

# HARNESSING STRENGTHS AT WORK

Sue Langley

Learn strengths-based strategies to get the best from yourself and people you work with, coach and lead.



# Introduction

Everyone has strengths and the potential to develop them to be the best they can be.

Research shows that knowing and growing our strengths helps us feel energised and engaged. We learn faster, perform better and strive to do our best every day.

When those strengths are harnessed and combined with others' great results inevitably follow. It's a win for the individuals whose strengths are realised and leveraged—and a win for their organisation, managers and teams.

This eBook introduces you to some of the most practical and research-backed ways to realise your strengths to achieve better performance, satisfaction and fulfillment at work. It also shares strengths-based strategies to bring out the best in people you work with, coach and lead.

You will learn:

- Why strengths matter and some of the latest research
- A practical framework for realising strengths at work
- Strengths strategies in leadership, coaching, performance, talent management and teamwork.

We look forward to inspiring you and others to realise and harness their strengths!

**Sue Langley**



“Simply put, strengths  
energise us, enabling us  
to be at our best.”

Alex Linley



“Strengths are so integral to our identity as individuals and as human beings. They are at the heart of what it takes to lead flourishing lives.”

Alex Linley

## WHY STRENGTHS?

A strengths approach represents a paradigm shift for many workplaces and people. Instead of focusing on problems or what is wrong—a deficit model—focusing on strengths builds on what works well and can work even better.

Our strengths are natural and authentic resources that represent what is good in each of us. They shape our character and our identity, influenced by nature, nurture, life experience and the urge to fulfil our potential; a fundamental part of who we are and grow to be as people.

We feel intrinsically motivated to act on our strengths and get a buzz that adds to our confidence and competence. We learn, persist and become more fulfilled over time.

Alex Linley defines a strength as: “a pre-existing capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking or feeling that is authentic and energising to the user, and enables optimal functioning, development and performance.”

In other words, our strengths allow us to be, and to become, our best self.

Strengths are at the heart of positive psychology, and have been a rich source of study for the last decade or so.

While a clear language of strengths may be lacking in modern times, many of us know to “play to our strengths”. Concepts of strengths, character and virtue have infused human history across many cultures. Aristotle extolled us to strive to “live in accordance with the best thing in us” if we want to attain a good life.

Recent scholars are exploring the scientific underpinnings for why strengths matter and the benefits that strengths bring. Strengths are now an integral part of the formula for human flourishing and workplace performance.

Strengths are at the heart of engagement—that elusive workplace concept that enhances employee contribution, leading to increased productivity, higher profits, greater commitment and retention.

Research shows that when people use their strengths they perform better, achieve results faster and feel more satisfied, energised and engaged. They are motivated and able to go above and beyond because they are doing what they love and do best.

It should be no surprise then that the most engaged employees are the ones who use their strengths at work most of the time.

In fact, a global study by the Corporate Leadership Council of almost 20,000 people across multiple organisations, industries and countries found that when people were encouraged by their managers to focus on their strengths, their performance rose a massive 36%. When they focused on their weaknesses, performance dropped by 27%.

By putting aside strengths to slog away trying to improve the things they weren't naturally good at, they likely worked a lot harder for diminishing results, feeling increasingly dispirited and disengaged. They may also have felt their manager didn't recognise and appreciate them for who they are as a person and the strengths they yearn to contribute in their role.

