, employees were seen as desirous of self-fulfillment, aspirational, seeking opportunities, ready to learn and... well... strengths-based, I guess.

Which leaves managers with a choice – to be either a Theory X or Y manager. The difference?

- A Theory X manager checks-up on her direct reports (i.e. doesn't trust them to deliver on their commitments and therefore manages their work).
- A Theory Y manager checks-in with her direct reports (i.e. trusts them to deliver and offers support to their efforts).

The trick here is to recognize that, while managers need to be a bit of both<sup>51</sup>, if you truly pursue the Strengths Springboard, the Theory Y approach will be much, much more prevalent.

Checking-in, not checking-up.

Strengths-based working benefits from strengths-based management.

That seems pretty common-sense to me.

But this paper isn't about strengths-based management directly – once again, I recommend Marcus Buckingham's outstanding work on that subject. Remember the Strengths Springboard is about the organization's belief system. How can we gear the system to help a manager see why the nuance in belief is important?

Theory X – given a chance, employees are a net drain on the organization.

Theory Y – given a chance, employees create value for the organization.

Perhaps looking at the value created by each employee will help build the case for Theory Y beliefs.

To do this, we'll make use of GAAP data published on any publicly-listed company. Here's the equation:

$$\text{Value Created per Employee (\$)} = \frac{\text{Gross Revenue} - \text{Operating Costs}^{52}}{\text{Number of Employees}}$$

What's great about this equation is that it recognizes that there are costs associated with employees, but that for those costs there is a return on investment. It's almost the perfect equation for symbolizing business intent.

1. Are we growing revenue?
2. Are we managing cost?
3. Are we optimizing each employee?

<sup>51</sup> Because it's certain that there are a few Theory X people in your organization

<sup>52</sup> COGS, SGA, R&D (excluding one-time charges, amortization, etc.)

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Let's take a look at an example<sup>53</sup> using figures quoted on Yahoo!

#### Intel Corp

2008 Gross Revenue: \$37.6 b

2008 Operating Expenses: \$27.9 b

2008 Number of Employees: 82,500

2008 Value Created per Employee = **\$117,139**

Some others:

- Whirlpool Corporation = \$10,429
- GE = \$175,610
- Google = \$328,902

Thinking in terms of Value Created per Employee begins to position the time spent with employees not as a Theory X "get their lazy butts moving" but instead very much more along the lines of a Theory Y "I am investing in an asset that is capable and willing to grow". Indeed, a manager of 10 direct reports at Intel in 2008 could be described as managing a value portfolio of \$1.1 million<sup>54</sup>.

Have you ever thought about a manager as an investment professional?

Checking-in, not checking-up. How are my investments doing? Active portfolio management. All of it comes into play once value is on the table.

Now, let's add one more spin of the wheel in regards to checking in.

Theory X assumes that the organization owns, and is stuck with, the colleague<sup>55</sup>. But remember the stats relating to Free Agent Nation that I described earlier. When 30% of the US workforce is self-employed, choosing to be freelance, how exactly does any manager or organization hope to perpetuate a Theory X belief system?

When the worker is choosing to deploy their talent, you'd better not be checking-up on delivery. When the worker knows by the very nature of the employment relationship that they are a competent, proud professional, there really is no space for pseudo-parental checking-up shenanigans. In the Free Agent scenario, it really is time for mutual respect. It really is time for Theory Y.

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<sup>53</sup> And it really is the first company that popped into my mind – don't infer any meaning by the choice

<sup>54</sup> I am indebted to Tanya Clemons at Pfizer Inc. for helping me see the aggregate value factor in such focused, tangible form

<sup>55</sup> Or, more accurately, stuck with them until it decides enough is enough and boots them out the door

So, get your managers positioned as investment professionals, focused on making the performer successful and maximizing the return on investment. Teach them to be active portfolio managers. Celebrate those who increase the return on investment – measured increase in meaningful outcomes coupled to increased engagement – through an action-based approach to strengths development.

Checking-in, not checking-up is the first step. Now let's look at what comes next.

