The Strengths Engagement Track™

A Benchmark Study of Sixty–Five High Performing Teams

MARCUS BUCKINGHAM

Best-Selling Author and Founder of
The Marcus Buckingham Company

Summary

- Insight Into What Differentiates High Performing Teams From the Rest
- Strategy For Measuring How Strengths-Based Your Organization Really Is
- Results From The Strengths Benchmark Study

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There are no great companies, only great teams.

When a organization asks for my help, the charge is usually quite straightforward: Study our best teams and discover what they have in common so that we can build more like them. Over the last twenty years I've had the chance to investigate all manner of superstar teams from the best clean up crews on Walt Disney World's late night "3rd shift," to the hottest of hot-shot broker teams at Merrill Lynch, all the way to the safest and most efficient Boron mining crews at Rio Tinto Borax. And each time I conclude the research, I am struck by the same bizarre finding. There is range in performance where there shouldn't be.

Consider this example. The graph to the right (Figure 1A) shows all three thousand locations of a large US retailer plotted against two variables, profit up the x axis and local economic potential, as measured by a combination of average household income, age, and education level, along the y axis. The theory of this organization is simple: the greater the local economic potential of a particular store, the more profit the store should make. And you can see from the line stretching upward from bottom left to top right that, when you average out all the stores against these two variables, the theory holds true.

But now look at the same graph, this time with a sample of the actual stores plotted against the same two variables (Figure 1B).

Significant range. See the dot down at the bottom of the graph near the number 800? This dot represents a store that is making much less profit than it should, given the amount of money available in the local community. Then look at the dots at the top of the graph. These represent stores that are generating far more profit than they should, given the amount of money available.

Any student of business would be intrigued by those dots at the top. These stores are selling the same kinds of products as their peer stores, to the same kind of customers, with the same kinds of employees, and yet they are dramatically outperforming them.

Why? Do they have a better selection of products, better training, a cleaner store, a nicer couch in the employee break room? What is it? What on earth is going on in these stores?

Over the years I've seen hundreds of examples of this kind of range, and not just in terms of profitability. The next graph (Figure 2A) shows the top ten percent and bottom ten percent of car dealerships in terms of number of employees who voluntarily quit the organization last year.

