

Strong words

To get the best possible results, companies need to understand what they do best and why, says management guru and author **Marcus Buckingham**. Sustained success is about harnessing those activities that energise or invigorate you – in other words, playing to your strengths – he tells Phin Foster.



Power of strengths

- Appetite drives ability. Identify which activities invigorate you and which deplete you.
- Tip your time gradually towards these invigorating activities, or strengths.
- Talk about what you are doing persuasively so that others will compensate for your weaknesses.

'There are plenty of things that we are perfectly good at, but would be quite happy to never have to do again,' muses Marcus Buckingham. 'Defining a strength as something you're good at is not inaccurate, it's just incomplete.'

For the 40-year-old Los Angeles-based Brit, an ability to define strength is crucial to attaining, sustaining and promoting success. A former researcher with the Gallup organisation for 17 years, 'specialising in measuring things that are tricky to measure', and the author of three bestselling books, his has been a career dedicated to gauging the secrets of sustained achievement. The conclusion is quite simple: identify your strengths and then fashion a role that works to them.

For Buckingham, a strength is an activity that empowers and invigorates you. 'People say that practise makes perfect,' he explains, 'but that's only true half of the time. There are things that we can practise like crazy and never seem to get any better at. When push comes to shove, it's

of the matter is that, generally, we are not massively miscast. Most of us have heard the sound of our strengths loudly enough to follow a career path somewhere within their vicinity.'

But finding oneself within the general vicinity will only get you so far. Buckingham's research has found that 51% of employees in the UK get an emotional high from their work at least once a week and that 73% will get so focused on an activity that they lose track of time.

'The problem is that once a week is simply not good enough,' he believes. 'You can't achieve much of any significance over that time.' To unearth why such experiences are so intermittent, he asks a rather more pertinent question: 'What percentage of a typical day do you spend working to your strengths?' The response is depressing: just 9% in the UK say 'most of the time'.

The reasoning behind this goes beyond perceived shortcomings in business practice and reflects more deeply entrenched popular convictions.

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appetite that will drive your ability. People need to pay extremely close attention to how activities make them feel, because it is those feelings that determine how good one gets.'

Playing to our weaknesses

If a strength is an activity that makes you feel stronger, then a weakness is the reverse: an activity that depletes you. For Buckingham, people spend far too much time attempting to work on their weaknesses and do not concentrate nearly enough on exploiting their strengths: 'Ask somebody about their ideal job and you might expect them to say: "One where I'm my own boss, disturbed only by the scent of the olive trees and the whinnying of my horse." But 61% of people in the UK say more or less what they are doing, or a specialised aspect of that activity. The fact

'Most people don't have a job that plays to their strengths because, deep down, they don't want one,' claims Buckingham. 'Our entire belief system says that we should not take our strengths for granted. We are supposed to knuckle down and improve our weaknesses.'

Statistics back him up: 87% of UK employees believe that highlighting one's weaknesses and fixing them is the best way to succeed in life. No matter how high up the company you might get, it would seem that there is still a widely accepted view that work is where you go to evolve and that, within this context, many strengths are little more than a luxury.

It doesn't have to be this way. 'People have far more room for manoeuvre than they think,' observes Buckingham. 'The starting

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point is taking your strengths seriously and believing that the way to win is to play to them.'

There are then three things you need to know how to do, with only one problem: 'Most of us are rubbish at all of them.' Buckingham explains: 'Firstly, identify which activities invigorate you and which deplete you. Most of us have never done that, so we fall back into clichés – "I like a challenge", "I like working with people".

What does that even mean? You have to think more vividly.

'Next, see whether you can tip your time, incrementally, towards these activities. The final skill you need to learn should make that easier: can you talk about what you are doing persuasively enough to get others to help you? If you look at the really successful people out there, they have managed to push their weakening activities away, and have achieved this by getting people inside.'

Staying power: sustaining excellence

One of Buckingham's favourite examples of sustained excellence is Tiger Woods, an individual for whom he obviously has a huge amount of respect: 'It's often said that what's great about Tiger isn't natural ability, but the amount that he practises. That's tautological. Why is this guy out on the range every night when he needn't be? He can't help it. He rebuilds his swing almost to provide justification for being out there.

