



## BUILDING A STRENGTHS BASED CULTURE – A CURRENT EXAMPLE

In the last Inklings we wrote about using a Strengths Based approach (such as Gallup StrengthsFinder) to improve business performance. In brief the research by Gallup and others identifies better performance where organisations and managers focus on identifying and developing employees' innate strengths. This runs counter to the common organisational philosophy of trying to discover and fix weaknesses. Our clients Boston Scientific have been working to develop a strengths based culture in their UK organisation with our help.

Boston Scientific is a US corporation in the medical devices industry. The UK franchise is an important part of their international business. It is a successful business but competing in a highly competitive and fast changing environment. We interviewed Tim Coutts, the head of the UK organisation and Liz Illingworth, HR Director for learning which we could share with Inklings readers.

Here is a summary of their main observations.

### Why take a Strengths Based approach?

Tim, Liz and their Leadership Team colleagues were looking for a way to develop an already thriving business. In our experience this is usually harder than changing an organisation which has obvious problems; there is an inertia that comes with success! As Tim said, "How could we capture what has made us successful and build on this?" Liz added, "We wanted something that would increase our competitive edge." Being familiar with the Gallup research on employee engagement the Strengths Finder route was an obvious one for them to take. Also the philosophy fitted the existing Boston Scientific UK culture. The Company's products are aimed at saving and improving lives. The UK organisation is focused on Sales and Marketing. Strengths Based Coaching made sense.

### How was Strengths Based Coaching introduced?

The Leadership Team were keen to avoid the "this month's guru/fad" trap as Tim described it. Strengths Based Coaching was shared with the extended Leadership Team of 40+ managers at an offsite. While a positive launch should not be confused with long term success there is no doubt that Strengths Coaching "really resonated with our managers and produced a surge of energy to use the approach" as Liz put it. Managers then had the opportunity to join a cross organisation Strengths Coaching Group which had a few facilitated "Action Learning" sessions. After that it was up to individuals how and indeed if they wanted to take the approach further for themselves and their teams. Various materials were developed to support managers in going further.

### How has it gone?

Tim, Liz and their colleagues are treating this as a long-term initiative. Right now they are pleased with progress and also impatient to see more! They still feel that the decision not to have a classic 'roll out' was the right one. Instead the emphasis was on developing Advocates for Strengths Coaching. As Tim expressed it, "The early wins were when individuals picked it up and ran with it."



He observed that by its nature Strengths Finder feedback is easy for managers to identify with; “It’s very individualised.” This typifies the ‘viral’ approach taken to the change. It was a deliberate decision to use the principles of the Tipping Point rather than a more conventional change strategy. They put faith in enough Advocates “catching on” that over time the organisation as a whole moves forward.” Tim and Liz both identified the Tipping Point Change Simulation as pivotal in their thinking. Like Strengths Finder the Tipping Point principles feel intuitively right to most people and there is persuasive research to back them up.

We discussed the challenge of measuring value/return on investment for the Strengths approach. Tim and Liz have been looking at multiple measures including: their IIP Assessment, some Employee Value Proposition Focus Groups run as part of a corporate programme and a specific survey on the use and impact of the Strengths approach. They felt that it was also important to track how much the simple language of Strengths was alive in the organisation, how potential recruits react to this aspect of the Company and so on are also important measures. Could/would they make a quantifiable assessment of the impact on business performance? They were doubtful, referring us back to the Gallup research as the business case for Strengths.

### **What lessons have been learnt?**

A Strengths based approach may not be for every organisation. Boston Scientific in the UK has a culture where managers are at least prepared to consider such an intervention. To quote Tim, “Strengths Coaching is right up our street.” However Liz was quick to point out that “it helps to get some sceptical, analytical people involved from the start. We benefited from their challenge.”

The viral approach to change is the only one likely to succeed. A top down roll out would have been self defeating. However, this puts far more responsibility on senior managers to “walk the talk” over time. Also you need to identify, encourage and involve your Advocates. Don’t waste time and energy on convincing resisters. As Tim said, “Not everyone will get it straight away. You have to get the Advocates to spread the message.” He also reinforced the need to remind people that “why we are focusing on strengths is to improve performance.” Liz feels now that quicker progress could have been made by “being better at identifying our early adopters.” Building on this Tim said “with hindsight I would have involved some champions from different levels in the Design Team.” (The Design Team which led the project comprised initially of Tim, Liz and another key member of the top team.)

Give managers some support (and challenge) and resources to get started but let them have the responsibility to make it happen. We debated whether there had been too much emphasis on letting the change evolve versus starting with a more detailed plan. Tim’s view was “I wish we’d known then what we know now about helping people to leverage their strengths.” Liz agreed and stressed the need to “immerse yourself in the Strengths materials before you start.”



As a reinforcing/development vehicle the Strengths Coaching Groups worked well in some cases but not universally. Tim and Liz felt that a variety of development resources, suiting different types of people, would be ideal. “For some people working one to one with their manager would add much more value than being part of a learning group” Tim explained. They also warned “not to overestimate the average manager’s motivation to explore the Gallup Strengths website without a map!”

Strengths Coaching at Boston Scientific started at a time when the Vision for the UK business was under review. Would it have been better to wait until the Vision was clearly articulated? After some deliberation Tim and Liz both gave an emphatic ‘no’. According to Liz, “we have a different and better Vision that people can identify with because of our work on Strengths”

You are probably wondering as we have if the Strengths approach has flourished in Boston Scientific because of its’ favourable culture and leadership. There is no doubt in our minds that this helped to give the intervention a helpful strategic fit. However, as a final comment Tim and Liz said that compared to a lot of interventions which they and their colleagues had experienced Strengths Based Coaching has the big advantage of being fun! As Tim Coutts put it “After all using and developing your Strengths is a hard proposition to say ‘no’ to.”

**Kevin and Rosanne**