

A COACHING MASTERCLASS ON

MAXIMIZING STRENGTHS



WORKBOOK



POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY INSTITUTE

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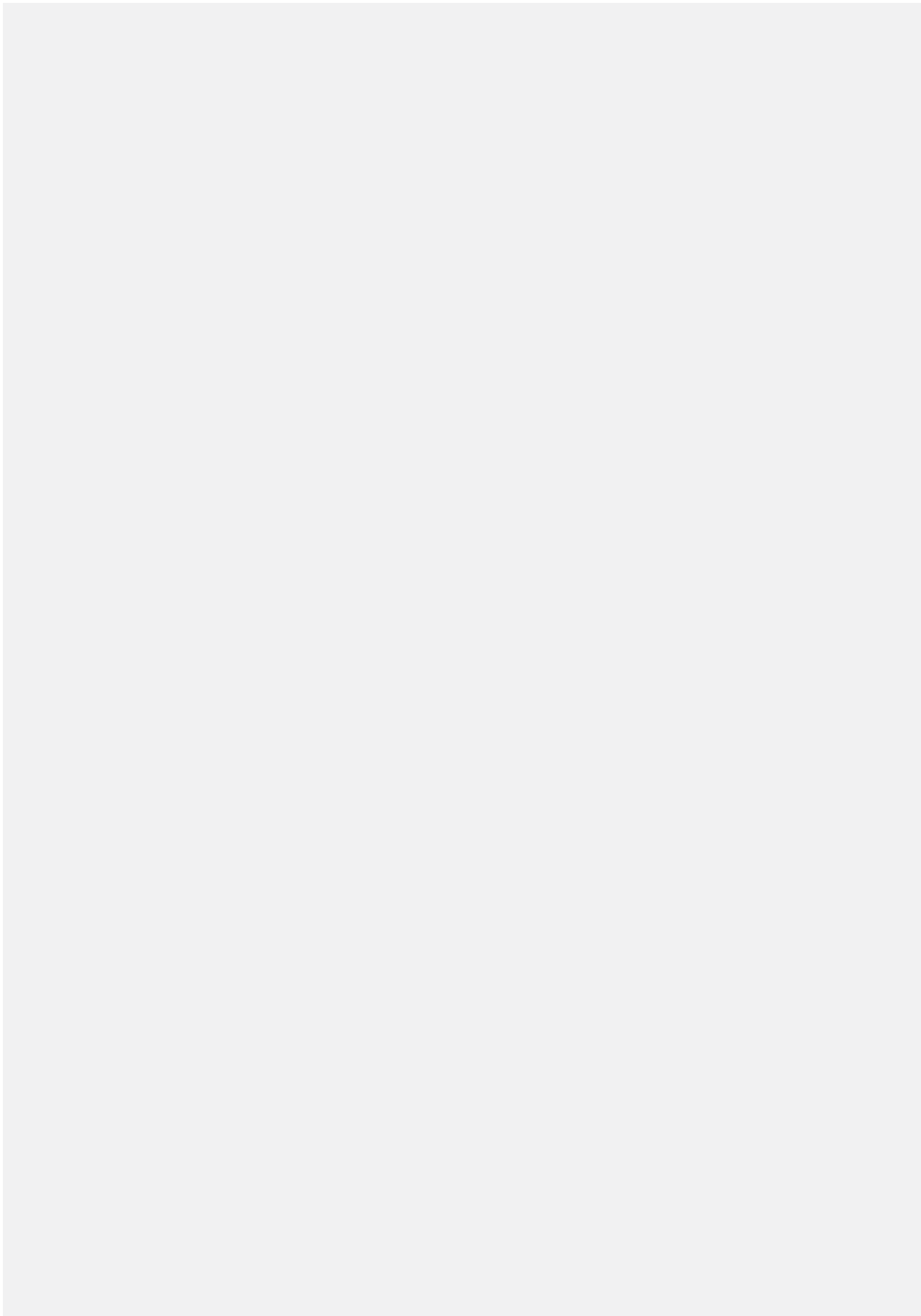