#### Management – focusing the weirdness

Diversity.

It's highly likely that in your organization someone has mentioned the 'D-word'. It's also highly likely that when it's mentioned, it conjures up images of social justice. Maybe, if you've had a particularly active Diversity function, your organization has representation goals – women in senior leadership, or people of color at all levels, for example.

And, depending on how effectively this has been positioned, you may have whole sections of your organization who don't necessarily agree with this representation approach: white males (which should be obvious), generation X and Y (which is less obvious but even more important) and the affected groups themselves, who know they run the risk of perceived tokenism at every turn.

There's no doubt that the 'modern' organization, with its intense focus on perfecting processes through reproducibility and standardization, has done a lousy job of adapting itself to the rapidly shifting demographics of the late twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. Of course, society has had much more than a subtle hand in it too.

But the social justice activism of the Diversity function within the 'modern' organization misses one critical thing: *diversity is not a minority sport, it is an everybody sport*.

Put it this way, in the 'StrengthsFinder 2.0' tool, Gallup have identified 34 strengths, of which 5 are identified as a person's 'signature themes'. Basic mathematics tells you that you have a 1-in-34-million chance of having the same signature themes in exactly the same order as another person.

According to the US Census Bureau<sup>56</sup>:

*"Minorities, now roughly one-third of the U.S. population, are expected to become the majority in 2042, with the nation projected to be 54 percent minority in 2050. By 2023, minorities will comprise more than half of all children."*

Get that? The social justice definition of diversity refers to 1-in-3 of the US population, and will refer to the majority in 2042 if forecasts bear out. Compare that to the likelihood of having the same top-5 signature themes...

Diversity is not a minority sport, it's an everybody sport.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/population/012496.html>

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Which means it is time to recognize a simple, plain truth: *People are weird*. As in abnormal. As in deviating from the norm.

And if there is one defining feature of management in an information, service and lifestyle organization, it is the capability to focus the weirdness for the best of the individual and the customer. That is management in the Strengths Springboard.

Spotting the behavioral nuances emerging from strengths, helping manage weaknesses to minimum impact, gearing the environment to best nurture, develop and deploy the strengths of direct reports... This is how the value-led manager develops the human investment portfolio that has been placed in his trust.

As Jess dives for the umpteenth time, think of her coach, watching like a hawk not for egregious flaws or mistakes – she is far beyond that level of performance coaching; near perfect performance – but instead for where her natural tendencies show up in her dive. Imagine a conversation along the lines of – “*your left shoulder seems to tighten as you emerge from the tuck, and it puts you off-center into the extension, let’s try focusing on keeping it loose.*”

How many managers in your organization would spot natural tendency so accurately and help the performer work through it.

*“But managers at my organization just aren’t able to do that!”*

If I only had a dollar for every time I’d heard that<sup>58</sup>...

A little over a page earlier, I showed how a hypothetical manager at Intel with 10 direct reports was managing a million-dollar value portfolio. Hopefully you took a moment to calculate the figure for your organization? If so, you know how much value a manager is stewarding?

And you’re saying that they’re in role but can’t actually do the job right? Really?

Hmmmm...

It is time to hold out for higher standards of managerial performance and priority. The ‘modern’ organization told managers to ignore individuality. The ‘modern’ organization told managers to mould colleagues into reproducible, standardized work units. The ‘modern’ organization is ill-equipped for the Strengths Springboard.

It is time to hit the ‘Reset’ button for managers.

Weirdness is the norm. Abnormal is standard. Being uncomfortable because other people just aren’t like you is wonderful.

Managers who can stay laser-focused on performance in the moment and the environment in which it takes place must be

at the top of your priority list in installing the Strengths Springboard.

And if they can’t, well... Would you sign a million dollars of your own money over to a financial professional with no qualifications, training or proven track record?

### *Leadership – Take it to the bridge!*

There is no dive until the dive takes place. Today’s dive will pay reference to the past and, alongside all the other dives, take the sport further.

Much as the ‘modern’ organization finds it distasteful to admit, when it comes to growth, there are no ready-made answers. Sooner or later, nothing you’ve done previously prepares you for the moment when you need to do something different.

