

How to Play to Your Strengths

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ABSTRACT

From time to time, students at AIU are given the opportunity to comment or critically review an article written in a well-known or academically prominent journal, particularly as it may affect their field of study. "How to Play to Your Strengths", is an article that appeared in the Harvard Business Review, "Managing yourself", issue of January 2005, pp 1-7. This piece is a compilation of study, by Laura Morgan Roberts, Gretchen Spreitzer, Jane Dutton, Robert Quinn, Emily Heaphy, and Brianna Barker. The title is somewhat misleading; there is the implication that the article deals with self-help techniques rather than those derived from "feedback". A different approach to using a person's "strengths" is proposed which purports to challenge traditional strategies and theories, by concentrating only on the positive side of life, and ignoring the personal benefits of changing a perceived negative quality to a perceived positive change. The propositions put forth in this article are basically contradictory to the basis of my field of study and are critically examined with a view of explaining to the reader that articles in professional journals need to be unbiased and supported by empirical evidence. The concept of "feedback" is by definition not judgmental but evaluative and supportive.

This piece puts forth a proposition that does not positively reflect on my field of study and practice. In my field of Thanatology, the study of death and grief, I work with clients to assist in transforming weaknesses, particularly those emanating from death and loss, (a perceived negative) into strengths, (a perceived positive) by engaging in hope, and investing in reason. That is, to assist the client, to translate and reframe this emotion into a reinforcing positive emotion. Alan D. Wolfelt (2001) avers that "mourners (need) to embrace the pain of their loss and confront it, rather than repress or deny the pain, (so as to) develop a new self-identity. In my research, I have found that when a loved one has died, grief and mourning occur as a process, which might be called "transformation".

OVERVIEW

I am of the opinion that articles in a prestigious journal should be professional and balanced in the research employed, and in the implications to a particular position, in this case traditional "feedback". The transmission of *evaluative* or *corrective* (italics, mine) information to the original or controlling source about an action, event, or process Wiktionary (2008). Unless so stated, opinions should not be self-serving, unless there is concrete evidence demonstrating their value, by the use of unbiased supportive data. Accordingly, I strongly suggest the authors misused the feedback term, as by

definition it is not judgmental, but evaluative and corrective, thus encouraging rather than discouraging. They failed to perceive this balance.

Six professionals in academic fields authored the article; five are professors, who encompass organizational behavior, management and organization, and original psychology. One is a PhD candidate. They all emanate from prestigious universities and the Harvard Business School. As such, the reader should have at his disposal, references to substantiate the various allegations and premises set forth. Moreover, both the headnote and the piece itself should have clearly identified that the thrust and purpose was to promote a “personal best” tool, of which the writers are the authors.

There is a paucity of supporting data and research to substantiate the assessment tool described. Moreover, various points are made which not only are incorrect; but give the impression that there have been thousands of hours of research, when in fact nothing is offered to substantiate these propositions.

The article promotes the “Reflected Best Self” (RBS) exercise credited by the authors to “develop a sense of ‘personal best’ and thus, increase future potential (in business).

It is to be noted that there is long and detailed teaching note, by the same authors, published by the Michigan Ross School of Business, July 15, 2003, which purports to support the view that people who receive positive feedback synthesize this into a cumulative portrait of “Best Self.” This is, at best, a hypothesis, as if there is any qualified research, there is no reference to it in this article. There are references to various authors, including Bandura and Beaumeister (2005) but no supporting data. I believe that constructs not having any reference to scientific method, need to be looked at with a critical eye. The authors show that one may ascertain certain common threads from positive feedback. I have no doubt of this, but to what purpose? Unless negative traits and emotions are miniscule, they will diminish the value of the positive traits, and be seen as a personality deficiency.

The Self-Esteem or self-affirmation construct began more than two millennia ago with a number of academics, including Socrates, urging the point of ‘know thyself; esteem thyself’. This hypothesis came to critical mass in the 1960’s when humanist academics alleged, “not only individual mental health, but societal progress depends on a positive self-image”. In fact, the State of California, created a task force in the late 1980’s (which lasted until it was disbanded in 1995) to promote this. The work continues through the National Association for Self-Esteem.

“Self-help” and “feeling good” have become North American irrational preoccupations. Micki McGee (2005), Assistant Professor, and Faculty Fellow at New York University sees the self-help industry as an “obsessional treadmill far more than a path to a better life”. I see self-help and positive reinforcement linked together as tools that actually cause discontent and do not acknowledge social solutions that might actually help. These solutions include concepts and practical suggestions to help overcome weakness and disabilities of various dimensions.

Today, makeover programs are as popular as the many Reality Shows on television. These latter give the impression to a passive and non-critical audience that praise after performing certain feats of “daring-do”, and self-help will lead to a path towards a better life, financial and otherwise.