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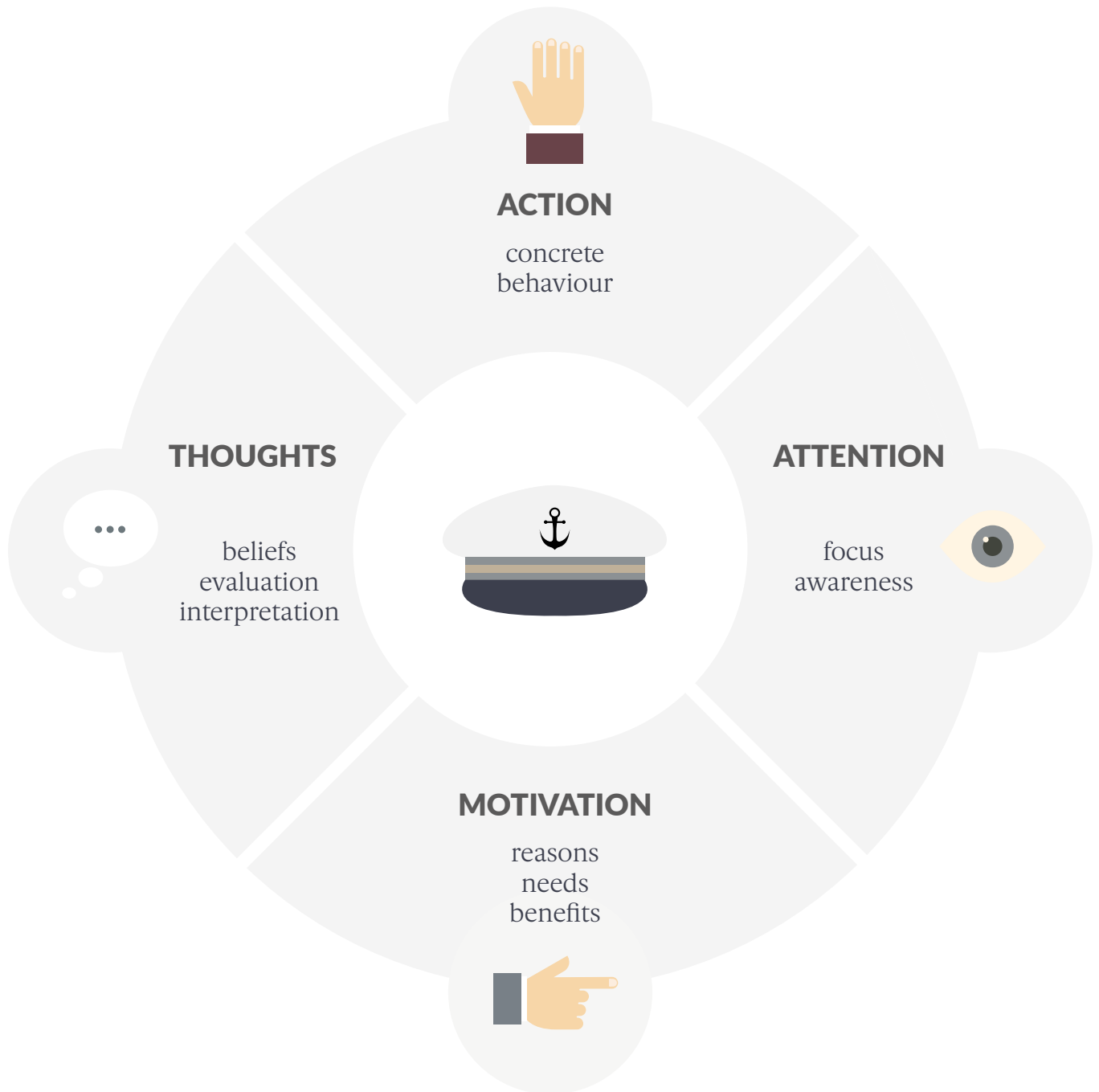
■ YOUR PERSONAL GOALS

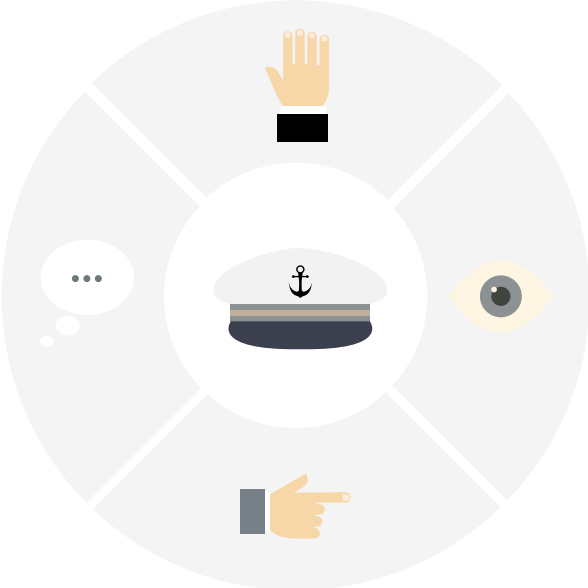
What would you like to learn in this masterclass?



