

THE POWERS THAT BAE

Strengths-based HR approaches have been around for a while, but the hoped-for revolution never happened. Now, however, a 'common sense' approach at BAE Systems has yielded positive results. *By Tim Smedley*

Having someone harp on about your mistakes and weaknesses is demotivating, while discussing your strengths is empowering, fun and engaging. So why do managers still invariably do the former?

The answer is possibly that they have never come across strengths-based management. The basic premise behind this approach is simple. Instead of focusing on an individual's weaknesses and helping them to improve their skills in those areas, you should focus on their strong points and allow them to use those to their full potential.

For most people, strengths-based management was put on the map by Marcus Buckingham's best-sellers, *First, Break All The Rules* (1999, co-written by Curt Coffman) and *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (2001, co-written by Donald Clifton). But research by academic psychologists in the previous two decades had also shown the impact of stressing people's achievements rather than their weaknesses and led to the positive psychology movement (see panel, page 42).

Unfortunately, however, neither the psychologists nor the best-sellers seem to have had a huge impact on practice.

In an interview with *PM* last year, Buckingham, whose ideas were based on surveys of 80,000 people by Gallup over 25 years, pointed out that only 17 per cent of workers polled in the US at that time, and 15 per cent in the UK, thought they were using their strengths at work. Later that year, the figure for the US dropped to 14 per cent.

As the Gallup data painted an increasingly depressing picture, Buckingham signalled a possible way forward: how can managers capitalise on their employees' strengths if they aren't capitalising on their own? Or, in his words, it should be about getting leaders to "put on their own oxygen masks first".

A few organisations are now attempting to put some of these ideas into practice. Among them is the UK division of aerospace company BAE Systems, which is working with Alex Linley, director of the Coventry-based Centre for Applied Positive Psychology. Linley has a slightly different approach from Buckingham's.

"If you look at a lot of the Gallup work, for example, it will say that a strengths-based approach is about focusing only on strengths and ignoring weaknesses," Linley says. "But our view is quite different from that. For us, a strengths-based approach is absolutely about focusing on strengths, but it also recognises that if there are areas that you aren't strong in that are performance-critical, then they have to be addressed as well."

His particular approach has now been tried and tested with the board members of BAE Systems' Air Support business. Linley became involved after running a consultancy course that was attended by several senior HR executives from BAE. The then head of HR at BAE Air Support, Andrea Adams, approached him afterwards to discuss how positive psychology could help with the company's business challenges. The traditionally centralised business model upon which Air Support at BAE was based was changing – rather than clients going to the business, it was going to the clients.

"It is a challenging HR agenda," says

“People often take things they’re good at for granted because it feels natural, so they don’t recognise the power of it”

Sean Watts, Adams’ successor and now head of HR, resourcing and organisational development. “We are putting significant numbers of people into RAF bases, working alongside the RAF – our people managing RAF people in the process. In essence, we are an engineering organisation that designs and builds aircraft, and what we’re trying to move to is a much more customer-orientated organisation that does maintenance and support.”

The nature of the business transformation led to the “Big picture” project, working with an industrial artist to produce a poster that illustrated for staff and leaders alike the challenges ahead. From this it became clear, Watts says, that “leadership development was the success priority for us. Board members came to us and said: ‘Yep, we’re really up for this, but it’s going to be a different leadership challenge and we need help in order to understand what we have to do differently.’” It was decided that different

challenges required a different approach, so Linley and his team were brought in to help at board level.

What Linley found – unsurprisingly for a business unit that’s larger than a lot of FTSE-100 companies – was a board of “extremely bright people who work together effectively and are highly functioning anyway. From a positive psychology perspective they were a good group to work with, as you didn’t have to deal with any dysfunction; just build on successes.” But this was hardly a blank canvas on which to work. How do you help someone who has risen to the top by being strong in most areas?

Linley and his team interviewed all 16 of the board members, 20 other senior executives and a few key stakeholders, including the HR director and the learning and development director. “In those interviews,” he says, “we wanted to gauge the perceptions of what leadership success meant for BAE both now and in the future.

We reviewed all this and pulled it together into a ‘leadership strengths profile’ for the board members, developed several indicators for each of these areas and invited the board members to score themselves in terms of both performance and the extent to which they felt they were an area of strength.”

It may seem strange to ask people what their strengths are and then come back to them and tell them what their strengths are. Not so, according to Linley: “It’s about bringing things to more conscious attention and putting them within the context of other things. People often take things they’re good at for granted, because it feels natural and doesn’t require a lot of effort, so they don’t recognise the power of it.”

Linley never found the BAE board members to be a cynical group – quite the opposite. But he was under no illusions that the next stage would be make or break. The board was allocated several key business tasks – tricky ones that had been on the agenda for a while but had never been tackled successfully. Rather than being shared out according to job function, these tricky tasks were now allotted according to strengths. And so the board went off in ones or twos, to present back in a month’s time.