Think on that for a minute. Nothing prepares you.

How often do the leaders of your organization say “*I don’t know...?*”

I’m going to hazard a guess that it’s not that often.

Through the lens of the Strengths Springboard, though, even that isn’t enough. Let’s try this on for size: “*I don’t know, I’m encouraging people to educate me.*”

*“So, Vince, is this another rant about leadership humility, authentic leadership, leading from every chair?”*

Nope. I would direct you to ‘*True North*<sup>59</sup> or ‘*The Art of Possibility*<sup>60</sup> if you’re interested in learning more of that.

This is the Strengths Springboard, where the diver pushes the boundaries of the dive.

The coach may have an idea of what may work, what will make the difference, and most likely will be able to steer the diver to achieve the previously unthinkable. That all may be true.

But the diver pushes the boundaries of the dive.

If you really want your organization to make the most of the strengths of each and every colleague, then your leadership must be seeing beyond the performance. This means scanning the competition, identifying what it may take to win, opening the performer to the extension of the possible – encouraging with a “*yes, you can*”, rather than destroying confidence with an “*I didn’t do that, so neither should you.*”

As I mentioned earlier, these are unpredictable times, bringing to life the homily: *in uncertain times, the only constant is change*. Remember, in the ‘modern’ organization, most leaders are in position because they have a track record of success in the past, but it just can’t be over-stated

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<sup>57</sup> This does not mean that social justice is not important, far from it. But that’s the subject of another paper another time.

<sup>58</sup> I’d have about \$5,673.50... The 50c? Someone started to say it but thought better when they saw my face!

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<sup>59</sup> ‘True North: Discover Your Authentic Leadership’ (George, Sims, 2007)

<sup>60</sup> ‘The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life’ (Zander, Zander, 2002)

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how radically different the future looks. How do you lead when you've never been to the future?

It's simple, really... You listen to people who make really good guesses.



So, to our question once again: How many of your leaders are saying *"I don't know, and I'm encouraging people to educate me"*?

Leadership in the Strengths Springboard is all about discovery, inquisitiveness and the encouragement to go beyond the horizon.

A 5' person can see 2.6 nautical miles to the horizon when stood at sea-level. A 6' person, 2.9 nautical miles. A diver standing on the 10-meter platform, around 7.2 nautical miles<sup>61</sup>. Your job as a leader is not to add incremental height to the diver – it doesn't do so much in terms of expanding horizons. No, your job is to look beyond the horizon or, if you're one of the many leaders who have no strength in the area of futurism, ask someone else to – whichever route, you're simply trying to piece together enough sense of the next direction to compel people to the journey.

And that compulsion is fuelled by the inquisitiveness of discovery. Self-discovery. Other-discovery. An end to the

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<sup>61</sup> <http://www.boatsafe.com/tools/horizon.htm>

'modern' organization's mythology of leaders having to have all the answers.

A diver looking to push the boundaries of the dive needs to see the space that's unseen. Leaders encourage people to fill in the blanks – and in the Strengths Springboard, it's the strengths that do the filling.

### ***Celebration is not a scarce commodity***

**"MEN ARE RICH ONLY AS THEY GIVE. HE WHO GIVES GREAT SERVICE GETS GREAT REWARDS."  
ELBERT HUBBARD (1856-1915)**

#### *We are the stories we tell*

There is a diver who placed second in the Olympic Games at age 16 and who subsequently went on to win back-to-back Olympic Gold in both 3-meter and 10-meter events (and would likely have made it gold in three straight Olympics were it not for a political boycott). In between these feats, this diver also won several World Championship gold medals. Watching some of his best dives on YouTube is an education in grace, poise and excellence.

The diver in question is Greg Louganis.

And if you recall the name, you've probably just remembered him hitting his head on the springboard at the 1988 Seoul Olympics.

Greg Louganis is an elegant and accomplished diver, who went on from that concussion in the preliminary rounds to win Olympic gold in Seoul (twice). He was named ABC Wide World of Sports *"Athlete of the Year"* in 1988. In that same year, Louganis was diagnosed with HIV, and has since become a committed HIV awareness advocate.