■ THE SAILBOAT METAPHOR





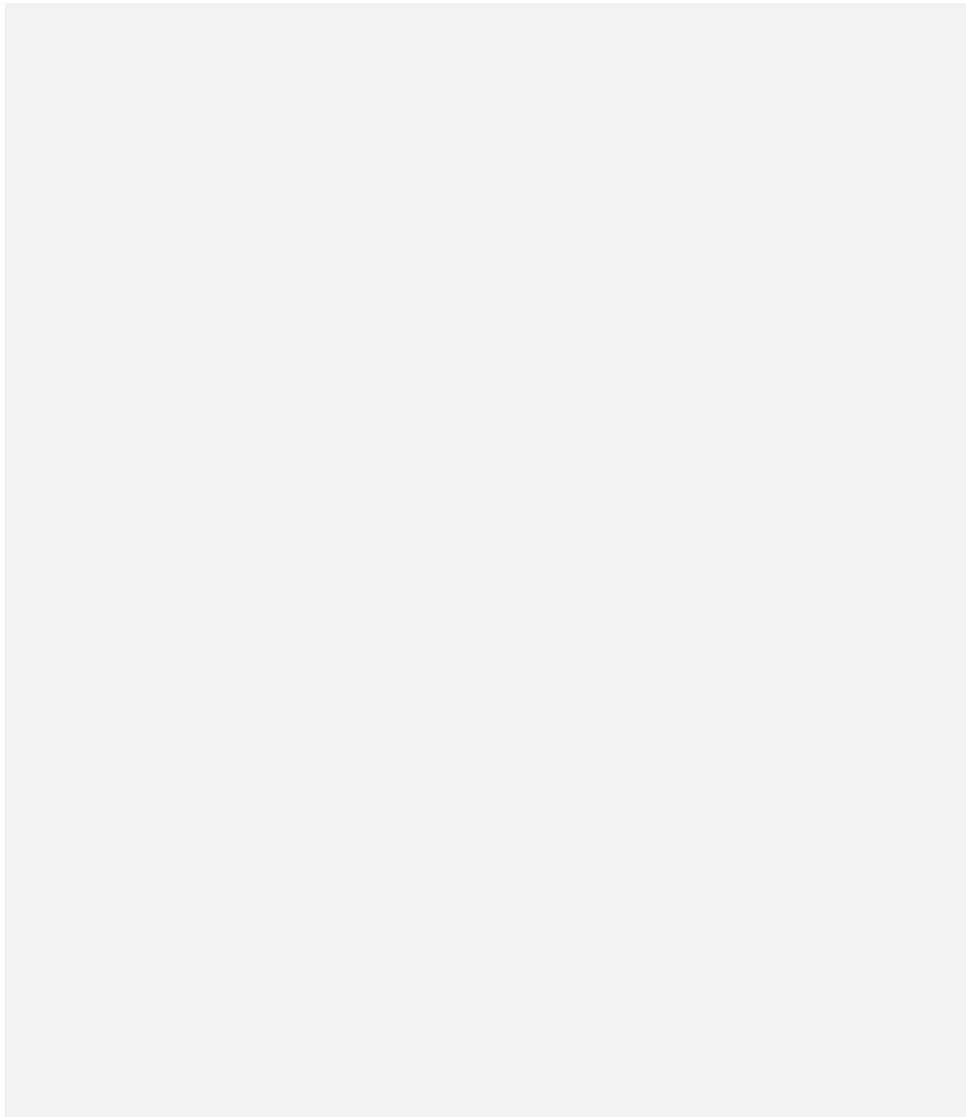


■ THE STATUS OF YOUR SAILBOAT

Ask the other person to use the sailboat metaphor to describe how he or she is currently doing. You may ask the following questions:

- What is the current status of your sailboat?
- How would you describe your current journey?

Invite the other person to speak as much as possible in terms of the different elements of the sailboat and their interaction.



■ WRITING AS A METAPHOR FOR STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS

A metaphor can be a powerful tool to explain complex constructs like strengths and weaknesses. This tool can best be described as an experiential metaphor: participants will carry out a small exercise and then draw links between their experiences during the exercise and the use of strengths versus weaknesses.

▶ GOAL

The goal of this exercise is to introduce the concepts “strengths” and “weaknesses” in a practical way that allows discussion.

▶ ADVICE

- There is an important difference between strengths and skills. While operating from both can deliver good performance, strength use is accompanied by increased energy levels, whereas predominantly using only skills will not raise energy levels and might even be draining.
- For the purposes of this exercise, it is important to note that, while handwriting is a skill, participants may argue that it was practice that allowed them to perform well with their dominant hand and the resulting awkwardness in the non-dominant hand condition. It is important to keep in mind that the goal of this exercise is to induce a certain emotional experience that is similar to using strengths or weaknesses, rather than introducing an example of a strength, which, in this case, handwriting is not.