To the contrary, there has been consistent and clear evidence by psychologists who stand by the statement that praise or reward, elicits a negative response. It is “conditional” and not the unconditional love which we all need and require Kohn (1993). There is greater recall of negative rather than positive events. In fact five times greater. This gives the therapist a tool with which to suggest the reframing of negative responses into positive attributes. As if ignored, they will, in time, destroy in whole or in part, the positive thoughts.

Alfie Kohn (op.cit.) p 42.ff, gives many examples of research programs from 1961 forward that evidenced the clear “inferiority of (the) reward groups.” In other words, reward or praise was counter-productive. Encouragement, not praise, on the other hand, gave a feeling of self-determination, rather than rewards that felt controlling and made one dependent on another’s approval. There is a clear difference here between rewards for achievement, rather than encouragement and positive comments and suggestions, to overcome weaknesses. Note that whilst “encouragement” may be between equals; “rewards” and “praise” strongly denote inequality between the giver and the recipient.

Only kings bestow knighthoods on commoners.

The authors’ set out four easy steps to “reinvent” the reader. According to them, positive reinforcement from willing cohorts who know the client-subject will provide examples of strength of the client-subject. The client-subject will then determine or derive common themes from this feedback. With this information, he/she can then provide possible interpretations to uncover positive self-esteem guidelines in order to develop a plan for more effective action. In the case of the few examples provided, we are permitted to tap into “unrecognized and unexplored areas of potential.” The premise is that in gathering data on one’s “Best Self”, one can burnish one’s performance at work, for example. There is also the indirect message that with better performance one will advance faster and earn more money. The authors posit that this in turn, will result in a happier family life. These are mere allegations without empirical data to substantiate the allegations.

With all due respect, the authors have “missed the boat” Not only is the piece devoid of even the smallest element of serious clinical study, or trial, it is composed of only two anecdotal stories out of a trial of an unknown number of participants, and relies on the phrase that “psychologists know that people respond better to praise than to criticism. This is contrary to consistent and clear evidence by psychologists that praise elicits a negative response.

Kohn (op.cit.) makes the point it is encouragement that enables the subject to build on weaknesses and reframe them into strengths. Praising positive aspects of a person and ignoring the negative ones eliminates the opportunity of building a well-balanced personality. Reframing weaknesses into strengths reinforces the already present positive aspects of a person. Praise in itself clearly indicates a hierarchy, not equality, between the “praiser” and the “praisee.” “You did a good job” should be restricted to praising a dog after he performs a certain trick.

There is substantial data, Moynihan (2005), showing that reframing negative to positive permits the use of courage to tackle weaknesses and transform them. Courage inspires others with similar weaknesses to be themselves, courageous. Reference to this is also lacking. Feedback on weakness

need not necessarily be negative but can be encouraging. While courage can never be instilled directly, a (person) “can foster an ability to be courageous by reinforcing and encouraging autonomy and individual thought that challenge accepted norms.”

The article appears to imply that one may foster excellence by identifying and harnessing unique strengths and by ignoring one’s weaknesses. Powerful and successful leaders are those who are multi-faceted and not one-dimensional only.

It is alleged by the authors, that criticism may be remembered. It is established by others that praise will also be remembered, Kohn, (op.cit.). Both emanate from the leader or teacher to the student-client. Neither of these strategies requires any input from the client-subject. Both make the client-subject defensive and potentially hostile to any recommendation or counsel. For over seventy years the well-known world communication organization known as Toastmasters International, has worked with and instructed millions of people, from all walks of life, and demonstrated how to retain and build on strengths. More importantly, to receive evaluations of encouragement, not mere opinions, in areas of personality and communication skills. Note these are evaluations, and not cold cut judging. Areas or points that are not equal to the positive aspects, and which could benefit from improvement are suggested. This encourages the building of a more focused, yet more catholic communicator. Potential suggestions for diminishing negative communication flaws are given in a supportive and encouraging manner. It has been found over time, that these communicators listen and learn from these suggestions.

We may agree that effective communication is an essential component of a strong managerial business sense; however, because thousands of executives and students have completed the “RBS” exercise, is no evidence of its success. A doctor may have graduated from medical school, but this is no guarantee of his practical ability to perform in a professional manner. Other than this allegation, no concrete evidence of any dimension is offered to support the statement made by the authors. It is mere supposition.

I would have preferred to have seen some firm data, which would have given credibility to the “RBS” exercise. Something beyond “completed the “RBS” exercise, as stated on page 2. A more credible quotation might be something like “I have successfully employed “RBS” in my job or profession, in this or that manner and with the following results.” Completing any exercise does not imply proficiency.