Yet, you remember the concussion.

It was a compelling and enthralling moment, captured on camera and beamed around the world into homes not just on sports programs but on news channels, chat shows and in comedian's routines.

We are the stories we tell.

What stories do you allow to take center stage in your organization? Which stereotypes do you reinforce?

- The hero leader succeeding through individual guile and perseverance despite insurmountable odds?
- The conformist who survives to the end of the career conveyor belt, retiring with significant share-growth to feather her pension nest-egg?
- The suck-up who managed impressions so well that he climbed all the way to the C-suite with no track record of performance?

When you listen to the informal story-telling – water-cooler conversations, myths, gossip – do you hear of risk-aversion,

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of lambs sacrificed on the alter of executive ego (“*They didn’t have a slide with the data on and, boy-oh-boy, did <insert leader here> cream them!*”)

How often do you see, hear or read about a colleague identifying what they do best and using those strengths to impact customers for the better.

What’s the balance of messaging between individual/ team success and impersonal organization stories. How often are leaders’ faces in your in-house news magazine, compared to regular managers and colleagues?

We are the stories we tell. And if you aren’t telling stories of success through strengths-based working, then you’re highly unlikely to gain sustainable long-term advantage.

Put simply, tell stories of failure and retribution and you will get failure and retribution. Tell stories of experimentation, failure, fast-learning, and ultimate success and you will create learning and discovery.

As I covered way back at the start in “*There is no better place for me to do my best work*”, people want pride and meaning. They want to be part of success and heritage. They want to leave a legacy.

If you make it appear that success and legacy are far from the norm in your organization, how exactly are they meant to believe they can do that?

To quote Jonathan Haidt’s outstanding book, “*The Happiness Hypothesis*”<sup>62</sup>:

*“Over and over again, psychologists find that the human mind reacts to bad things more quickly, strongly, and persistently than to equivalent good things. We can’t just will ourselves to see everything as good because our minds are wired to find and react to threats, violations and setbacks.”*

The stories we tell are the currency of *the way things are around here*. And you already have a significant deficit.

In short, if you want to remember your equivalent of Louganis’ elegant, near perfect dives rather than that one moment when he failed, you’d better start significantly altering the balance of celebratory stories over the cautionary tales that are already, naturally running rampant within your organization.

Let’s look at a couple of ways of doing that.

### *And the Oscar goes to...*

It would be trite to say the Strengths Springboard is simply about going for gold. Simple, straightforward sports metaphors just don’t work for the majority of situations.

Usually, this is because it’s tortuous to say the least to compare the average worker in the ‘*modern*’ corporation with an Olympian who has been coached and optimized since

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<sup>62</sup> ‘The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom’ (Haidt, 2006)

early childhood, groomed and chiseled to the elite status represented by the Olympics. Or the NBA. Or the Premier League. Or the NFL.

And that just isn’t fair to most workers who were born and raised in the ‘*rounded pebble*’ world of the late twentieth century, which has been so strongly reinforced by the ‘*modern*’ organization<sup>63</sup>.

As this paper isn’t about the ‘*rounded pebble*’ world, though, let’s pick apart the Strengths Springboard view of celebration.

First of all, the belief: *Celebration is not a scarce commodity*.

Let’s face it, in most organizations, the point-of-view is pretty much closer to:

- “*Don’t tell her she’s good, it’ll just go to her head*”; or...
- “*If we give him a little extra this month, what about all the other people that didn’t work on it directly?*”, or probably worst and most disheartening of all...
- “*Let’s hold it back until we see that she can sustain it.*”

Once again, back to the Porter-Lawler extension of Expectancy Theory. When effort, performance and outcomes (extrinsic & intrinsic) are met with perceived fair reward, job satisfaction results.

Since when is the absence or withholding of reward likely to be perceived as fair?

Since when did you see someone winning anything that didn’t celebrate?