Figure 1A

Figure 1B

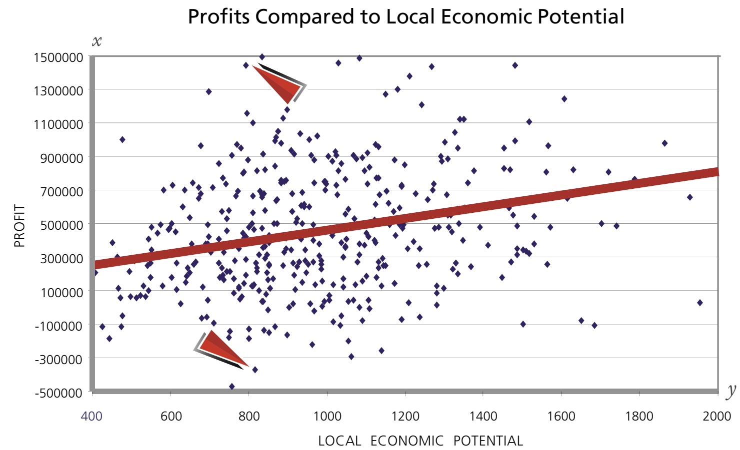

Figure 2A

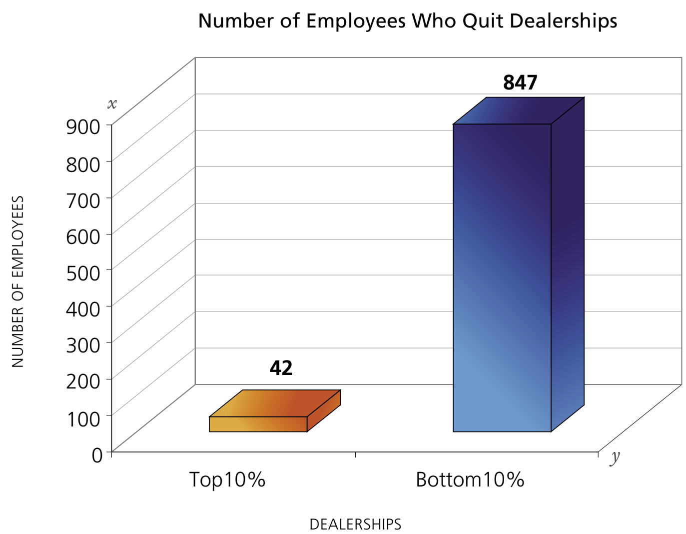

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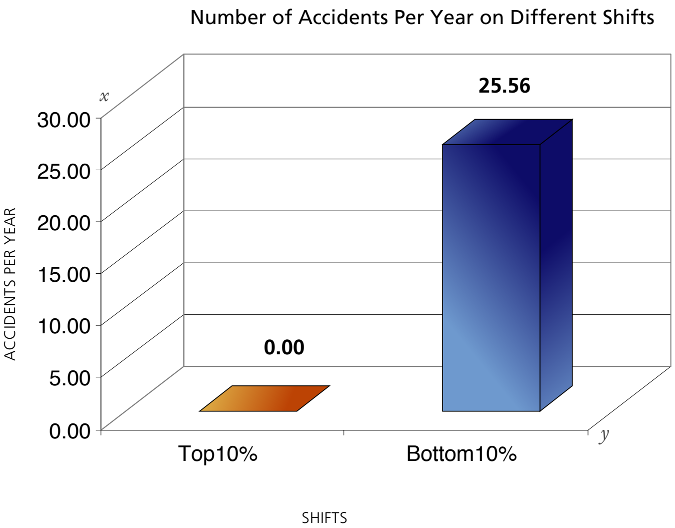
Figure 2B



As you can see, the top ten percent of dealerships lost, in total, 42 people last year, while the bottom ten percent lost 847. Despite offering the same training, the same pay, the same benefits, and despite selling the same vehicles to the same kinds of customers in the same kinds of towns, some dealerships managed to keep their people, while others bled talent profusely. Why? What's going on?

And the graph above (Figure 2B) shows the number of accidents per month that occurred in a large manufacturing facility in the top ten percent of shifts, as compared to the bottom ten percent.

The employees do the same work in the same factory using the same equipment, but on different shifts. Some shifts reported no accidents during the year, while others, working right along side them, averaged more than two reported incidents a month. Why?

Initially mysterious, it turns out to be quite a straightforward research question to answer. One way to approach it is to ask the employees on both the productive and the unproductive teams a long list of employee survey questions, and then pay attention only to those questions where the most productive teams answer "strongly agree," and the less productive ones do not.

Four years ago Dr. Jim Harter of the Gallup Organization and Dr. Frank Schmidt of the University of Iowa conducted this research. Their results were reported in the Journal of Applied Psychology and, while no research should ever be considered final, their findings represent the most definitive statistical analysis of the difference between employee attitudes on high and low performing teams.

Harter and Schmidt asked twelve questions of 198,000 employees, from 7,989 teams, from 36 different organizations; simple questions such as, do you know what is expected of you at work, do you feel your opinions count, do you feel that someone at work cares about you as a person? They were then supplied five performance outcomes on each of the teams:

- productivity
- profitability
- customer satisfaction
- employee turnover
- safety measures

Armed with this data they then calculated which of the twelve questions showed the strongest links to the most business outcomes.

Although all of the questions showed correlations to team performance that were both positive and consistent across organizations—thus confirming that employee opinions do indeed drive business performance—there was one question that stood out. One question showed the strongest and most consistent correlations to the most business outcomes. This one:

At work do you have an opportunity to do what you do best everyday?

Of the five performance outcomes measured, this question's meta-analytic correlations were the highest or second highest to four of the five. Simply put, teams where employees said that they had a chance to play to their strengths at work outperformed those teams where they did not—even when the teams were engaged in exactly the same kind of work.

The conclusion to be drawn from the Harter and Schmidt study is clear: while there are many good levers for engaging employees and driving team performance, levers such as selecting talent, setting clear expectations, praising where praise is due, and defining the team's mission, the *master lever* is getting each employee to play to his strengths. Even if each employee is, in an objective sense, inaccurate in assessing his own strengths, the team will outperform other teams if the team members feel that their strengths are in play most of the time. Pull this lever and an engaged and productive team will be the result. Fail to pull it, and no matter what else is done to motivate the team, they'll never fully engage. They'll never become a high performing team.