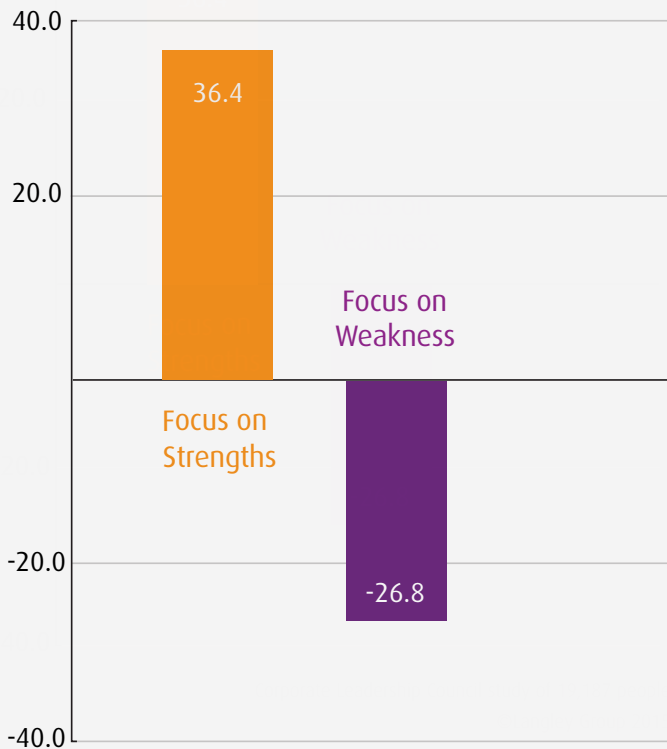
A strengths approach attunes us to the positive without denying reality or the negative. It does not mean ignoring weaknesses—after all, we all have them and they can pose a real risk. What it does mean is being aware of what we don't do so well and creating realistic strategies to minimise them and their impact.

It can depend on our role. Not all weaknesses need to be improved. As we will see, there are many strategies we can choose to more fully harness our strengths.

“A person can perform only from strength. One cannot build performance on weakness, let alone on something one cannot do at all.”

Peter Drucker

## Change in Performance



Corporate Leadership Council study of 19,187 people

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# Benefits

For people who use their strengths more...





## Studies link strengths with individual and organisational thriving.

For example, Reena Govindji and Alex Linley showed that people who use their strengths more have higher levels of subjective wellbeing (happiness), psychological wellbeing (fulfillment), self-efficacy (confidence) and vitality (energy). Others have reported lower levels of stress over time.

Another study found that those who use their strengths in striving to achieve goals were far more likely to reach them. When they did they satisfied psychological needs and were happier and more fulfilled as a result.

Ken Sheldon and his colleagues found that when focussing on self-development, people improve faster on areas where they are already strong than those where they are weak. Leaders who focussed on developing themselves and their teams through strengths have also been shown to be more effective and successful.

In organisations, the opportunity to do your best everyday is a core predictor of workplace engagement, which in turn predicts productivity, profits, commitment and other business outcomes according to Gallup researchers. Data from Alex Linley's work with Norwich Union showed that people working from their strengths perform better and stay with the company longer.

Studies highlighted by Capp in *Why Strengths? The Evidence* (2010) and *R2 Strengths Profiler Accreditation* (2015). See references for more.



© Capp 2015



“Each of us has much more hidden  
inside us than we have had a  
chance to explore.”

**Muhammad Yunnus**

## REALISING YOUR STRENGTHS

Do you know your strengths and those of the people around you? Until we really understand them, we can miss the power and benefits of a strengths approach.

Realising your strengths means knowing and growing them. It also means being mindful of when, how and how much to use your strengths to achieve optimal performance, development and potential.

Many coaches stop at helping people identify their strengths or simply urge them to use their strengths more often. This doesn't always produce optimal results or help you improve.

Some people have criticised the strengths approach for this reason. There are many examples of executives who have overplayed their strengths to the detriment of themselves and their teams. Robert Biswas-Diener, an expert in strengths coaching, advises a more nuanced approach.

There is a Golden Mean for using your strengths. So that you do not underplay or overplay them, use the right strength, in the right amount, in the right way at

the right time. Consider this an optimal performance ratio—for best effect, dial up or dial down the strength to meet the demands of the situation.

Strengths are far less static than many people think. They evolve, changing with your context and role. Understanding this helps you adopt a Growth Mindset rather than a Fixed Mindset, a concept pioneered by Carol Dweck. She found that if people believe their basic qualities like intelligence or talent are static traits they don't spend time developing and nurturing them. Our strengths, like ourselves, are a work in progress!