Essentially, this view of celebration being a scarce resource is the ultimate myth of the Taylorist ‘*modern*’ organization. Keep ‘em hungry. Whip them into shape. Employees as farm animals and non-variable production units.

The idea that somehow not recognizing contribution is motivational would be frankly ludicrous, were it not so widely practiced.

The diver dives, her performance is judged against standards of excellence, competitive peers and, if she is strong enough in that performance, she wins a medal.

Perhaps she has to go through multiple rounds of diving before the ultimate accolade, but each preliminary is a rehearsal and performance in its own right, each providing a burst of energy on the continued journey to ultimate celebration.

In those preliminaries, does the diver really care about the score? Maybe. But it’s more likely that he is focused on the last dive and the next dive, on minute errors and mental rehearsal of how he will correct for them in the next round. If the diver knows he hasn’t got a hope of achieving the medal podium, then personal best is the target – its own form of recognition in and of itself (a different version of the Record Books – but personal meaning from work all the same).

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<sup>63</sup> There is a whole other paper to be written about the symbiosis of the conformist ‘*modern*’ organization and the educational system; drone production for the hive system, etc.

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Through the lens of the Strengths Springboard:

- *Recognition of the right magnitude;...*
- *For progress towards ultimate objectives;...*
- *At the time when the work is done*

Stimulus and response. Recognition serves to sharpen the mind and body upon what to do in the next performance to gain further recognition. It really is as simple as that.

At the same time, we cannot ignore that the gold is hanging out there, always tantalizingly in view; the immediate recognition absolutely has to be coupled to the longer-term aims identified when working on customer outcomes.

That sense of progress, of small celebrations as part of movement towards an over-arching accomplishment, is fundamental to building the Strengths Springboard in your organization.

As colleagues focus on building their strengths and managing around their weaknesses – and overcoming the negative stories that are so prevalent – they need to see and feel the impact it has on their performance reflected back at them.

Why is this recognition important? Much as the idealist wants to tell you that building strengths is fulfilling on its own, you just can't forget that the individual conversion is taking place in an organizational belief system that pushes the rock back down the hill at every chance.

Even the most zealous are eroded by a society that doesn't provide some validation of their viewpoint, even if that validation is only overt resistance.

The most crippling thing we can do is not to praise or criticize, it is to ignore<sup>64</sup>.

So what are the infrastructural elements of celebration in the Strengths Springboard?

Let's start with one that is so intensely simple that it's profound.

Wait for it...

*"Thank you."*

I'm not going to explain that. Try using it when you mean it and monitor what happens in your work-group over time.

Next? Let's talk about social-standing. Earlier on I mentioned the social networking technologies that have exploded over the past few years. Why do you think they are taking off at such speed?

Increasingly, people are engaged in personal marketing, sometimes for profit but more often than not with no ulterior motive. Online personas enable us to project an image of ourselves that we can control, that isn't reliant upon the positioning of our genetic inheritance in the beauty myth of western society.

So you get the stay-at-home mother who is an online anarchist frequenting chat boards about gothic horror novels, the grandfather hooked into skate communities after bonding with his sixteen year-old grandson, the quiet guy in the office who maintains close virtual relationships with more people across the world than who work in his department.

People live a fantasy life online. And people are vain; they want to be important.

So, make your success stories public. Use online news, posters, town hall meetings, formal awards, learning sessions, notes from the CEO, anything that tells the performer in question: *"we know who you are, we saw what you did and we liked it, please do more!"*

Round about now, you'll hear one of the many not-so-subtle resistances of the 'modern' organization – which, you will remember, wants to withhold recognition as a motivational strategy. What you'll hear goes along the lines of...

*"But some people don't want to be publicly recognized, they prefer to hear quietly."*

There are several holes in that argument, let's cover just a few of them:

1. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy – i.e. everything about the 'modern' organization is saying it's wrong to be celebrated – which person in his right mind is going to openly declare he is counter to the prevailing norm? *Of course* people are going to say they don't want public recognition!
2. Ask anyone who has received an award for work that had personal meaning whether she appreciated it and, if she can get past the 'humility-façade' induced by the first point here, she will smile and say *"absolutely!"* Over the past twenty years, I've spoken to many people who have won formal and informal performance accolades (from spot performance recognition, to Oscar-like statuettes, to major national awards) and I have yet to meet anyone who wished they hadn't received the recognition.
3. When did you ever see a winner who didn't celebrate? There may be some but even if you buy the myth completely, you've got to admit that the balance is skewed heavily in the opposite direction. Simple probably will tell you that success wants its voice to be heard.