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Our People Are (Not Quite) Our Greatest Asset

Organizations pay homage to these findings when they say "our people are our greatest asset". And, on one level, they are right to profess this. After all, organizations place a premium on their employees because, in today's knowledge and service economy, the value of the employees lies in their creativity, innovation, and good judgment, and, of course, should these employees leave the organization, they take all of that value with them—more often than not, straight to the competition.

So, yes, in this general sense, the employees of an organization certainly are its greatest asset, an asset that should be nurtured and celebrated and protected.

However, none of us is creative, or innovative, or has good judgment in every single aspect of our work. On the contrary each of us has some aspects of our work where we aren't very creative at all, where our first idea is not only our best idea, it's our only idea. We keep talking but there's nothing there; the well is dry.

By contrast, each of us has other areas of our work where we show great judgment, where we are consistently creative, where we come up with one solid idea after another. These are our areas of strength.

So, given this, when organizations say "our people are our greatest asset," they don't really mean this. What they mean specifically is "our people's strengths are our greatest asset." After all, as the Harter and Schmidt data revealed, and as intuition would suggest, performance suffers when you employ a bunch of people who do not get a chance to play to their strengths at work.

An organization shouldn't focus on a people's strengths to make them happier. It should only do so to make them better performers. On this point the data is unequivocal: no matter what the team, no matter what the organization, when it does, they are. That's why the best organizations are now so public in their commitment to become "strengths-based."

The Strengths Engagement Track™

To take Harter and Schmidt's work to the next logical step, what organizations now need is a tool to measure just how strengths-based they really are, and, once the results are in, to suggest action to increase their level of strengths engagement.

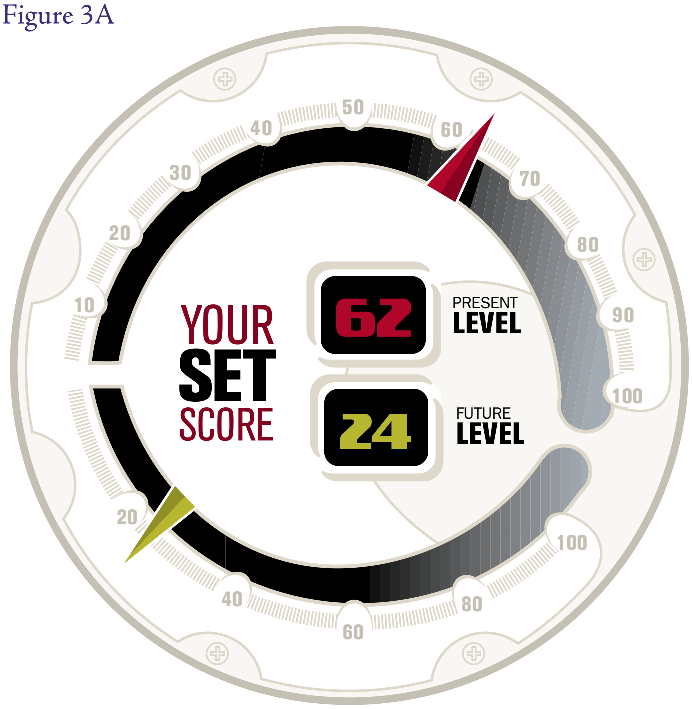
In 2007, a research project was undertaken to build such a tool. Three nationally representative samples of the working population were polled, thirty five thousand employees were surveyed, the responses were collected and analyses run. The result was a sixteen question web-based survey that tracks how effectively and how consistently each employee plays to his strengths. It is called the Strengths Engagement Track™, or SET. The questions are as follows:

The Strengths Engagement Track™

- Is finding your weaknesses and fixing them the best way to achieve outstanding performance?
- As you get older does your personality change?
- Are you the best judge of your strengths?
- Do you have the freedom to modify your work to fit your strengths better?
- On great teams should everyone be able to play every role equally well?
- On great teams should people put their strengths aside and do whatever it takes to help the team?
- How frequently do you feel an emotional high from your work?
- How often do you find yourself feeling positive anticipation about work when you are not working?
- How often do you get so involved in what you are doing at work that you lose track of time?
- What percentage of the time do you feel invigorated when you reach the end of a long, busy day?
- What percentage of a typical work day do you spend doing things that you really like to do?
- When discussing your work, how often do you catch yourself whining?
- What most influenced your decision to leave your previous job and apply for your current position?
- Which of the following best describes your ideal job?
- When your manager discusses your performance with you, do you spend more time talking about how to build your strengths or how to improve your weaknesses?
- Overall, which do you think will help you be most successful: building your strengths or improving your weaknesses?