You can get to know your strengths informally or by taking a formal strengths assessment. On the next pages you will find tools to start identifying, using and developing strengths based on the Strengths Profile. There are others such as the VIA Inventory, Gallup Strengths Finder and StrengthScope.

# Strength spotting

You can learn to spot strengths in yourself and others daily. Signs of strengths can be observed in any conversation if you watch and listen. When you notice over time, patterns emerge.

You can use them in any situation, from conversations with team members to new business prospects; candidates for a role to people you meet at a networking event; or simply for your own self-reflection.

Here are ten strengthspotting tips.

1

## **Childhood memories**

What do you remember doing as a child that you still do now – but most likely much better? Strengths often have deep roots from our early lives.

2

## **Energy**

What activities give you an energetic buzz when you are doing them? These activities are very likely calling on your strengths.

3

## **Authenticity**

When do you feel most like the “real you”? The chances are that you’ll be using your strengths in some way.

4

## **Ease**

See what activities come naturally to you, and at which you excel – sometimes, it seems, without even trying. These will likely be strengths.

5

### Attention

See where you naturally pay attention. You're more likely to focus on things that are playing to your strengths.

6

### Rapid learning

What are the things that you have picked up quickly, learning them almost effortlessly? Rapid learning often indicates an underlying strength.

7

### Motivation

What motivates you? When you find activities that you do simply for the love of doing them, they are likely to be working from your strengths.

8

### Voice

Monitor your tone of voice. When you notice a shift in passion, energy and engagement, you're probably talking about a strength.

9

### Words and phrases

Listen to the words you use. When you're saying "I love to..." or "It's just great when....," chances are that it's a strength to which you're referring.

10

### To do lists

Notice the things that never make it on to your 'to do' list. These things that always seem to get done often reveal an underlying strength that means we never need to be asked twice.

Strengthspotting tips from *Average to A+: Realising Strengths in Yourself and Others*, by Alex Linley.



# Strengths Profile

The Strengths Profile approach represents an important development in positive psychology, strengths assessment and development.

As we have seen, a key ingredient in strengths is the energy we feel when we use them and the positive emotions that generates. Distinguishing between things we do well that energise us and those that de-energise us has been the missing component in strengths approaches and tools. Also lacking is the importance of context and the dynamic and evolving nature of our strengths. Without these insights, many have failed to gain the benefit we expect from using our strengths.

Strengths Profile (formerly R2 Strengths Profiler) is designed by Alex Linley and his team at Capp to identify and develop strengths in individuals and teams, synthesising the latest research. Whether you are familiar with the tool or not, or perhaps use other frameworks, you can apply the SP lens quite simply when working with your own or other people's strengths. By adding the dimension of energy and context, you can build a richer understanding of where strengths are being used and how best they can be capitalised. For each strength consider:

- Performance – How well do you do it?
- Energy – How good do you feel when doing it? How much energy do you gain?
- Use – How often do you do it? In which situations?

**STRENGTH**

# STRENGTHS DEVELOPMENT MODEL



## Use realised strengths wisely

These are things you are good at, enjoy doing and do often. They are generally your most recognised and available resources for sustained performance, wellbeing and engagement. Marshal realised strengths by using them appropriately for your situation and context.



## Use unrealised strengths more

These are things you are good at, enjoy doing and do less often. These strengths can be areas of untapped potential, waiting for the right situation or time to surface and develop. Find opportunities to use them more.



## Use learned behaviour when needed


These are things you are good at yet find draining. They can reveal areas of potential burnout in your current role or the overuse of certain strengths. Use them in moderation and only when you need to.



## Use weaknesses less

These are things you are poor at and also find draining. They are areas where performance and motivation are lowest, yet are often targeted for development. The goal here is to minimise their impact and use them only where necessary.





“Realising our strengths is the  
smallest thing we can do to make  
the most difference.”