Besides, it's not just about the performer in question. To some extent it's irrelevant whether public recognition is perceived as valued or not. Even if there is an outside chance that one strong performer really, truly, absolutely doesn't want to be celebrated, there are many, many more performers who wish that they could be celebrated. And the celebration sends the message that it's worth it, to keep going. You are recognizing performance both for the individual and all the individuals.

If there is one thing I hope you take away from this paper it is this. There is no shortage of positive energy if you can

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<sup>64</sup> At Google, search for '[Elizabeth Hurlock Math Experiment](#)'

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successfully install the final belief: *Celebration is not a scarce commodity*.

And if you need one more image to bring it home, watch any sporting event, even the hardest rugby game or cage-fighting UFC championship. What happens when the performance ends. Is the performer ignored by team-mates, coaches and competitors?

It's actually highly unlikely. You're much more likely to see high-fives, pats on the shoulder, shaken hands, smiles and nods of encouragement. Visit your local karate school and watch a session; see how much positive conditional feedback is being provided on the mat, from senseis and students alike.

A note of caution, though: Please, please, please do not try a 'big award' program that is not backed up by celebration throughout your recognition practices – that is undermining the belief you're trying to create. By all means have your own version of the gold medal or the Oscars, just don't make that the only thing you do.

*Celebration is not a scarce commodity.*

Once you internalize that belief and bake it into all your recognition practices, you unlock the energy to flow through strengths-based working.

Recognition is the spring in the springboard.

### *Sharing the glory and keeping each other honest*

Let's try an experiment.

Take a group of around 20 people who have gone through the process above to identify and agree meaningful, customer-based individual outcomes.

Agree the 3 month stretch bar for overall performance – what outcomes do you expect to have been created by the group in 3 months – and ensure that together, the group generates individual commitments within those performance expectations, i.e. what each of them will deliver for group performance.

Doesn't sound like much of an experiment yet, does it?

Here's where we start to play. Commit to reward the group proportionately for performance both under and over the expectations you have agreed<sup>65</sup>.

Except that there is one additional condition. Each of the 20 people will have to force rank the other 19 as to whether they delivered on their commitments to the team. And from those peer ratings, the spread of reward will be paid appropriately – i.e. those lowest ranked will receive less of a pay-out than those highest ranked.

So if the pay-out is 20% over the average, the highest rated will receive 40%, those lowest ranked will receive 0% pay-

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<sup>65</sup> Note: the win and the loss have to be clear. Don't start with nickel-and-diming reward. For 20% greater outcomes, 20% increase on average pay-out OK? It's an experiment after all!

out. If the group hits the target, the lowest ranked will be penalized and the highest ranked will receive 20%.

Run the experiment.

You'll likely hear from people who 'know better'<sup>66</sup> that:

- The group will low-ball the targets, so that they're easy to achieve
- They'll work the rating system so that everyone gets equal votes
- The group will fall apart in disarray and in-fighting

And, of course, they would be wrong. The group would be highly likely to exceed the performance targets.

This experiment is based upon research on reciprocity<sup>67</sup> that indicates that the presence of punishment points within a social system (known as collective/mutual goods) leads to higher individual contribution to the system<REFERENCE>.

Psychologically, it appears that in the converse to the 'modern' organization's Theory X beliefs, people generally don't want to let the team down and don't want to be seen as the outcast. So everyone contributes more.

All that said, the experiment above is pretty extreme – I wouldn't suggest going for it straight off the bat. Try it virtually for a while, with a group of willing volunteers.

If you can't even let yourself try it (or persuade your organization to let you), take the foundational elements into your thinking on how to gear team and collaboration recognition.