Once completed, the SET survey immediately yields this dial, on both individuals and teams (please see Appendix A for an example of the full SET report):

Figure 3A



The top dial is the PRESENT dial. It reveals how engaged your strengths are currently, as compared to a nationally representative sample of the working population of the US. Thus if your needle is pointing to the number 50 you are in the fiftieth percentile; if it points to the number 74 you are in the seventy-fourth percentile, and so on. Five of the sixteen questions are used to calculate this PRESENT dial:

• How frequently do you feel an emotional high from your work?
• How often do you find yourself feeling positive anticipation about work when you are not working?
• How often do you get so involved in what you are doing at work that you lose track of time?
• What percentage of the time do you feel invigorated when you reach the end of a long, busy day?
• What percentage of a typical work day do you spend doing things that you really like to do?

Whatever your score is, think of it as a measure of how well you are doing at living up to your own potential. If you score 62 and a colleague of yours scores 74, this doesn't mean that she is necessarily more productive than you are, though she may be. It simply reveals that, currently, she is engaging her strengths more consistently than you are, and therefore is expressing more of her strengths' potential.

The bottom dial is the FUTURE dial. It is calculated using the remaining questions—some of these questions are normally coded, some are reverse-coded, and then an algorithm is applied to the raw data to produce the FUTURE dial.

This dial reveals how engaged your strengths, or, when combined with others, your team's strengths are going to be. It represents your trend-line. Thus if you score low on this dial, as it does in the example above, this strongly suggests that, whatever your PRESENT score is, it is likely to decrease. If you score high on this FUTURE dial, the likelihood is that your PRESENT score will go up.

The SET survey captures this by asking questions about your mindset and your behaviors, questions such as "Is finding your weaknesses and fixing them the best way to achieve outstanding performance?" or "Do you believe that on great teams everyone should be able to play every role equally well?" (Obviously, both of these questions are reverse coded.) Thus if your FUTURE dial is low, this means that your mindset and your behaviors are not consistent with the discipline of putting your strengths to work. Your strengths may be engaged in the present, but because you didn't engage them by thinking right and acting right—your mindset and your actions were off the mark—the chances are slim that your current level of engagement will last. Right now your strengths may be engaged but it's because of something your manager did, or because of who your teammates happen to be, or because of pure good fortune. The slightest change in your environment, however—a new boss, a new client, a reorganization of your department—and your strengths will likely disengage, and your performance will diminish.

Our People Are (Not Yet) Our Greatest Asset

Thus far the SET survey has been administered to three nationally representative samples of the working population of the US (this will continue to be administered three times per year). Drawing on these data, a closer look at some of the individual questions within the SET survey reveals that, in most organizations, people are *not* the greatest asset, at least not nearly to the extent they could be.

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For example, the national samples show that currently only 37% of the US workforce believes that building on strengths is the best way to achieve success (this is down from 41% in 2001.) The rest, 63%, would bet their career, their success and their satisfaction on fixing their weaknesses.

We now know that when managers talk to their employees about their performance only 24% of them focus on the employees' strengths (35.5% focus on weaknesses, while 40% of employees say "My manager doesn't talk with me about such things.")

And we know that only 14% of them say that at work they do things they really like to do "most of the time." One doesn't need to be a Pollyanna to find this number depressingly low. Let's say, in a bow to the challenges of the real world, we're granted fully a quarter of our typical day to fill with those annoying non-negotiables we all have in our job. We can have a quarter of our day, from the time we arrive through till eleven in the morning, each and every morning, to fill with the calls we don't like making, the e-mails that drag us down, the mundane reports that refuse to write themselves, the grumpy guy down the hall who daily insists on barging into our office and unloading his problems on us. A quarter of everyday bequeathed to activities that bore us or frustrate us or just leave us cold.