Alex Linley

# STRENGTHS STRATEGIES

We can learn to use our strengths in new and better ways to become even stronger. Here are a few strategies to stretch, challenge and team up with people to play to your strengths.

## Strengths constellations

Our individual constellation of strengths come alive in different contexts. By combining our most energising strengths we can maximise their effect and create an upward spiral of positivity and growth. Better still, find ways to play a symphony of strengths with other people.

## Strengths partnerships

Find complementary strengths partners – someone at work or home who can compensate for your weaknesses or take over when you get drained.

## Calibrating strengths

Consider the results you want and select which strengths are best to achieve them. Remember to be mindful of how your strengths affect others. Go deeper by observing and reflecting on what is going well. Refine your actions with feedback.

Some more tips:

- Reflect on the strengths that have proved most successful before. How did you combine them? In what situations did they work best?
- Focus on strengths you want to be known for in your work, future career and personal brand.
- Find people who can be role models for emerging strengths.
- Be honest. Tell people your weaknesses and allow them to offer their strengths in return. What weaknesses do you really need training and development to address?
- Organise tasks to sandwich activities that drain you between those that energise you.
- Consider sustainability. Are you taking some strengths too far? What strengths may be better to start developing now?



“The unique purpose of organisations is to make strengths productive. To achieve results, one has to use all the available strengths...these strengths are the true opportunities.”

Peter Drucker

# STRENGTHS BASED ORGANISATIONS

If performance and engagement are top priorities in organisations, how much more potential can be realised when each individual is playing to their strengths?

While a strength approach is gaining momentum, not everyone is clear what their strengths are and how to capitalise on them. Critically for organisations, neither are their managers or human capital leaders.

Realising strengths and the energy that fuels them is a natural route to enhancing employee contribution, engagement and performance. Knowing individual strengths and how to harness them enables you to get the best from people throughout the employee life-cycle and at every level of the business.

When applied effectively and holistically, a strength-based approach can be the key to an engaged, high performing workforce. Perhaps most importantly, it reaches beyond traditional talent management to find hidden value and talent that can re-engage and invigorate individuals and the organisation.

There are many ways to integrate strengths into how your organisation does business. Here is a five step guide:

1. **Identify** strengths with a blend of formal assessment tools such as Strengths Profile and informal approaches like strengths spotting, strengths cards, strengths conversations and strengths sessions.
2. **Apply** strengths strategies and empower people to autonomously choose and use their strengths.
3. **Develop** strengths through training and coaching from graduate to executive level.
4. **Appreciate** strengths with strength-based feedback, performance conversations and recognition.
5. **Reinforce** strengths throughout HR systems and processes. Make them part of your employee and customer value proposition.

# Business applications

How can organisations start harnessing strengths?

Drawing together what we've learned so far, here are ten tips for business.

1

## **Tap into unused talent throughout the organisation**

To the extent that the strengths of employees are not being harnessed, there is untapped talent and energy in the organisation. Much time and resource is spent in attempting to improve performance, but little of that is directed at getting the best out of people.

2

## **Attract and retain more of the people it needs**

People like to use their strengths: doing so reinforces and re-energises them. A strengths based organisation will be more attractive in the employment market, especially to Generation Y. Without the opportunity to use their abilities, many people leave.

3

## **Improve individual performance**

Individual performance is significantly improved by a focus on strengths, and undermined by a focus on rectifying weaknesses. The traditional approach of molding individuals to jobs and focusing development effort on correcting weaknesses have proved unsuccessful.

4

## **Build employee engagement**

Use of strengths is one of the key drivers of employee engagement, which itself is linked to improved employee retention, discretionary effort, quality, customer satisfaction and loyalty, sales, profitability, shareholder return and business growth

5

### **Develop flexibility**

Selected and deployed on the basis of strengths – less on the basis of what they ‘have done’, and more on the basis of what they ‘could do’ in a variety of future roles – employees are more willing and able to accept changes in role and organisation.

