



Leadership Tips & Tools

JULY 2007

A flood of new publications, including *StrengthsFinder 2.0* by Tom Rath, *Go Put Your Strengths to Work* by Marcus Buckingham, and *12: The Elements of Great Managing* by Rodd Wagner and James K. Harter, offer abundant evidence to support strengths-based leadership and management practices.

Our last issue focused on being a strengths-based leader. *12: The Elements of Great Managing* was the anchor. The focus of our attention was the 11th Element, “*In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.*”

This issue of *Leadership Tips and Tools* continues the discussion, integrating the key findings from *12: The Elements of Great Managing* with observations, best practices, and research from some of our favorite resources. Our focus here will be on...

Recognition & Praise! Performance Feedback & Talent Management

“*Encouragement is oxygen to the soul.*”

—George Matthew Adams

Great leaders and managers don't wait for the annual review or the yearly staff recognition event to offer specific praise and recognition for work performance. In fact, the 4th Element from *12: The Elements of Great Managing* provides as many insights into performance feedback as it does into recognition. The 4th Element examines the role of positive performance feedback: “*In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.*”

The Heart! Kouzes and Posner have taught us to recognize and celebrate the achievements of our colleagues by showing appreciation for individual excellence and celebrating values and victories as a way to create a spirit of community. The five practices of exemplary leadership articulated in *The Leadership Challenge* build to a crescendo culminating with the fifth exemplary practice of *Encouraging the Heart*.

The Head! Much of the discussion of the 4th Element in *12: The Elements of Great Managing* is anchored in neurological research which tracks dopamine levels in the brain. Wagner and Harter argue that parts of our brains are programmed for positive events. Further, they confirm that our brains are looking for positive events and reinforcement—moving in minutes, not months. “*All the evidence suggests the employee brain is perpetually watchful and eager for reinforcing signals, particularly an unexpected, spur-of-the-moment boost.*”

Capitalize on Reinforcing Signals! A leader's ability to encourage both the heart AND the head by capitalizing on reinforcing signals in the brain can have a profound effect on performance. As strengths-based leaders, we can be mindful of recognizing and encouraging individuals while simultaneously watching for opportunities to capitalize on the brain's programming seeking positive events and reinforcement. This kind of powerful feedback goes beyond praise and recognition to become performance appraisal and talent management.

Create Self-Assurance! Bookstores are full of resources encouraging us to be self-aware. While self-awareness is important, a far more critical concept for strengths-based leaders is self-assurance. When we provide on-going praise, recognition, and feedback on performance from a strengths perspective and offer feedback on challenges that might be "getting in the way" of employment of strengths, we create self-assurance in those with whom we work. As strengths-based leaders we look for both strengths and weaknesses in others' performances; our focus is on strengths.

Goals Achievement! Research by Albert Bandura, the father of social learning theory, has shown that "self-efficacy," or self-assurance, is the "strongest predictor of a person's ability to set high goals, to persist in the face of obstacles, to bounce back when reversals occur, and ultimately, to achieve the goals they set." Strengths-based leaders know that simply making others aware of their strengths (and weaknesses) is not the goal—creating and reinforcing self-assurance in using strengths is!

More optimistic! Create self-assurance by sharing with others the ways you perceive their success as an outcome of deploying their strengths. Tie strengths to department and college goals! Move colleagues from self-awareness to self-assurance. Self-assurance makes us more optimistic and more resilient in the face of challenges to come. Strengths-based leaders create self-assurance.

What About Weakness? Gallup inquired into the proper balance between focusing on strengths and positive news or focusing on weakness and negative news in feedback and appraisals. The research found that a manager or leader who focuses on strengths essentially inoculates others from becoming actively disengaged. By focusing on strengths and giving honest appraisals regarding challenges or weaknesses, managers and leaders can keep others engaged and forward looking. So, focus on strengths and use the positive messages inherent in strengths to help others see weaknesses as "challenges" to living out the full potential of their strengths.

"A recent study by Gallup found that organizations focused on maximizing the natural talents of their employees increased engagement levels by an average of 33 percent. Per year."

