

## Strengths Based Approaches to Change and Everything Else

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by Cassandra O'Neill

Ever heard of strengths based approaches to change? If you are serving on a nonprofit Board of Directors or are an Executive Director -- you can use strengths based approaches with your leadership team, staff, volunteers and clients. This article describes what strengths based approaches are, how they are different from traditional approaches, and the benefits of using them.

Strengths based approaches focus on the identification and development of the strengths of an individual, organization, community, and system. They build upon what is working, where you are strong, successful, and passionate. They are based on and align with the research on resiliency, positive psychology, and asset based thinking.

Principles that strengths based approaches share include:

- There are hidden and unrecognized assets, strengths and resources in every individual, family, organization and community;
- Desired outcomes can best be achieved when attention is focused on discovering these collectively and connecting them to a shared vision;
- Focusing on what is working and how to build on this creates collective resiliency;
- There is always something that is working well; and
- Solutions exist within communities and organizations and are waiting to be discovered.

Traditional approaches are often based in a world view that is mechanistic and linear. They focus exclusively or primarily on deficits, weaknesses, and needs, and operate from a scarcity paradigm. In the social sector, almost all funding is distributed from a deficit paradigm which results in:

- mountains of needs assessments that catalog what is missing;
- the development of unsustainable programs that are designed to meet the perceived needs of the target population by delivering services from experts, i.e. professionals; and
- a pattern of dependency among service providers and recipients.

The good news! There are strengths based alternatives that are based in a different world view and have much different results. Ever heard of positive deviance? This approach is contingent on the identification of what contributes to positive outcomes for individuals, families, organizations, or communities. What makes these outcomes a deviation - is that they are achieved by a minority of the population. This approach began internationally and is now being used in this country.

Think of the following situation: the majority of children in a Southeast Asian village were malnourished. What might be a traditional response be? When I pose this question to groups they often say things like: send food and do a needs assessment. When I ask them to think of an alternative response, one that is strengths based people say things like talk to the people, find out what their perspective is, look at the context, and provide education.

What actually happened? A team discovered what the families whose children were not malnourished were doing. And guess what? The community learned what these families were doing and did it too. It was simple, eating shrimp from existing resources. They did a similar inquiry in Haiti and found another sustainable solution that the entire community could easily adopt.

How could this inform our work in the social sector? The solution did not exist outside of the community – it existed within it and was discovered. The solution was not contained in an analysis of the root causes of malnutrition. Analysis of the root causes of success contained the solution. Maybe there are some solutions waiting to be discovered in our own communities and organizations.

Positive deviance initiatives are occurring in hospitals and schools in the United States. Teams are studying hospital employees who have low infection transmission rates and teaching what is being done to others. Teams are also examining what schools are doing right! For more information on the Positive Deviance Initiative go to <http://www.positivedeviance.org/>.

When people first hear about strengths based approaches they often find it very hard to think outside traditional approaches. In the social sector, we've been conditioned to focus on what isn't working i.e. the problems, gaps, needs and weaknesses. Do you think of your staff, your peers, your clients as problems or unmet needs, or do see them as resources?

You can deliver a service to people and view these individuals as possessing gifts and talents. How might this make a difference? Two programs delivered the same service, one used a strengths based approach and one used a traditional approach. The service delivered was assistance with tax preparation. This service is delivered by volunteers who are trained in tax preparation. One program used a traditional approach, people came and got their taxes done, and that was the extent of their interaction.

The other program offered the same service and used a strengths based approach. As soon as people came to the program site, they were asked "What have you been gifted with?" If someone said they were bilingual, they had them help translate. If their gift was taking care of children, they assisted with the children who came with their families to get their taxes done. How did this impact the clients and program? The following year, this program found that half of the people who trained as volunteers had received tax assistance the year before. They were former clients!

These individuals saw themselves as resources and were giving back, rather than just passively receiving a service and becoming repeat customers. This tax assistance program also helped individuals establish savings accounts and Individual Development Accounts (IDA) in order to purchase a house or a vehicle. These program enhancements were a result of strengths based

inquiry. The staff and volunteers simply looked beyond what services they could provide and asked "How can we have the most impact? How can we help people build on strengths and pursue dreams?"

Ever heard of asset mapping? It's a strengths based alternative to needs assessments. What happens when a group looks at what does exist in their community rather than what doesn't? Asset mapping is more than developing a list of organizations in a community. When asset mapping is done as a collaborative process, it can lead to the development of relationships and insights about how to build on existing strengths and assets. Why does this matter? When people see connections between their own expertise, resources, skills and the interests and resources of others in their community – magic happens! By simply focusing on a clear and compelling purpose, zooming in on what already exists, and what outcomes people want to see -- people naturally identify ways to create the outcomes they want using what they have. Find out more about this at the Asset Based Community Development website at <http://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/abcd/>

Many resources are available to you to support your use of strengths based approaches with your Board, staff, and clients. Gallup did extensive polling and found out that 70% of people do not get to use their strengths at work. Think about what would be possible if everyone do use their strengths?

Do you know your strengths? Many of us cannot immediately identify our strengths, because attention is directed at addressing our weaknesses. Focusing precious time and energy on our weaknesses is counterproductive when there are others who have those talents and skills. By allowing people to do what they are best at – everyone benefits. A client of mine builds job descriptions around employee strengths. Can you imagine? Wouldn't you want to work there?

Interested in learning more about your strengths and those with whom you work? *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, a book by Tom Rath, comes with one on-line Strengthsfinder assessment. If your agency works with kids, there is also an assessment for kids aged 10-14 called StrengthsExplorer available at [www.strengthsexplorer.com](http://www.strengthsexplorer.com).

Martin Seligman the father of Positive Psychology and author of *Learned Optimism* and *Authentic Happiness* has developed several on-line assessments available at [www.authentic happiness.com](http://www.authentic happiness.com). The VIA Signature Strengths Questionnaire measures 24 Character Strengths.

Whole system methods such as Appreciative Inquiry and Open Space Technology are strengths based, because they are designed to elicit the best thinking of everyone in an organization, community, and system - not just one group. These can be used in many ways from conducting strengths based strategic planning to increasing engagement at Board and staff meetings. Would you like to raise the energy at your Board and staff meetings? It's easy when you ask Appreciative Questions or use Open Space Technology to facilitate a discussion.

Are you ready to increase the impact of your Board and organization by focusing on what is working, and identifying and building on strengths? Are you excited about creating opportunities for high levels of engagement and participation when planning, implementing, and evaluating the work of your organization? For more information check out the Resource Guide on Strengths Based Approaches available at the following link:

[http://evolutionarysustainability.blogspot.com/2008\\_11\\_01\\_archive.html](http://evolutionarysustainability.blogspot.com/2008_11_01_archive.html).

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