If the individual belief set is "I am building a strengths-based work-life", then the aim of peer transparency is to make tangible the complementary belief: "I am benefiting from another's strengths and encouraging them to get stronger".

So, the basic elements of the experiment:

1. Mutual agreement and understanding throughout the process, including absolute transparency
2. Stretch group objectives
3. Visible, agreed individual commitments to contribute to group objectives
4. Proportionate rewards and penalization based on group performance
5. Forced peer ranking within the group
6. Distribution of proportionate reward (or penalization) based on perceived contribution

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<sup>66</sup> Guess what type of organization they work for?

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reciprocity\\_\(social\\_and\\_political\\_philosophy\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reciprocity_(social_and_political_philosophy))

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As Gary Hamel said in his key-note speech to the Human Capital Institute Summit in 2009: *Transparency is the most under-rated control mechanism in the world.*

Don't buy the 'modern' organization's mythology that recognition should be private. The main thing that myth is protecting is that generally there is a lack of differentiation of reward for performance variance, that the culture of averageness permeates everything – from salary increases, to share options, to performance related bonuses.

And if that isn't true in your organization, then it's a fair bet that you didn't need to read this far.

## Who are you trusting to build your Strengths Springboard?

"GREATNESS LIES, NOT IN BEING STRONG, BUT IN THE RIGHT USING OF STRENGTH." – HENRY WARD BEECHER (1813-1887)

Some very brief thoughts on two critical functions:

### Human Resources

Don't blame HR. It really isn't all their fault.

I hope that at least some of you are in the HR profession. I really do. If you are, then you are champions in your function because so many of your professional peers are lost in a double-bind mythology that is painful to see.

Here's the mythology:

- *The 'modern' organization wants reproducibility, scalability and non-deviation from the norm*
- *It hires, develops, promotes and retains managers who can sustain the status quo and quell diversity's pernicious fingers*
- *It also pressurizes those same managers to perceive themselves as technical/functional managers ahead of people managers*
- *Those managers fail at managing people*
- *HR grows a belief and value system that they compensate for, and protect against, broken managers, leaders and colleagues*
- *Despite good words indicating the opposite, HR grows to infantilize managers, keeping them 'dumb' as to their role in driving value*
- *The 'modern' organization forced by the rapidly changing business landscape to reconsider its core being blames HR for failing to develop the leaders, managers and performers of the future*
- *HR blames the managers for being incapable of developing talent*
- *And a vicious cycle begins*

Imagine a diver being coached by someone who didn't believe that people could or should dive. And who, to a certain extent, has evolved a vested interest in making sure they don't learn. That's the 'modern' HR organization.

As I say, don't blame them, it really isn't all their fault. The function is largely an extension of the 'modern' organization.

It's in the title, right? *Human Resources*. There isn't anything more 'modern' than that.

Some HR groups have got some of it right, but they are few and far between, and very, very few have got it *all* right. What I've seen for a number of years is that there are bright sparks in the profession who actually carve out excellence despite the wider inertia of the function.

So you'll get one company who are gods in strategic workforce planning, another that have nailed experience-based leadership development, another that is teaching the world about diversity. Dig a little deeper, though and you find that it isn't the function, it's an individual leader – or more accurately, an individual further down the hierarchy who is willing to be the heretic despite their own leadership.

There are many great books and thinkers on the subject of HR's need to transform its value equation and I meant it when I said these would be brief thoughts. If you want to dig deeper, I would direct you to John Boudreau, Dave Ullrich, Ed Lawler, John Sullivan, to name a few – but even as you review their work, listen carefully for the subtle whisper of the 'modern' organization. You'll hear it underpinning much of the HR value proposition.

The information, knowledge and lifestyle economy will demand strengths as a competitive advantage. If you are truly looking to grow the Strengths Springboard, you could do worse than changing the name of *Human Resources* to *Human Value*.

Then, dedicate HV to building the future, not perpetuating the *status quo* or, even worse, carrying forward the past.