What drives him to be excellent sustainably is an ongoing, unquenchable appetite.'

This combination of natural ability and drive contrasts sharply with the experiences of Buckingham's close friend, a former amateur swimmer. 'He was incredibly successful,' remembers Buckingham, 'but as he entered his teenage years, the guy began to get

paralysing migraines before every swim meet. This, he realised, was down to hating what he was doing.

'Fate had played a cruel trick on him: it gave him the ability, but did not charge that ability with positive emotions. He could only improve so much. A strength has to be more than just the fortunate meshing of chromosomes.'

A clear vision

Vividness and persuasiveness are also key factors in Buckingham's assessment of good management and leadership. He defines the difference between the two roles as like that between chequers and chess: managers pick up on the differences between people and exploit those differences, leaders capitalise on commonalities and exploit them.

'The most positive way of leading is capitalising on the fact that we all fear the future,' he explains. 'An ability to turn anxiety into confidence requires incredible vividness. Clarity is the antidote to anxiety.'

He cites a contemporary political example: 'Bush's approval ratings aren't in the toilet because Iraq was wrong. It's because when he talks about victory we can't see it. There are no stories, no vignettes. Saying it 14 times in a speech will not make any difference.'

A growing reliance on slogans and buzz-words is troubling for Buckingham. 'Organisations have proved to be very ineffective at getting the best out of people,' he begins. 'Companies are constantly saying that their people are their greatest asset, but what they are really talking about is their people's strengths.'

'We live in a knowledge-based economy where people's judgment, creativity, innovation and ideas are their core values. Most of us, however, are not creative in every aspect of our jobs, only in those aspects of our work that play to our strengths. It's a chronic waste.'

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This is where better management should be coming into play. 'The reason we fall back on buzz-words is that we're not prepared to take the time to acknowledge that people are different,' Buckingham sighs with exasperation. 'They're messy, and the real discipline should be recognising that messiness and harnessing it.'

'In most cases, businesses are over-led and under-managed. A great manager will never generalise. Ask one the best means of motivation and you will get a spontaneous response: "It depends."

'We don't need more leaders, we need better leaders,' observes Buckingham in conclusion. 'Don't tell people that they are your greatest asset – they will simply turn to one another and say "but our competitors have people, I've seen them, and they look a hell of a lot like us" – prove it.'

Are you strong enough to do that? ■

The strengths revolution

In a world where efficiency and competency rule the workplace, where do personal strengths fit in?

It's a complex question, one that intrigued Cambridge-educated Marcus Buckingham so much he set out to answer it by challenging years of social theory and using his almost two decades of research experience as a senior researcher at The Gallup Organization to break through the preconceptions surrounding achievement and get to the core of what really drives success.

In essence, his arguments flow from a simple question: what would happen if men and women spent more than 75% of each working day using their strongest skills and performing their favourite tasks – basically doing what they wanted to do?

According to Buckingham, companies that focus on cultivating employees' strengths rather than simply improving their weaknesses stand to dramatically increase efficiency while allowing for maximum personal growth and success.

If this theory sounds revolutionary, that's because it is. Buckingham calls it 'the strengths revolution'. He claims this strengths revolution is the key to finding the most effective route to personal success – and the missing link to the efficiency, competency and success for which many companies are constantly striving.

To kick-start the strengths revolution, Buckingham and Gallup developed the StrengthsFinder exam (www.strengthsfinder.com), which identifies signature themes that help employees quantify their personal strengths in the workplace and at home. Since its debut in 2001, the StrengthsFinder has helped more than one million people to discover their strengths.



Marcus Buckingham

In his role as author, consultant and speaker, Marcus Buckingham has been the subject of in-depth profiles in *The New York Times*, *Fortune*, *Fast Company*, *Harvard Business Review* and *USA Today*, and is routinely lauded by corporations such as Toyota, Coca-Cola, Master Foods, Wells Fargo and Disney as an invaluable resource in informing, mentoring and inspiring people to find their strengths and achieve and sustain long-lasting personal success.

He holds a Master's degree in Social and Political Science from Cambridge University and is a member of the Secretary of State's Advisory Committee on Leadership and Management.