—Todd Wagner and James Harter

Maintain Vigilance on "Negative Bias"! "Our attention is automatically drawn to negative information more strongly than it is automatically drawn to positive information," report Wagner and Harter in *12: The Elements of Great Managing*. So, it is probably not surprising that managers and leaders are quicker to see weaknesses and problems than to see strengths and exemplary performance. While arguing for the 12 Elements, Wagner and Harter help us understand our overwhelming "negative bias" as humans. As strengths-based leaders we need to maintain vigilance on our "negative bias" and be mindful that without conscious effort, negative observations and appraisals will continually "jump in line before the positive ones."

Use the Genius of AND! Sometimes we undermine our efforts with old habits. Here is one. Conversations and feedback intended to appreciate, honor, and develop others need to include the genius of AND. There will always be positives to celebrate. Strengths on which to focus! And, everyone wants to grow and develop. Don't sabotage conversational success with "BUTs!" It's a bad habit to use "but" as a conjunction during conversation. We can work hard to establish a positive interaction and destroy it all with one misplaced "but." "But" negates! No "buts" allowed in strengths-based conversations! Practice and use the genius of AND! Learn to substitute "and" for every "but" in your daily interaction. Eventually, you will erase this negative conjunction from your interpersonal communication vocabulary.

Return to Stockdale! Remember the Stockdale Paradox from Jim Collins' best seller, *Good to Great?* Telling the story of Admiral Jim Stockdale, Collins helps us understand that "hardiness" is a key to moving from good to great in our organizations . . . and our lives. Simply stated, the Stockdale Paradox argues that we need to retain faith that good will prevail in the end, regardless of difficulties. . . AND at the same time confront the challenging facts of the current reality, whatever they might be. *"Good-to-great leaders were able to strip away noise and clutter and just focus on the few things that would have the greatest impact. They were able to do so in large part because they operated from both sides of the Stockdale Paradox, never letting one side overshadow the other."*

Foster Hardiness! Can we create cultures and climates of "hardiness?" Again, returning to *The Leadership Challenge*, promoting psychological hardiness is one of the commitments of exemplary leaders. Kouzes and Posner argue that we foster hardiness when we engender a sense of control by assigning tasks that are challenging yet within the individual's personal talent or skill, offer more rewards than punishments, and build an attitude of challenge by encouraging others.

A Strengths Path! Recent publications like *StrengthsFinder 2.0* by Rath and *Go Put Your Strengths to Work* by Buckingham remind us of the Gallup research finding that only about 17% of us "live a life that plays to our strengths." Our challenge as post-secondary leaders is to find ways to provide praise, recognition, and feedback in ways to align strengths with job performance goals AND provide honest appraisals of work that might be undermining achievement.

"The managers who are the best at getting the most from people are those who give the most to them."

—Todd Wagner and James Harter

We Invite You to the Library! Our strengths lie in our ability to continue to learn and grow as leaders. We celebrate the work of Lane Glenn and Ann Marie Krause, facilitators of the Texas Leadership Academy, who recently passed along a gift shared by the leaders in their Academy. The gift: The Library Thing (www.librarything.com)! This on-line Library will provide a place to share the books and resources cited in the *Leadership Tips and Tools*. You will find the books discussed in this issue, as well as resources from previous issues. You will also find opportunities to share your reviews, recommendations, musings, and best practices for other visitors to see. You may find that The Library Thing provides a place for you to create a resource or reading list for your faculty, staff, and students. We invite you to go to the Leadership Tips and Tools Library at: http://www.librarything.com/catalog/Academy_Tips_Tools.

Genuine Concern! In the end, being "strengths finders" is our daily business as post-secondary leaders. Praise, recognition, performance feedback, and talent management are at the heart of all that we do. They are at the core of our job description . . . and our daily legacy. We can offer them only through genuine concern for the personal and professional growth of our colleagues and students. Genuine concern for others is a lifestyle, not a technique. Developing knowledge and skill in strengths-based leadership—praise, recognition, and feedback—could be misconstrued as technique and strategy, yet, when rooted in solid research, a caring attitude for enactment, and genuine concern for the growth and development of others, they become the soul of our leadership.

We want to hear from you! Please email us with your suggestions for *Leadership Tips and Tools*. We would love to hear your suggestions, experiences, stories, discoveries, and successes with putting these tips and tools to work. What topics would be most helpful to you for up-coming issues of *Leadership Tips and Tools*? We value your suggestions and feedback. We are listening!

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