This still leaves large stretches of time, seventy-five percent of our time, which could be filled with activities that call upon some aspect of our strengths. What these data reveal is that only 14% of us have managed to fill this time with activities such as these. Only 14% of us have our strengths in play "most of the time."

Data such as these lead to the conclusion that as yet, and despite excellent work by many managers and Human Resource departments, large organizations are still not very good at engaging the strengths of each employee.

The SET Benchmark Study

This is not true of high performing teams. Study high performing teams within a range of upper echelon organizations and you discover that these teams are far more effective at engaging each employee's strengths.

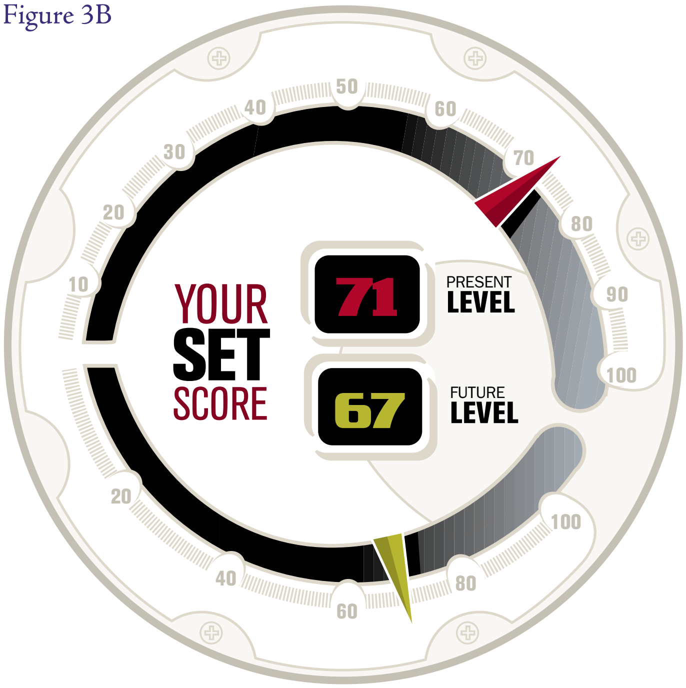
In January 2007, thirteen organizations participated in a benchmark strengths study. Each organization was asked to identify five high performing teams. These teams came from different levels within the organizations, and from different countries (US, UK, India, and China were all represented) but, according to the metrics available within each organization, they were all high performing teams.

The organizations involved in the study were:

- Accenture
- Best Buy
- Black & Decker
- Chick-Fil-A
- Coca-Cola
- EMC
- Intrawest
- Microsoft
- McKesson
- SAP
- Stryker
- Universal Studios

65 teams participated, containing 783 team members. The average team size was 12. Matching the sample size to that of the national samples (n=600), the SET scores of this benchmark group were as follows:

Figure 3B



As you can see, their PRESENT score is in the 71st percentile of the national sample. Their FUTURE score is in the 67th percentile.

Looking behind the dials to the questions themselves, 55% of the high performing teams believe that building on their strengths is the best way to succeed, as compared to 37% of the national sample. (Please see Appendix B for a benchmark/national sample comparison across all sixteen questions.)

42% of the high performers say their managers talk with them about their strengths, versus 24% of the national sample.

And 33% of them say they do what they really like to do at work for "most of the time," as compared to only 14% of the national sample.

While there is room to improve even with the benchmark teams, they show us that it is indeed possible to build a team that thinks right about strengths, talks right about them, and acts on them.

The Rest of Us Are Closer Than We Think

The good news for the rest of the organization is that most employees are not that far off.

Conventional wisdom tells us that building on strengths at work, although an appealing theory, won't actually work in practice. Too many people would run to Human Resources and complain that they are in the wrong job, or that their manager doesn't let them sculpt their work to fit their strengths.

Familiar though these arguments are, the data from the SET research don't support them.

Ask a nationally representative sample of the workforce what their ideal job is and 60% of them say either "what I'm doing now with increased responsibility" or "a specialized subset of what I'm doing now." Only 31% say "a different job."

Ask them why they took their current job and the most common answer is "greater opportunity to do more of what I like to do" (37.5%). "More money" comes in second (34.8%).