▶ REFERENCES

- Hodges, T. D., & Clifton, D. O. (2004). Strengths-based development in practice. In P. A. Linley & S. Joseph (Eds.), *Positive psychology in practice* (pp. 256-268). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
- Linley, A. (2008). *Average to A+: Realising Strengths in Yourself and Others*. Warwick: CAPP Press.

► INSTRUCTIONS

Ask participants to complete the following exercise.

Step 1: Writing using the dominant hand

Ask your participants to write their name five times using their dominant hand.

Step 2: Using the non-dominant hand

Second, ask your participants to write their names five more times, but this time using their non-dominant hand.

Step 3: Debriefing

Debrief this exercise by discussing the following questions:

- What did it feel like to write your name five times with your dominant hand?
- How would you describe the feelings associated with writing your name with your non-dominant hand?
- Did your writing get better over the course of writing your name five times with your non-dominant hand?
- Could you get better if you practiced writing with your non-dominant hand? How much effort would be required to get your signature to look like it does with your dominant hand?

Now explain that using strengths versus weaknesses is very similar to what most (non-ambidextrous) participants experience during this exercise:

- Using strengths feels natural - with relatively little effort, you can accomplish great results.
- Using weaknesses can result in relatively low performance.
- Using weaknesses can generate feelings of clumsiness, frustration and disappointment.
- Even with a lot of practice, operating from weaknesses is unlikely to result in performance levels comparable to results that follow from strength-based actions.

- Operating from a place of weakness can take longer, compared to the amount of time required to complete a similar task while working from a place of strengths.
- More conscious effort is required when working from a place of weaknesses, meaning that you may tire more quickly and have less power available (in the short term) for other tasks.
- Results can still be accomplished when operating from a place of weakness, but those results may be sub-optimal - but you can still get the job done if needed. It is just unlikely to be something you will want to do over and over again.
- Working from a place of strengths can mean excellent results, resulting in pride, satisfaction, self-efficacy and a desire to do and learn more.

■ A STRENGTHS VERSUS WEAKNESS FOCUS

Explaining the theoretical background of concepts like strengths and weaknesses can certainly help increase their understanding. However, adding personal experience to these concepts can boost the learning process in a fast and personally relevant way. This tool was designed to increase the awareness of the outcomes of strengths-based practice and allow groups to explore their experiences concerning this approach.

► GOAL

The goal of this exercise is to allow individuals to experience what it feels like to operate and think from a weakness versus strengths focus. In most cases, participants will experience that focusing on deficits and trying to repair their weaknesses deplete their energy levels, enthusiasm, and motivation while focusing on and building strengths will lead to an increase in these factors. This exercise was designed to be used in groups. It helps introduce the concepts of strengths versus weaknesses.

► ADVICE

- While the groups are talking in their sub-groups, coaching may be required. The group leader can consider joining both groups briefly to assist in this process.
- The group leader may increase the awareness of the experiences of the participants in both the strengths and weakness groups during the group discussions by explicitly instructing them to focus on their experiences during the discussion.
- If more time is available, it is also possible to switch groups so that everyone can experience all three roles (observing, strengths focus, and weakness focus).
- After the presentations, the group leader may wish to express his/her appreciation to the members of the weakness group for their willingness to endure negative or difficult emotions that may have arisen.

The group leader may facilitate the group debrief session by asking the following questions:

- How did you feel when discussing your weaknesses/strengths and plans to address them?
- How can you use the experiences to improve your current work team and environment?

► REFERENCES

- Hodges, T. D., & Clifton, D. O. (2004). Strengths-based development in practice. In P. A. Linley & S. Joseph (Eds.), *Positive psychology in practice* (pp. 256-268). John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
- Linley, A. (2008). *Average to A+ : Realizing strengths in yourself and others*. CAPP Press.

► INSTRUCTIONS

Step 1

Split the group into three sub-groups. Each sub-group gets a flip chart and markers.

Group #1

The members of the first sub-group discuss aspects of their job that they find burdensome and struggle with; things that deplete rather than create energy. In addition, they formulate 12-month goals to increase their performance in those areas to an adequate level. Have them record their ideas along with illustrations on the flip chart.

Group #2

The members of the second sub-group discuss aspects of their work that they enjoy and are good at, things that create energy and enthusiasm. In addition, they formulate 12-month goals to develop their competence in those areas still further. Have them record their discussion along with illustrations on their flip chart.

Group #3

The members of the third sub-group observe the other two sub-groups and discuss the differences between the groups while observing them. Ask these observers to take notes about what they notice. This observer group will provide valuable insights during the debrief discussion.