### Communications

Long before she ascends that Athens platform, Jess attends her first coaching session, stepping out of the changing rooms, and into the echoing noise of the pool. People are diving in from all angles. Even in her inexperienced state, though, Jess can see that this is wrong. There are belly-flops, rotating entries, somersaults that are like tumbleweed with arms and legs akimbo. This is just wrong.

Then she notices that, around the edge of the pool, scattered amongst the towels and other belongings, there are hundreds of copies of the same book. She picks one up. It's called *"Diving Made Simple"*. When she opens it, she's surprised to find it's in a language she's never seen. The letters don't even make sense.

Something is very wrong.

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Jess turns back to the pool. And really looks at the divers dropping into the water, swimming to the side and climbing out of the pool. They all have duct tape stuck across their mouths.

All of a sudden, at ear-splitting volume, a resonant male voice crackles out of the PA system, echoing around the cavern of the swimming pool:

*“You are all diving very well. Diving is important for our customers and, thanks to your hard efforts, diving is taking place. Dive harder. Dive faster. Your customers need you to dive! Please now turn to page 753 of Diving Made Simple and learn to execute the new dive described there. You are expected to be fully proficient in the new dive by next Tuesday. Thank you.”*

Silence.

The divers get out of the pool and go to reclaim their copies of *Diving Made Simple*.

You're Jess. What would you do right now?

I know what my answer would be. And I doubt Jess would ever have subsequently ascended that Athens cliff.

As with HR, I promised to keep this brief, so I won't take too much longer to unpick the communications function. But just stop for a moment and really listen to your internal communications. Do they bear even a passing resemblance to our swimming pool from hell?

Here is what needs to be in place:

- *Colleagues must have voice – formal and informal – and the balance must significantly outweigh that of leadership and management – build a cacophony of colleague voices*
- *People learn most from experience and coaching, least from books and classrooms – share experiences and learning outside of the written word*
- *Authority figures should only speak when what they say is specific enough for the performer to use – communications should be for the recipient not the sender*

In short, if your communication function gives voice to the top of the 'modern' organization pyramid, and denies that of the colleague population, then it's unlikely that you will build a culture of strength. If, however, your communication function views itself as giving voice to excellence, at any and all levels of the organization, you have a better than even chance of building the Strengths Springboard.

## The Strengths Springboard – A Conclusion

Well, we've been together through some interesting waters.

I hope you have found no answers.

Or, more accurately, I hope you have found no specific answers but are filled with questions and thoughts about what you could do to build a Strengths Springboard in your organization.

Start with the honest assessment of how 'modern' your organization is; there's no doubt that when changing a system, knowing where you're starting from is a good thing! The more 'modern', the greater the challenge – start with baby steps, build a phased approach – e.g. what does team recognition look like rather than jumping right to intra-team judging and relative reward.

Push as hard as you can, but not so hard that you destroy the road in front of you.

Never lose sight of the five core beliefs:

1. There is no better place for me to do what I do best
2. My strengths directly impact my customers for the better
3. Performance serves outcomes, not activities
4. Control, what's control?
5. Celebration is not a scarce commodity

Finally, as you learn, come share it with all of us at <http://www.strengthspringboard.com> where we will commit to do likewise for you.

If you want to get in touch with me to discuss anything in this paper or other ideas, feel free to do so at [vince@strengthspringboard.com](mailto:vince@strengthspringboard.com).

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## About the Author

Hello, my name is Vincent Tuckwood. I am a commitment to help you improve your life by delivering my potential. I have dedicated my personal and professional life to enabling people and organization's to shine. Whether through individual career coaching, team effectiveness, colleague engagement consulting or larger-scale speaking events, I like nothing better than helping people see their unseen, understand that it's not as threatening as they believe and identify the possibilities to move forward to an even more exciting future.

You can find me at:

- LinkedIn: <http://www.linkedin.com/in/vincenttuckwood>
- e-mail: [vince@strengthspringboard.com](mailto:vince@strengthspringboard.com)

I hope you will join me at <http://www.strengthspringboard.com> as we journey to help more organizations build their own Strengths Springboard.