Ask them how often they feel an emotional high at work—a sure sign that they are playing to a strength—and 51% say "about once a week."

Ask them how often they get so involved in what they are doing at work they lose track of time—another strength-in-play sign—and 73% say "about once a week."

Ask them whether they have had the chance to modify their role to fit their strengths and 50% either agree or strongly agree that they have.

Yes, there are some of us who are hemmed in by uninteresting jobs, and restrictive managers. And yes, there are a few of us who are massively miscast—accountants who want to be astronauts, engineers who yearn to be entrepreneurs—but many of us are not. Many of us have heard the voice of our strengths loudly enough to seek out roles that call upon some aspect of our strengths at least once a week, and, if we can't, many of us feel that we have the freedom to tweak our role so that we can.

But we can't win on "once a week." We can't make our greatest and longest lasting contribution on "once a week." We can't achieve anything of any significance on "once a week." In fact, no matter how noble our sense of mission is, or how cool our organization is, or how supportive our teammates are, most of us will burn out on "once a week."

Identify-Change-Grow™

What the research reveals is that, to reach the level set by the benchmark study, organizations don't need to redesign all jobs, and individuals don't need to hold out for the perfect dream job. Besides, that perfect job doesn't exist. Confucius said "Find a job you love and you'll never work a day in your life," but this is one of those few occasions where we'd be wise to ignore him. None of us, no matter how content we are at work, loves our entire job. Whatever our job happens to be, it doesn't consist of one activity "that we love." Instead it comprises many different activities. Some invigorate us, some leave us neutral, and some deplete us or bore us or drain us. Given this, trying to design, or to hold out for that perfect "job we love" is a fool's game.

Instead the challenge, both for organizations and for individuals, is quite straightforward:

How can we gradually but deliberately increase how often each person plays to his strengths? How can we get people from "once a week" to "most of the time?"

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To answer this we need to impose a new discipline. This discipline can be represented as follows:

This *identify-change-grow* discipline must be applied to both individuals and companies.

For individuals the discipline means that we need to learn three new skills. First, we need to sort through our activities and *identify* precisely which ones invigorate us, and which deplete us—most of us are still woefully vague when it comes to capturing vividly which activities strengthen us and which weaken us.

Second, while others are pulling us in every direction, we need to stay sufficiently in control of our hours at work so that, over time, we load up on the invigorating kind, and push back hard if the scales gradually tip the other way—this will demand that we *change* either our actions and routines in the course of a regular week, or the way we perceive these actions and routines.

Third, we must learn how to explain what we are doing persuasively enough to get our colleagues to want to help us — we need to learn how to talk about our strengths without sounding like we are boasting, and our weaknesses without sounding like we are whining. Only then will others support us and help us *grow*.

For organizations, this identify-change-grow discipline will be focused not on individual people, but on people processes. First, organizations will need to review each of their people processes, from recruiting and selection through to performance management and succession planning, and *identify* which ones are reinforcing remedial, rather than strengths-based thinking.

Second, organizations will need to *change* these processes so that they are explicitly strengths-based. This change will need to be both attitudinal — for example, a organization-wide communication strategy highlighting the critical importance of applying strengths will need to be developed; and it will need to be practical — for example, employees will quickly become confused if performance appraisal forms are not rewritten so that "strengths" and "areas of opportunity" become synonymous.

Finally, organizations will need to install the right ongoing routines and rituals for communicating about strengths so that they can *grow* in a robust way — for example, in the future a strengths-based organization will provide ways in which each employee can capture his ongoing discoveries about his own strengths and weaknesses, and then share them with his colleagues; interactive databases such as these will not only challenge each employee to "own" his strengths and weaknesses, but they will also be invaluable in building the right teams and in succession-planning.

To date, organizations, even as they publicly celebrate individual diversity, have proven themselves to be an inefficient mechanism for putting each individual's strengths to work. As the data quoted in this white paper show, their performance suffers significantly as a result of this inefficiency. We hope that the Strengths Engagement Track™, together with the *identify-change-grow* discipline described above, will provide organizations with a simple road map for how to become deliberately and explicitly strengths-based.

Take Action Today

Your people, using their unique strengths, are the ultimate power supply of your business growth, innovation and productivity. If you are interested in learning how to increase the performance of your people the Marcus Buckingham Company is committed to helping your organization become strengths-based.