Step 2

After 10 to 15 minutes, bring everyone back together. Both sub-groups give a brief presentation of their discussion. The sub-group that discussed weaknesses goes first. Second is the sub-group that discussed strengths, followed by the observers who explain to the entire group what they noticed while observing the two sub-groups at work.

■ THE VIA CLASSIFICATION OF CHARACTER STRENGTHS & VIRTUES

In 2004, Peterson and Seligman conceptualized the Values-In-Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA - IS), which brings together the six most valued virtues, operationalized into 24 different character strengths. It is suggested that every person possesses three to seven out of these 24 strengths, called signature strengths, which represent the core of the person's identity (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In the research literature, signature strengths are often operationalized to people's top five strengths, which, when exercised, are reported to be accompanied by feelings of authenticity, excitement, and invigoration (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Further, it is suggested that people possess an intrinsic motivation and a strong urge to use their top five strengths (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Research has shown that using one's signature strengths has a positive impact on the person's subjective (Proctor, Maltby, & Linley, 2011a) and psychological well-being, vitality (Govindji & Linley 2007), and quality of life (Proctor et al., 2011b).

► GOAL

The goal of this overview is to provide both client and practitioner with a complete list and description of the 24 VIA strengths. This list can be used by a coach during strengths spotting and can also be used by clients to become aware of possible strengths.

► ADVICE

- It is important to remember that the 24 strengths as classified by the VIA is not a complete list of potential human strengths. Probably, there are thousands of human strengths. This is also reflected by the fact that other strengths tools have identified other strengths as well (see, for instance, the R2 Strengths Profiler overview of strengths). Nevertheless, the current overview can be a valuable tool for both clients and practitioners to develop a clear concept of what strengths entail and a starting point for looking more through the lens of strengths at oneself and others.
- Note that the conceptualisation of strengths by the VIA is also somewhat different from the StrengthsFinder 2.0 and R2 Strengths Profiler approaches to strengths. The VIA conceptualizes strengths as morally valued components of character that contribute to a fulfilling life (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), whereas the StrengthsFinder 2.0 and R2 Strengths Profiler view strengths as personal competencies that generate optimal performance.

► REFERENCES

- Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. New York: Oxford University Press and Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

► INSTRUCTIONS

Strengths of Wisdom and Knowledge

Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge

- **Creativity** [*originality, ingenuity*] Thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualize and do things.
- **Curiosity** [*interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience*] Taking an interest in on-going experience for its own sake; exploring and discovering.
- **Open-mindedness** [*judgment, critical thinking*] Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; weighing all evidence fairly.
- **Love of learning** Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally.
- **Perspective** [*wisdom*] Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people.

Strengths of Courage

Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external and internal

- **Bravery** [*valour*] Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; acting on convictions even if unpopular.
- **Persistence** [*perseverance, industriousness*] Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles.
- **Integrity** [*authenticity, honesty*] Presenting oneself in a genuine way; taking responsibility for one's feeling and actions.
- **Vitality** [*zest, enthusiasm, vigour, energy*] Approaching life with excitement and energy; feeling alive and activated.

Strengths of Humanity

Interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others

- **Love** Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated.
- **Kindness** [*generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, "niceness"*] Doing favours and good deeds for others.

- **Social intelligence** [*emotional intelligence, personal intelligence*] Being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself.

Strengths of Justice

Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life

- **Citizenship** [*social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork*] Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group.
- **Fairness** Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; not letting personal feelings bias decisions about others.
- **Leadership** Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the same maintain time good relations within the group.

Strengths of Temperance

Strengths that protect against excess

- **Forgiveness and mercy** Forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting the shortcomings of others; giving people a second chance; not being vengeful.
- **Humility / Modesty** Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; not regarding oneself as more special than one is.
- **Prudence** Being careful about one's choices; not taking undue risks; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted.
- **Self-regulation** [*self-control*] Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions.

Strengths of Transcendence

Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning

- **Appreciation of beauty and excellence** [*awe, wonder, elevation*] Appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life.
- **Gratitude** Being aware of and thankful of the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks.
- **Hope** [*optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation*] Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it.
- **Humour** [*playfulness*] Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side.
- **Spirituality** [*religiousness, faith, purpose*] Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose, the meaning of life, and the meaning of the universe.

■ 200+ STRENGTHS LABELS

Over the years, different strength assessments have been developed. The most widely known and used assessments are the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS), the R2 Strengths Profiler, and the Clifton StrengthsFinder 2.0. Each of these tools attempts to measure a fixed set of an individual's strengths. It is important to note that, although there is some definitional overlap, a great number of strengths are unique to each assessment. For example, although the strength of "humor" is included in both the VIA-IS and the R2 Strengths Profiler, the strength of the "narrator" is only defined in the latter.