My chosen field of expertise encompasses the rebuilding or reframing the life of a person enduring loss of all type’s and dimensions and working with a perceived weakness or minus and transforming it into a perceived gain or plus. This is one of the bases of Alfred Adler’s Theory of personality. On page one of the piece; the authors dismiss “opportunities for improvement” with a knowledgeable evaluation, and toss this construct into the wastebasket of negative information, overinvestment in weakness and papering over the perceived weaknesses. Adler(1964).

Again, to the contrary, enlightened evaluation has been proved extremely powerful in turning a perceived negativity into a perceived positive gain. There is no evidence that high self-esteem by itself, leads to better job performance. If there is such, it is not proffered for examination by the reader. Bookstores are crammed with shelves of “self-esteem” and “self-help books. With over a half

century of focusing on ourselves and self-esteem; crime, drug abuse and school underachievement remain high and increasing.

Convicted Tyco executives, such as Dennis Kowalski, now serving a 25-year sentence for stealing more than \$150 million from his company, have extremely high self-esteem. In the words of the prosecutor at his trial, “he absolutely refuses to take any responsibility.” The John Gomery Inquiry in the Province of Quebec, Canada, established that federal bureaucrats and their underlings laundered millions of taxpayer dollars to their own party faithful and hangers-on. These white collar adult delinquents refuse to accept any responsibility for their acts. According to McGee (op.cit.) “self-help overemphasizes the individual’s agency at the expense of the necessary reliance...on a network of others.”

One might be inclined to believe that self-esteem would bear positive and good fruit in schools where it is about the universally applied “gold star syndrome” versus the blue, green, and red ones. What does this do? It rewards by praise “You won/deserve/got/ beat out/ahead of your classmates.” Thus is it that students have to explain and take the consequences of being “awarded” the lesser stars, and the gold star winner has to put up with the teasing he or she gets from the non-start or colored star “winners”. Moreover, if he or she does not come home the next month with another gold one, look out!

Individuals often resist change. They prefer habit, which leads to inertia. By refusing to respond to change, they fall ever further from alignment with environmental demands. This failing alignment depletes their motivation and energy, further reducing the likelihood of effective change.

The result is a downward spiral) that has been referred to as the slow death phenomenon Quinn uses the phrase “slow death” to refer to individuals’ and collectives’ tendency toward declining motivation and reduced energy.” Caza and Quinn (2005).

Florida State University Professor and Adlerian Researcher, Roy F. Baumeister, (In Worline (2005)) determined in two studies that close to two hundred earlier studies of self-esteem were long on links between self-esteem and violence, but short on evidence. They found clinically, to the contrary that there was a link between high self-esteem and crime, aggression and violence. The therapy for these people is not reinforcing confidence and excellence, but in cultivating self-control and instilling modesty and humility. These studies undermine the construct of the “How to Play to Your Strengths” authors.

Patients with loss issues have had their self-esteem and attachment to the world, severely damaged. They need not to learn how good they are, i.e. “You are handling your loss so well”, or “I am amazed how you seem to be dealing with your loss”, but only to have someone “actively listen” to their grief, no matter how trivial or how long ago, this may appear to the listener. What they seek is some path to follow, some work to do, to resolve their grief (a perceived weakness) into the formation of a new identity where there may be a new relationship with the deceased loved one in the form of memory, which is a perceived strength. (Monihan,op.cit.).

My wife was killed in 1990. I was moved to say at a memorial service for her, thirty days later, that I

had to use her senseless death as an opportunity for me to change my life and reframe her life and death, as a gift from her to me. In fact, that is what happened and society and I are the better for it. It was not easy seventeen years ago and still not easy today to work with death and avoid the commonly preached task of getting through or by it; most importantly I transformed a negative experience and event into a positive force in my life and likewise the lives of my children who were very young in 1990. I have become a positive example of how a crushing emotional blow can be transformed into an opportunity to do better in this world. This was even more reinforced by the diagnosis I received in 2002 indicating that I was suffering from serious and possibly terminal head, neck, and throat cancer. Following surgery and radiation treatment, the pain and incapacity of which endures to this day, I turned a potential death sentence into a life experience that has widened and deepened my personal horizons to do more for my fellow man, than I would have previously.

OPINION

I am of the opinion that positive feedback looks after itself and may be built on as a sound foundation; but that the building of the personality in itself requires additionally; walls and superstructure of so-called negative feedback that can transform the “building” into an even stronger structure. Only thus will we have achieved psychological balance.

A personality is not balanced by increasing positive traits; but ignoring or discarding other traits perceived to be or deemed weaknesses. These weaknesses will not disappear. They will only grow; sometimes to such an extent as to diminish the positive sides of a person. Human behavior is social and purposive, Adler (op.cit.)so then, one must examine how positive and negative feedback, so called, can make a difference to a person’s life.