6

### **Improve teamwork**

A focus on strengths in teams allows for the efficient allocation of tasks and, with greater role flexibility, encourages cooperation. The positive emotions generated by the use of strengths enable social integration.

7

### **Increase diversity and positive inclusion**

An understanding of strengths encourages people to value difference. The person who once appeared aloof is now understood to play a vital role and may absolve me from my non-preferred tasks. Teams made up of people who differ tend to be more creative and perform better.

8

### **Increase openness to change and ability to deal with change**

The use of strengths generates positive emotions which facilitate performance by broadening people’s mind sets, encouraging them to discover new ways of thinking and acting, building resilience and the ability to deal with the after-effects of negative events.

9

### **Deal more positively with restructure**

When faced with a restructure, using a strengths-based approach means you can offer a process that meets best practice requirements whilst appointing top performing individuals into key roles that are mapped against the future business requirements.

10

### **Contribute to the happiness and fulfilment of employees**

Apart from being more likely to achieve their goals, people who use their strengths experience higher levels of energy, wellbeing and authenticity. This combination of organisational and individual benefits helps create a high performance workplace in which you have engaged employees.

Business tips by Capp available in the R2 Team Facilitator Manual (2015) and Strengths Profile Accreditation Workbook (2015).

When leaders know their own strengths and the strengths of their team, they can create a positive culture where strengths are harnessed and people excel.

Take a strengths assessment to discover your strengths. Think about the strengths that have enabled your success so far. Are these the ones you want to be known for now? Do you need to develop different strengths to get to the next level as a leader? Be honest about your career goals and the roles that will allow you to deliver your best.

Work with a coach, mentor or boss to create a development plan that leverages your strengths and authentic leadership style and builds on your potential. Focus on activities you can apply daily to feel more energised, motivated and engaged.

Build positive relationships within your team by emphasising people's strengths. When you recognise what someone does exceptionally well, they will feel more motivated and committed to keep doing their best. Spot strengths and challenge people to develop. When they consistently volunteer for certain activities, chances are they will play to strengths.

Consider ways to make meetings more collaborative, productive and energising by tapping into strengths. Encourage people to use their strengths to offer unique insights and solutions to achieving strategic goals.

## Hint

Celebrate wins by encouraging people to share stories about strengths and how these contributed to success.





# Leadership





Performance  
management

## Hint

Align KPIs and development plans to strengths. Set performance goals that challenge and stretch strengths.

People place a high value on relationships with their bosses. They want them to understand their strengths and manage them according to individual needs.

A strengths-based approach to performance management, whether in formal reviews, feedback conversations or day to day, is individualised and motivating for managers and the people they lead. It helps build positive productive relationships and retain talented people.

Too often performance management is seen simply as dealing with disciplinary issues or poor performers. Many managers don't like and avoid performance conversations. They can lack the skills, positive frameworks and motivation to do it well.

Strengths-based performance conversations are active, positive and more likely to elicit top performance; and they're easier to hold. People are far more able to realistically discuss how to minimise the impact of their weaknesses when they know their strengths are being recognised, rewarded and developed.

Teach managers how to spot and leverage their team's strengths and hold performance conversations that focus on strengths. Look deeper to see how these are playing out. Is it lip service or are people really bringing strengths to life?

For maximum impact, integrate a strengths lens into performance management processes and metrics.

It's tempting to focus on bridging gaps and improving weaknesses when we want to guide people to succeed. Yet we do so at the expense of making full use of their strengths.

If you are a coach, manager or people development leader, focusing on strengths is one of the greatest differences you can make to get the best from people. Help maximise strengths and minimise weaknesses by considering some of these questions:

- Which strengths energise them most? How can they apply them to stay satisfied, engaged and performing at their best every day?
- Can they partner with team members who possess complementary strengths?
- Can they spend more time on projects and tasks that play to their strengths?
- Where weaknesses impact, which strengths can they draw on instead to achieve the same goals and really excel?
- Which strengths, if developed, hint at untapped potential that may propel them in the next stage of their career?