When identifying strengths, it is important to remember that the assessments mentioned above only address a very limited set of human strengths. In reality, many hundreds of different strengths may not be currently included in the aforementioned tools. Many strengths may yet have to be defined or named. Therefore, the strengths offered by these assessments should best be considered as a good starting point rather than a complete set of available human strengths. This tool offers an extensive list of strengths, including many strengths that are not currently included in other strength assessments.

▶ GOAL

The goal of this tool is to enhance the process of strengths-spotting by allowing both clients and practitioners to look beyond the limited set of strengths that have been identified by well-known strength assessments. The strengths listed in this tool can help expand both the clients' and practitioners' strengths vocabularies, contributing to more effective and accurate strengths-spotting.

▶ ADVICE

- This overview can also be used as an assessment tool. The practitioner may ask the client (or people in the client's network) to select strengths that characterize the client best.

▶ REFERENCES

- Biswas-Diener, R. (2009). Using strengths-based interventions in coaching and therapy. In G.W. Burns (Ed.), *Happiness, healing, enhancement. Your casebook collection for applying positive psychology in therapy*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Linley, A., Willars, J., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2010). *The strengths book*. CAPP Press.

► INSTRUCTIONS

The list below includes a wide range of different strengths across different domains.

Personal strengths

Accurate	Creativity	Gratitude
Action-oriented	Critical thinking	Helping
Adventurous	Curiosity	Honest
Ambitious	Dedicated	Hope
Analytical	Determined	Humility
Appreciation of beauty	Disciplined	Humorous
Appreciative	Educated	Idealistic
Artistic	Empathetic	Independent
Athletic	Energetic	Ingenuity
Authentic	Entertaining	Industriousness
Bravery	Enthusiastic	Inner peace
Caring	Fairness	Inspiring
Citizenship	Fast	Integrity
Clever	Flexible	Intelligent
Compassionate	Focused	Kindness
Charming	Forceful	Knowledgeable
Communicative	Forgiveness	Leadership
Confident	Friendly	Lively
Considerate	Generous	Logical
Courageous	Good looking	Love

Personal strengths

Love of learning	Persuasive	Social skills
Mercy	Persistent	Straightforward
Modesty	Practical	Strategic thinking
Motivated	Precise	Tactful
Observant	Prudence	Team oriented
Optimistic	Respectful	Thoughtful
Open	Responsible	Thrifty
Open-minded	Self-assured	Tolerant
Orderly	Serious	Trustworthy
Originality	Self controlled	Visionary
Organized	Speaking	Vitality
Outgoing	Spirituality	Warm
Patient	Spontaneous	Willpower
People skills	Social intelligence	Wisdom
Perseverance		

Strengths in the workplace

Activating	Data input	Instructing
Adapting	Empathizing	Judging
Administering	Evaluating	Learning
Analyzing information	Examining	Listening
Arranging	Explaining	Locating
Advising	Editing	Launching
Budgeting	Empowering	Leading
Building teams	Finding	Managing
Briefing	Fixing	Mentoring
Balancing	Formulating	Motivating
Communicating	Finalizing	Meeting people
Controlling	Guiding a group or individual	Marketing
Coordinating	Gathering information	Negotiating
Creating	Generating ideas	Navigating
Checking	Giving feedback	Observing
Counseling	Helping	Organizing
Compiling	Handling	Overhauling
Coaching	Hosting	Overseeing
Deciding	Imagining	Persuading
Detailing	Implementing	Planning
Developing people	Influencing	Preparing

Strengths in the workplace

Directing	Initiating	Presenting
Devising	Innovating	Problem-solving
Discovering	Interviewing	Proofreading
Prioritizing	Selling	Tracking details
Questioning	Setting-up	Thinking creatively
Qualifying	Supervising	Understanding
Researching	Simplifying	Uniting
Resolving	Speaking	Upgrading
Reporting	Strategizing	Updating
Recording	Teaching	Verbalizing
Repairing	Teamwork	Volunteering
Reviewing	Troubleshooting	Verifying
Scheduling	Training	Writing

■ VIA SIGNATURE STRENGTHS SCORING SHEET

The strengths of a client can be identified in many ways. Aside from (online) questionnaires and strengths spotting conversations with a practitioner, peers can be perceived as a valuable source of information. Using more diverse sources to identify strengths yields a more complete picture of an individual's strong points. Gathering the data from these multiple sources is only one part of the process. Presenting them in a structured way is another part that can be quite challenging. This inventory was designed to solve this obstacle. Note that it was designed specifically for use with the 24 VIA strengths.