Let us examine, in the article, the well-documented illustration under the pseudonym of “Robert Duggan and his processing of the Reflected Best Self Exercise”. According to the article, the subject is a retired military officer with an MBA. In the service, he was in middle management – but despite strong academic and leadership credentials, was “stuck” according to his description of being in the same position for many years. This despite generally good performance evaluations. As part of the RBS exercise, he sought out positive feedback from eleven individuals who knew him well; three family members and two former classmates and six former or present colleagues. Scarcely an unbiased group.

Unsurprisingly, within ten days he received positive feedback from all, stressing almost universal conformity in perseverance, courage under pressure, high standards, and so on. It is then concluded that this established Robert’s sense of himself in a positive way. Whether he ever got a better job is not presented. What would have happened, one wonders if Robert’s negative attributes had included the inability to properly communicate his notions and ideas, no amount of self-esteem reinforcement would allow him to communicate in a manner to become or be promoted to program manager. In the example, he created a word picture of himself that summarized the information received. From this, he discovered a negative trait, i.e. the inability to develop a sense of mission; moreover, without solid and positive communication skills, he would be unable to convey the mission to others.

To succeed in the business world, and in the military “business”, negative traits must be transformed

into positive ones. I am of the belief that ignoring negative points, and working only with positive feedback only lends itself to misleading conclusions, i.e., I am OK, I do not have to improve myself; whereas feedback, that is not “negative” in implication but positive in methods for improvement is in fact positive and encouraging. While it is stated that Robert was in fact promoted to program manager, a conclusion is drawn that this was accomplished by the reinforcement of his strengths. Nothing is presented in the piece to justify this. In my opinion, Robert was promoted because he reframed the negative part of himself into a positive strength. His positive strengths looked after themselves; however, by developing a sense of mission, he was able to better communicate his strengths to his superiors. It was the reframing of his mission, not his positive attributes, which had been acknowledged previously by his superiors that got him the advancement he sought.

IMPLICATION TO MY FIELD OF STUDY

I have much difficulty with this type of research. The test group is a small size. There is nothing objectionable in qualitative analysis; however pre-selection so as to give only examples of the subjects “good points” is sloppy research. For the general public that is used to vagueness in reporting, it makes for an easy read; however for the scientific community, it is not appropriate.

Researchers have a choice in the type of research they wish to pursue. It can be one of either, and sometimes a blend, to some degree, of the two.

First is Quantitative research. In this form, control groups are usually employed, together with large numbers of subjects. This type of research is relatively easy to analyze and reduce to numbers where trends may be discovered. Quantitative research categorizes data into patterns as the primary basis for organizing the large amount of data. Much of this research is of the yes/no type, together with filling in blanks and selecting ranges, for example from one to five, or one to ten.

The second type is Qualitative research. It depends on the reasons behind various aspects of behavior. In a “nutshell”, it investigates the *why* and *how* of decision making, not just *what*, *where*, and *when*. (Wikipedia, 2008). Hence, the need is for smaller but more focused samples rather than large random samples. This research is usually with small numbers of subjects, with one on one interviews, the use of Socratic open-ended questioning and the use of questions that can evoke detailed responses. If questionnaires are used, they are long and prompt the responder to amplify his or her statements. It is almost impossible to have a control group, as the answers to the open-ended questions are invariably, idiosyncratic.

The article also emphasizes a failing trait in North American Society, and that is to seek out the “fast track” to anything. Education, weight loss, weight gain, hair loss, botox face transformation, are only a few. Therefore, we become experts with the wrong focus; that speed equates with results. Likewise, we are rewarded and praised, for the wrong reasons, when we should be encouraged to make changes by ourselves with the assistance of our own cognition, or supported by others whom we respect. We become narrowly focused experts on narrow subjects; rather than having a well-balanced overview with expertise on some aspects of the whole.

Ignoring weaknesses, does not make them go away. A perceived “weakness” turned into a strength

solidifies and in turn strengthens what is already strong. This then produces the self-actualized person. I could not discover in the piece, any strong allegation or more than marginal data that supported the thesis that positive feedback leads to business success or family happiness.

As stated earlier, my field of study encompasses the challenge of reframing perceived losses, of any type, into actual gains. While there may be a side benefit of positive reinforcement of what each individual does well, my hypotheses are to open the “eyes” of the person experiencing or having experienced loss. This person then has, at the least, so tools to understand how this loss or losses may be transformed by him or her into actual gains, or at the least to neutralize their negative effect on him or her. Thus actually encouraging family, friends and colleagues.

In grief, our western society encourages us to act “as if” and to get over, get past., or to “work through” the loss or grief, of “breaking bonds” rather than taking the negative aspects of loss and reframing them into tools of positive reinforcement and gain. Acting as if, reminds us not only of the loss, but also our own mortality.

In conclusion, this article was not helpful to me in my field. It did point out that many researchers do not appreciate the value of feedback that identifies weaknesses and gives notions and idea of how to take the risk of reframing those weaknesses into positive traits. Only then, we will achieve what is called the “well-balanced” person.

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