Take the first step and request information about The Marcus Buckingham Company's Simply Strengths Experience:

- Research
- Workshops
- Train-the-Trainer
- eLearning
- Executive Coaching

Please contact:

Kevin Small
5927 Balfour Ct, Suite 206
Carlsbad, CA 92008
Office: 760-602-0888
Kevin@MarcusBuckingham.com
www.MarcusBuckingham.com
www.SimplyStrengths.com

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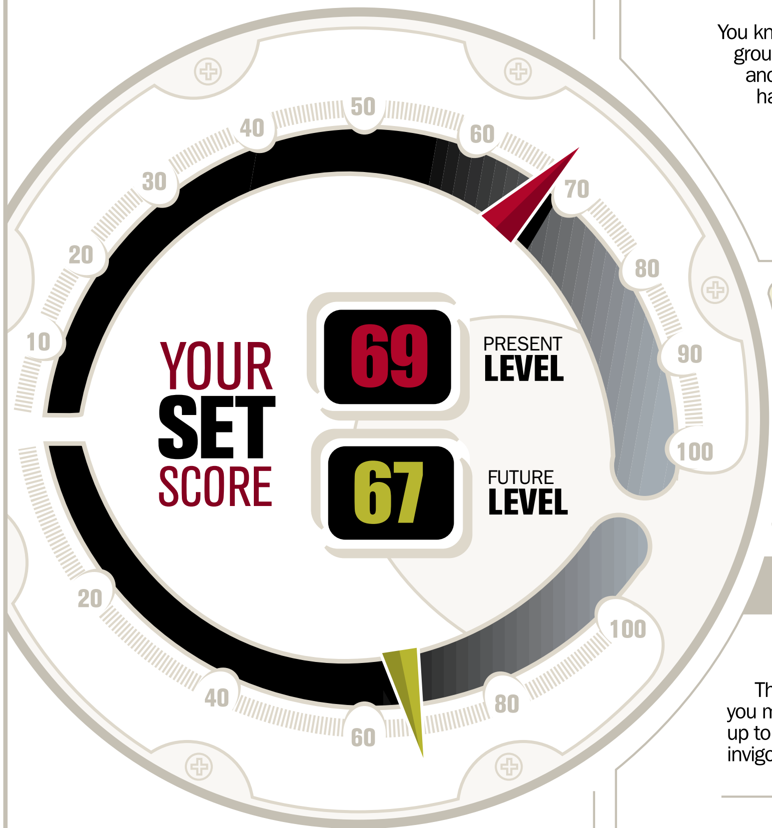
Appendix A

PREPARED FOR:

JOHN W. REESE

SET Strengths Engagement Track™



DESCRIPTION

Right now you are engaged at work, but you're holding out for something else. On some level, you are marking time.

You know how important your strengths are, but you haven't yet found a role that calls upon them everyday.

You know that great teams are built around a group of people with complementary strengths and weaknesses, but you don't see this happening. This frustrates you.

LEGEND

PRESENT SCORE
: present strengths engagement status

FUTURE SCORE
: potential strengths engagement status

PRESCRIPTION

The future is a place you build out of the choices you make today. To build the future you want it is up to you to identify the exact activities that, today, invigorate you so much.

Precisely what are you waiting for? No one will ever hand you your perfect job. You must either seek it out or build it.

Why would people want to partner with you? What can you offer them? How can you help them? They need answers from you.

DATE OF LAST ASSESSMENT

Why **SET** Matters to You.

- Your SET scores gives you a real time comparison of how engaged your strengths are compared to the rest of the working world.
- Your SET scores do not tell you how productive you are. They tell you how much of your capacity you are using. They tell you what gear you are in.