For those who tend to overplay certain strengths, how can they be more mindful about how they use these strengths? For example, a leader who habitually overplays Drive and Competition may need to dial up Compassion to sustain his team's engagement when they show signs of burnout.

## Hint

A 'development opportunity' can be an opportunity to develop strengths rather than weaknesses.

# Coaching and career conversations







## Delegation and teamwork

## Hint

Consider what strengths are required to complete a task. Does anyone have those strengths? If yes, delegate it!

When people know their own strengths and the strengths of others in their team, they are better equipped to leverage them together.

Strengths-based delegation and teamwork is a core tool managers can use to transfer organisational strategy into team goals and individual objectives. When people's strengths are aligned to the organisation's mission and their team goals, collaboration and performance skyrocket.

Team members can work in complementary partnerships to maximise each other's strengths, compensate for individual weaknesses or offset de-energising behaviours.

When tasks and roles are aligned with their strengths, people are more likely to work faster and experience a sense of 'flow' in their work. This leads to higher quality work. Goals become more satisfying, meaningful and attainable because people are doing what they intrinsically love and do best.

A language of strengths also helps team members understand themselves and each other. It gears conversations toward mutual respect and appreciation by highlighting what each person can contribute. A tool such as the Strengths Team Profile shows the diverse strengths available across a team and provides a positive framework to unite people in moving toward their goals.



Research now shows that recruiting for strengths rather than competencies is more effective in hiring talent that is engaged, productive, effective and able to grow in their role.

When Aviva recruited customer advisors for their strengths, the company experienced 39% reduction in cost per hire, 54% reduced call answer delays and 50% less turnover in the first year. Onboarding new talent selected for strengths has also shown to be 50% faster than the competency-based model.

If you are looking to find and retain the right talent, target strengths. Start by defining the strengths likely to be useful for the role and organisational context. Consider which strengths might help or hinder high performance. Which may be needed to complement those already present in the organisation or team. Use those insights to attract the right people and integrate them into job descriptions, marketing and branding.

Use a strengths-based assessment tool as part of the recruitment and selection process. Keep an open mind rather than following a formula. People use their strengths in creative and often unexpected ways so try not to pigeon-hole them. For example, relationship strengths like Rapport Builder may be important in a sales role and if these appear to be de-energising you may have some concerns. On the other hand, a strength like Mission may ultimately be more important than Prevention in a health and safety role.

## Hint

Hold strength-based interviews informed by assessment and strengthspotting.

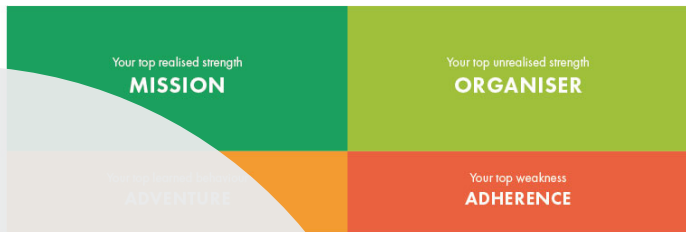


## Recruitment and selection

**TALENTS**

## STRENGTHS · PROFILE

Expert Profile - 13 January 2016



350,000+ people have completed Strengths Profile across 25 countries. It is considered the most robust and validated strengths tool today.

## ASSESSMENT TOOLS

### Strengths Profile

Strengths Profile is designed to unlock performance, energy and potential by realising people's strengths. Unique from traditional one-dimensional strengths tests, it assesses 60 strengths across three dimensions of energy, performance and use, revealing a dynamic set of realised strengths, weaknesses, learned (or de-energising) behaviours and unrealised strengths. Team Profiles and Manager Insights are also available.

We recommend a debrief with one of our qualified experts to help you design personalised strategies and get the most from your strengths.

Available at Langley Group.

