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SCIENCES

Playing to Your Strengths

Professor Ciaran O'Boyle

Director, RCSI Centre for Positive Psychology and Health

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“Be sure to put your feet in the right place,
then stand firm”

~

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Bad is stronger than good

In an important paper published in 2001, the social psychologist Roy Baumeister and his colleagues gathered evidence that bad events have stronger and more lasting consequences than comparable good events¹. Research reviewed by the authors showed that this effect is so widespread as to be almost ubiquitous. For example, close relationships are more affected by destructive actions, by negative communications and by conflict than by their opposites. Even in our everyday social relationships, conflict has a stronger impact than positive supportive behaviours. The list goes on: there are many more words in all languages to describe bad emotions and bad moods; negative emotions have stronger effects on our thinking; we pay more attention to bad things and remember them better; bad things are more quickly learned than corresponding good things; bad parenting has a bigger impact than good. Our desire to get out of a bad mood is stronger than our desire to get into a good one. A bad first impression of someone has a greater impact than a good one. Negative stereotypes and reputations are more easily acquired and more difficult to get rid of than good ones. Bad health has a greater impact on happiness than good health, and health itself is more affected by pessimism than optimism².

These findings show that, as humans, we are essentially biased in the manner in which we process and respond to good and bad events. We appear to be hard wired to attend to, and process, bad information more efficiently and more thoroughly than good. Bad parents, bad emotions and bad feedback have more impact than good ones and we are more likely to construct our definitions of ourselves to avoid bad self-definitions than to pursue good ones. Baumeister and his colleagues considered this to be an evolutionary phenomenon. Organisms that were better attuned to bad things would have been more likely to spot danger and to survive threats.

However, notwithstanding this inherent negativity bias, when it comes to thinking about ourselves, it is important to balance our awareness of our weaknesses and vulnerabilities with an appreciation of our strengths. This is particularly important when it comes to the effort we must expend on our own psychological growth and development. As the American writer Maya Angelou put it:

*“We delight In the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely admit
the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty”.*

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Your Signature Strengths

If you were asked to name your strengths, what would you answer? Most people (up to two-thirds), are reluctant to talk about their strengths, and even when they do, researchers have found that many are unaware of the full nature and range of their strengths. It is also common for people to underuse their strengths. A large body of research in positive psychology has now emerged to show that knowing and using your strengths can significantly increase your well-being and productivity: you are more likely to develop greater insight and perspective in life; to have a stronger sense of direction and increased capacity to achieve your goals; to be happier and more fulfilled; to have higher self-esteem and confidence and to be more resilient in dealing with pressure and stress^{3 4 5}.

Finding Your Signature Strengths

Three major well-validated measures of strengths have been developed and are available: the Clifton Strengths Finder⁶, the Cappfinity Strengths Profile⁷ and the VIA Classification of Strengths and Virtues⁸.

The VIA survey, which is the only one that is free to users, emerged from the pioneering work of Chris Peterson and Martin Seligman, two of the founders of positive psychology. In a major initiative to identify and characterise strengths and virtues, they established a mammoth research study that began by combing the philosophical and religious literature in search of qualities that were prized across many cultures and in different eras, were found in both young and old people, could be cultivated, and were believed to lead to fulfilment in life. Their research culminated in 2004 in the influential VIA classification system. From an extensive set of strengths the research team picked 24 each of which had to meet the following criteria:

1. It must be present in a range of a person's behaviours, thoughts, feelings and actions.
2. It must be generalisable across situations and times.
3. It must contribute to fulfilment associated with the good life for oneself and for others.
4. It must be morally valued in its own right, irrespective of the beneficial outcomes it can lead to.
5. It must have a non-felicitous opposite (e.g. courageous vs cowardly).
6. Displaying the strength does not diminish others, but may benefit them.
7. It can be measured.
8. It can be distinguished from other character strengths.
9. It is strikingly displayed by paragons.
10. It must be supported and cultivated by social institutions.

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The VIA Virtues and Strengths

The VIA system, which is supported by an extensive body of research⁹, classifies the twenty four character strengths under six virtues as follows:

| | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Wisdom and Knowledge: | Curiosity; Creativity; Judgement; Love of Learning; Perspective |
| Courage: | Bravery; Perseverance; Honesty; Zest |
| Humanity: | Love; Kindness; Social Intelligence |
| Justice: | Teamwork; Fairness; Leadership |
| Temperance: | Forgiveness; Humility; Prudence; Self-Regulation |
| Transcendence: | Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence; Gratitude; Hope; Humour; Spirituality |

Using VIA to Find Your Strengths

“Look well into thyself: there is a source of strength which will always spring up if thou wilt always look”

~

MARCUS AURELIUS

By taking the VIA Strengths Survey, you can identify your signature strengths. These are your key strengths and they have certain characteristics: you feel that they represent the “real you”; you feel excited when you discover and use them; you excel at them quickly; you believe that a strength is one of your core attributes; you learn quickly when the strength is used; you yearn to find new ways to use the strength; you feel invigorated rather than exhausted using the strength.

Playing To Your Strengths

The starting point for playing to your strengths is to identify your five or so signature strengths. This awareness alone has been shown to have a positive effect on self-esteem and well-being. Try to develop and maintain awareness of your key strengths as you go through your day to day life and especially when you are dealing with challenges. Use your key strengths as much as you can and see if you can modulate your life and work so that your key strengths are being routinely expressed. Increasing your awareness of others' key strengths leads to more harmonious interactions and also to better teamwork. Finally, if you are responsible for leading others, try to craft their duties so that they become aware of and play to their strengths. As Benjamin Disraeli once said

“The greatest good you can do for another is not just to share your riches but to reveal to them their own”.

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