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Appendix B

SET Strengths Engagement Track

Best Practice Comparison to National Sample

February 16, 2007

Finding your weaknesses and fixing them is the best way to achieve outstanding performance.	Best Practice %	National %
Strongly Disagree	10.3%	0.4%
Disagree	17.0%	1.0%
Neutral	8.7%	11.8%
Agree	23.3%	48.3%
Strongly Agree	40.7%	38.5%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

As I get older my personality changes.	Best Practice %	National %
Strongly Disagree	6.2%	2.5%
Disagree	18.3%	9.7%
Neutral	16.3%	21.8%
Agree	36.2%	49.0%
Strongly Agree	23.0%	17.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

I am the best judge of my strengths.	Best Practice %	National %
Strongly Disagree	2.9%	0.5%
Disagree	18.4%	12.5%
Neutral	25.7%	36.2%
Agree	32.7%	36.2%
Strongly Agree	20.3%	14.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

I have the freedom to modify my work to fit my strengths better.	Best Practice %	National %
Strongly Disagree	1.3%	3.3%
Disagree	9.2%	19.5%
Neutral	19.9%	27.2%
Agree	43.6%	39.0%
Strongly Agree	26.0%	11.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

On great teams everyone should be able to play every role equally well.	Best Practice %	National %
Strongly Disagree	24.5%	6.3%
Disagree	29.7%	39.6%
Neutral	10.5%	18.5%
Agree	14.0%	25.3%
Strongly Agree	21.3%	10.3%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

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Appendix B cont.

On great teams people should put their strengths aside and do whatever it takes to help the team.	Best Practice %	National %
Strongly Disagree	8.2%	1.7%
Disagree	30.0%	18.7%
Neutral	16.8%	29.8%
Agree	22.0%	37.0%
Strongly Agree	23.0%	12.8%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

How frequently do you feel an emotional high from your work?	Best Practice %	National %
Every day	31.1%	15.7%
Weekly	54.9%	35.1%
Monthly	6.7%	15.7%
Rarely	7.3%	33.5%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

How often do you find yourself feeling positive anticipation about work when you are not working?	Best Practice %	National %
Every day	35.1%	15.8%
Weekly	51.7%	30.7%
Monthly	8.4%	13.8%
Rarely	4.8%	39.7%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

How often do you get so involved in what you are doing at work that you lose track of time?	Best Practice %	National %
Every day	55.6%	38.8%
Weekly	35.4%	34.1%
Monthly	3.0%	8.8%
Rarely	6.0%	18.3%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

What percentage of the time do you feel invigorated when you reach the end of a long, busy day?	Best Practice %	National %
Less than 25%	12.4%	38.2%
25 - 49%	25.2%	30.0%
50 - 74%	35.5%	22.8%
75 - 100%	26.9%	9.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

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Appendix B cont.

What percentage of a typical work day do you spend doing things that you really like to do?	Best Practice %	National %
Less than 25%	6.5%	28.3%
25 - 49%	21.3%	29.3%
50 - 74%	39.4%	28.3%
75 - 100%	32.8%	14.1%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

When discussing your work, how often do you catch yourself whining?	Best Practice %	National %
Every day	5.3%	13.6%
Weekly	20.9%	23.8%
Monthly	24.4%	15.8%
Rarely	49.4%	46.8%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

What most influenced your decision to leave your previous job and apply for your current position?	Best Practice %	National %
Increased accountability	14.5%	5.7%
Better Compensation	10.5%	34.8%
Greater opportunity to do what I really like to do	64.7%	37.5%
I didn't like my previous job	10.3%	22.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

Which of the following best describes your ideal job?	Best Practice %	National %
What I was doing at an earlier stage of my career	4.1%	9.2%
What I am doing now with increased responsibilty	53.8%	35.0%
A specialized subset of what I am doing now	27.4%	24.5%
A different job I have yet to find	14.7%	31.3%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

When your manager discusses your performance with you, do you spend more time talking about how to build your strengths or how to improve your weaknesses?	Best Practice %	National %
How to improve my weaknesses	39.2%	35.5%
How to build my strengths	41.8%	24.3%
My manager doesn't talk to me about these things	19.0%	40.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

Overall, which do you think will help you be most successful: building your strengths or improving your weaknesses?	Best Practice %	National %
Building your strengths	53.8%	37.3%
Improving your weaknesses	46.2%	62.7%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

Harter, James K. and Schmidt, F.L. (2002). Business Unit Level Relationship Between Employee Satisfaction, Employee Engagement and Business Outcomes. Journal of Applied Psychology, Vol 87, pp. 268-279.

For A Full Technical Report On The Strengths Engagement Track Benchmark Study Visit www.MarcusBuckingham.com/WhitePaper.

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