» [Order now](#) » [Enquiries](#)

### Strengths Cards

Explore strengths with 60 cards drawn from Strengths Profile. Play strengths games to discover your strengths and those of others. Use them as quick reference tools to help develop your strengths day to day or harness them toward your goals. Ideal to facilitate strengths-based conversations and introduce people to their strengths without indepth assessment. Strengths Book available.

Available at Langley Group.

» [Buy now](#)

## COURSES & CONSULTING

### Strengths Profile Accreditation

Would you like to learn more about harnessing people's strengths?

Professional certification in Strengths Profile is ideal for coaches, facilitators, managers, team leaders, HR practitioners, and consultants who want to unlock and develop strengths.

Open courses and inhouse training.

» [Learn more](#)

### Strengths Profile Team Training

Take team performance to the next level by harnessing strengths. The Strengths Profile Team Profile reveals strengths that exist across a team, for better teamwork, engagement, productivity and alignment. Learn how to unlock strengths potential and design strengths training across organisations.

Open courses and inhouse training.

» [Learn more](#)

### Strengths training

Ask us to design and deliver strengths-based training in your organisation or professional network. From short sessions to indepth leadership training, people find discovering and working from their strengths motivating and engaging.

» [Learn more](#)

### Keynotes and masterclasses

Would you like us to deliver a high impact presentation about strengths? A fresh approach for human capital managers, business leaders, coaches, consultants and people development experts.

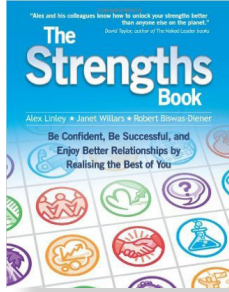
» [Learn more](#)

### Assessment and talent services

Whether you want to select talent or get the best from people, we can help you choose and use the right strengths tools for your workplace or clients, and administer and debrief results.

» [Learn more](#)

## BOOKS



### The Strengths Book

An easy to use manual for applying the Strengths Profile approach.

» [Buy now](#)

#### Average to A+: Realising strengths in yourself and others

by Alex Linley

#### Character Strengths and Virtues: A handbook and classification

by Chris Peterson and Martin Seligman

#### Character Strengths Matter: How to live a full life

by Shannon Polly and Kathryn Britton

#### Mindfulness and Character Strengths: A practical guide to flourishing

by Ryan Niemic

#### Positive Psychology at the Movies: Using films to build character strengths and well-being

by Ryan Niemiec and Danny Wedding

#### Positive Psychology Coaching: Putting the science of happiness to work for your clients

by Robert Biswas-Diener and Ben Dean

#### Smart Strengths: Building character, resilience and relationships in youth

by John Yeager, Sherri Fisher and David Shearon

#### Strengths-Based Leadership

by Tom Rath and Barry Conchie

#### Strengths Finder 2.0

by Tom Rath

#### The Strengths Book: What you can do, love to do, and find it hard to do - and why it matters

by Alex Linley, Janet Willars and Robert Biswas-Diener

Many of these books can be purchased at Langley Group.

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## Sue Langley

Sue Langley is a speaker, master trainer, global business consultant and leading advisor on the practical workplace applications of positive psychology, emotional intelligence and neuroscience.

CEO of the Langley Group of companies, Sue's gift is synthesising science into simple, practical tools anyone can use. She has taught thousands of business leaders, HR professionals, coaches and consultants how to harness strengths and build a positive culture.

A Master Trainer in Strengths Profile, and several strength-based scientific assessment tools, she partners with Capp to train practitioners and build strengths-based organisations in Asia-Pacific. Sue holds a Master in Neuroscience of Leadership, BA in Psychology and Management and has studied positive psychology at Harvard. She is a Director of Wellbeing Australia, designed the first nationally recognised Diploma of Positive Psychology and Wellbeing and presents her work at conferences internationally.



“To inspire and equip individuals,  
teams and organisations to show up  
more frequently as the best  
version of themselves”

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The Langley Group is a positive people development company.

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