“Nothing had changed in terms of their job roles,” Linley says. “They were still working under immense pressure with a huge amount of things to do. But the key difference was that the projects they had been given were things they would have naturally been drawn to, that they enjoyed and found energising.”

He knew that the theory behind everything they were doing was sound – he had done it before and seen it work. But the month still seemed a long wait. A wait, it turned out, that was well worthwhile.

“It was a fantastic experience going back a month later,” he recalls. “It was like getting a grade-A report at school, as all the projects were now moving on positively. And that

FIVE WAYS TO BUILD A STRENGTHS-BASED ORGANISATION

1 Ensure that you have a deep and mature understanding of strengths. Strengths are not just the “things that people are good at” but, as we define them, “pre-existing capacities for a particular way of behaving, thinking or feeling that is authentic and energising to the user and enables optimal functioning, development and performance”.

2 Know where the best place is for you to begin. All organisations are collections of teams. As such, building a strengths-based organisation can begin with building a strengths-based culture within a specific team. If you have the option, make this the leadership team.

3 Understand your options for taking the approach more widely into the organisation. These can include a traditional cascade model; taking a “deep slice” of the organisation, using a particular business unit or geographical location; or “lighting fires” – following people’s enthusiasm from the ground up.

4 Recognise the parameters. Do existing appraisal processes fit with a strengths approach? What about performance management processes? Consider a strengths audit to help you answer these questions and explore your options for what you can do about them. Simple shifts in philosophy and emphasis can be all that is needed.

5 Be patient. Creating a strengths focus in an individual, a team or an organisation does not happen overnight. Take your time, understand what works for you, and progress and embed accordingly. Ensure success by evaluating your approach at each stage and refining or refocusing as appropriate.

Alex Linley and Nicky Page, Centre for Applied Positive Psychology www.capppeu.org

Development

moment was the big validation point for this approach, where the board told me: ‘Yes, we like this; we want to take this forward.’”

Surely starting such a radical approach at board level carries a high level of risk? It does, says Watts, but “it’s a case of risk versus return. What we’ve found is that because they’ve embraced it so well, we’ve got a degree of buy-in now. We didn’t set out with the idea of becoming a strengths-based organisation, but we knew that it could pave the way for something that could become an organisational approach in the future.” This is the power of, in Marcus Buckingham’s words, getting leaders to “put on their oxygen masks first” before helping others.

The extent to which a strengths-based approach will be integrated into BAE is under review. But, as Linley compiles his performance and evaluation metrics for the programme, he’s already buoyed by the anecdotal feedback. “It’s been very positive,” he says. “People have talked about ways in which they’ve made subtle changes that have had a profound impact, and of more substantive changes that they are now trying to embed. For me, the biggest validation – irrespective of business performance or anything else – is the fact that they continually want to take this further.”

However, Linley is clear that the approach is not merely an extension of the current happiness and well-being trend. “As Aristotle

STRENGTH IN DEPTH

The strengths-based approach used by BAE and Alex Linley at the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP) has a short but distinguished history. It is a branch of positive psychology, a movement started in the US in 1998 by Martin Seligman, and builds on work over two decades by Edward Diener on what makes people satisfied.

It is also related to appreciative inquiry, based on research in the early 1980s by another American, David Cooperrider. This approach encourages people to focus on aspects of work organisation that lead to success rather than trying to correct failures.

Linley founded CAPP in the UK earlier this year as the world’s first not-for-profit membership organisation that promotes the science and practice of positive psychology.

Marcus Buckingham’s ideas developed in parallel to the positive psychology movement and came from extensive research by Gallup, where he worked in the 1990s.

described it, happiness is something that comes about through doing the right thing, rather than something that you pursue and achieve for its own ends,” he says. “So I would argue – and the data supports this – that when you adopt a strengths approach, increased engagement and happiness is one of the results. But was that what we set out to achieve with BAE? No, it was about business performance.”

Watts agrees: “There’s a danger that we all sound like we’re tree-hugging here, but there’s a big caveat: it’s all about business performance. So, for example, if someone were the greatest strategist in the world but terrible at people management, we wouldn’t be able to tolerate that, no matter how strong they were in other areas. So it’s playing to people’s strengths where

possible, but it’s also recognising that you need to be fairly robust, particularly at board level. It’s common sense.”

Linley adds: “Unlike the situation with a traditional competency framework, where you would have to address everything and get it all up to an A grade, with a strengths framework what we’re saying is: ‘Get your strengths up to an A grade – absolutely make the most of them. But if there’s a discipline that you’re not so good at but that you need, then get that up to a pass, a C grade.’ And, in some cases, you should be able to shape your job so that you can do less of the things you’re not so good at and spend more time on the things you are good at. It’s more about striking the right balance.” Now that does sound like common sense. ■