► GOAL

The goal of this inventory is to create a structured overview of the different sources of information (e.g., the practitioner, peers, or online assessment) that can be used to identify the strengths of a client. In other words, the overview can be used to identify the core strengths of a client: strengths that are recognized by multiple sources (use the "total" column to sum the number of times a strength has been recognized by the different sources).

► ADVICE

- Although this inventory is primarily designed as a tool for the practitioner, clients can benefit from receiving a copy after completion. The inventory can provide insight into the usage of strengths in different contexts. For instance, sometimes, a colleague identifies different strengths than a spouse. This may indicate that the client is using different strengths in the workplace than at home. The inventory can be a particularly useful starting point for a conversation on strengths development. Questions that can be asked include, for instance, "What do you notice when you look at the overview?" "Do you recognize yourself in the most frequently identified strengths?" "Are there strengths that you may use too much or too little?" etc.

► INSTRUCTIONS

A sample inventory is displayed on the following page. The names below the inventory represent the names of the three persons that the client selected to report on his/her strengths. As you can see, although not all sources have identified the same strengths, considerable overlap can be noted in 5 of them: creativity (mentioned 4 times), love of learning (3 times), integrity (4 times), love (4 times), and fairness (4 times). These strengths are likely to be the "signature strengths" of this client. In addition, the inventory also provides insight into possible blind

spots: strengths that are mentioned by others but not by the client. In this example, integrity is an example of a potential blind spot. The inventory may also shed light on possible opportunities for growth: strengths that are mentioned by the client but not (or not often) recognized by other sources. Perspective is a potential area for growth for the client in the example below. Perspective is only mentioned by the client, but no other source believes this strength to be present (at least not in the top 5).

		Strengths	Self	Coach	VIA	Other 1	Other 2	Other 3	Total
wisdom & knowledge	1	Creativity	X	X		X	X		4
	2	Curiosity							
	3	Open-mindedness							
	4	Love of learning	X		X	X			3
	5	Perspective	X						1
courage	6	Bravery						X	1
	7	Persistence		X					1
	8	Integrity		X	X		X	X	4
	9	Vitality				X			1
humanity	10	Love	X	X	X		X		4
	11	Kindness						X	1
	12	Social intelligence							
justice	13	Citizenship							
	14	Fairness	X	X		X		X	4
	15	Leadership							
temperance	16	Forgiveness and mercy							
	17	Humility / Modesty			X				1
	18	Prudence				X	X		2
	19	Self-regulation							
transcendence	20	Appreciation of beauty							
	21	Gratitude			X				1
	22	Hope					X	X	2
	23	Humor							
	24	Spirituality							

Names

Other 1: John Wright (colleague) Other 2: Mother Other 3: Will Connel (friend)

Name of client:

		Strengths	Self	Coach	VIA	Other 1	Other 2	Other 3	Total
wisdom & knowledge	1	Creativity							
	2	Curiosity							
	3	Open-mindedness							
	4	Love of learning							
	5	Perspective							
courage	6	Bravery							
	7	Persistence							
	8	Integrity							
	9	Vitality							
humanity	10	Love							
	11	Kindness							
	12	Social intelligence							
justice	13	Citizenship							
	14	Fairness							
	15	Leadership							
temperance	16	Forgiveness and mercy							
	17	Humility / Modesty							
	18	Prudence							
	19	Self-regulation							
transcendence	20	Appreciation of beauty							
	21	Gratitude							
	22	Hope							
	23	Humor							
	24	Spirituality							

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Names

Other 1:

Other 2:

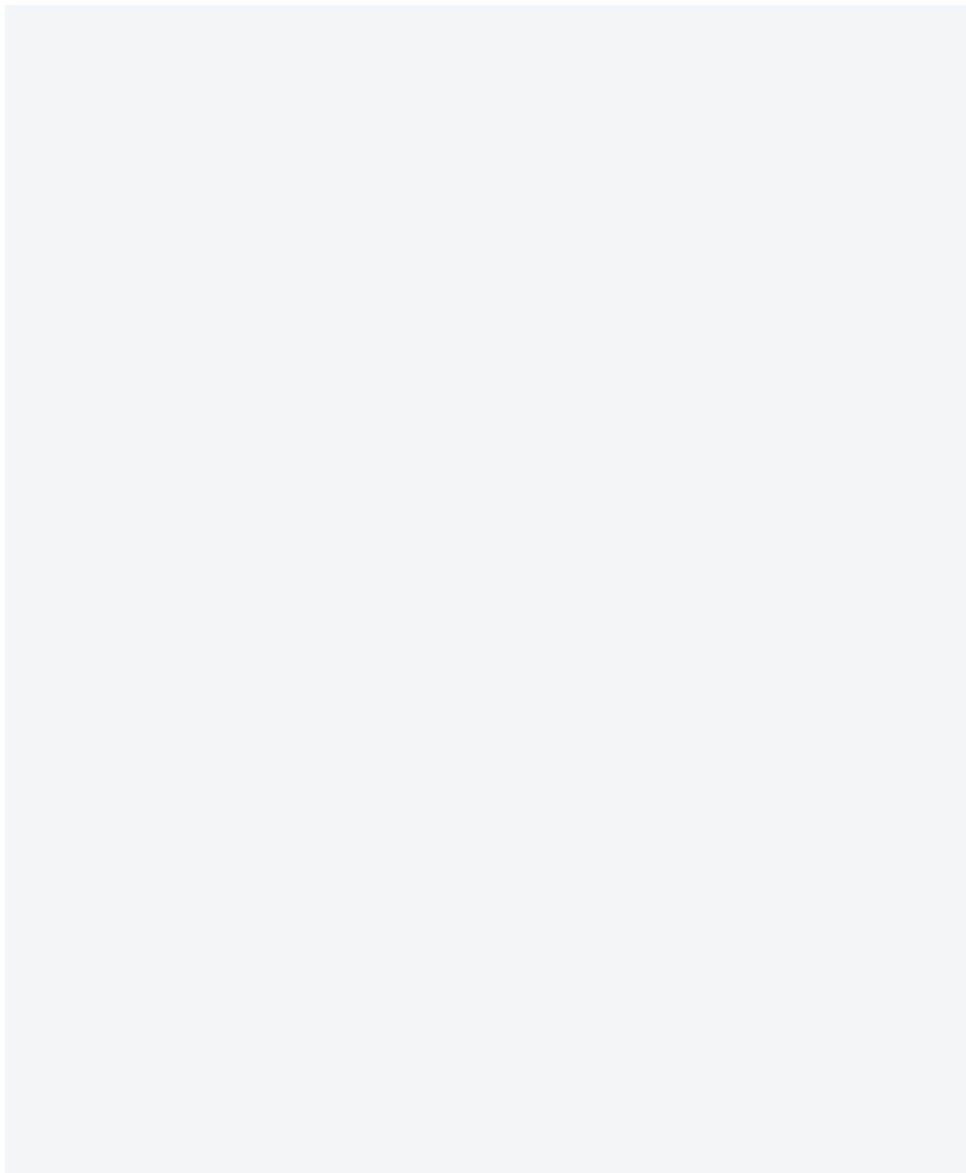
Other 3:

■ STRENGTH INTERVIEW

Invite the other person to identify two occasions when they have been at their best. The occasions can be of any duration from a few minutes to a year.

Get him or her to talk about the experience, re-living it as vividly as possible.

Note down every example of a possible strength they display as they talk. After the interview, invite them to consider the list you have noted down (you may also consider the strength spotting questions on the next page).



Additional strength-spotting questions:

1. What do you like to do?
2. What activities make you feel fulfilled?
3. What brings positive energy into your life?
4. At what times do you feel fully engaged, instead of just pretending to be engaged or are only partially engaged?
5. What are three things that you are passionate about?
6. What makes you feel passionate about the three items you listed above?
7. What do you feel is your true calling in life?
8. When in life do you play?
9. In what instances do you enjoy the ride instead of looking to reach your end goal?
10. When are you self-disciplined?
11. When are you creative?
12. Where do you feel at peace?
13. Where do you feel calm and productive?
14. When do you feel like you're doing what you're supposed to in life?
15. What activities make you feel completely absorbed?
16. When do you lose track of time?
17. What activities can you not wait to do again?
18. When do you deliver results seamlessly?
19. Which activities give you the feeling of clarity, calmness, creativity, and success?
20. What activities give you a sense of flow when you engage in them?
21. When does something happen fast and slow at the same time?
22. When do you experience the feeling of being in the "zone"?
23. What did you do as a child that you still do today, perhaps only probably better?
24. What activities excite you?
25. When do you feel like the "real you"?
26. What does your attention naturally focus on?
27. What have you learned quickly, catching on with minimal effort?
28. When do you feel motivated?
29. Which items do you want to put on your to-do list, but never seem to get there?
30. What are you looking forward to in the future?

■ INVENTING NEW STRENGTH LABELS

Being able to label our strengths is important for several reasons. First, although the observation of strength signs is an important starting point for accurate strength awareness, without a proper strength vocabulary, one may still struggle to articulate observations to actual self-knowledge. Without proper words or “labels,” strength observations remain abstract and difficult to understand. We need a “strengths vocabulary” to translate observations, such as feelings of joy, positive thoughts, and dedication, into a strength label. Second, strength labels can operate like a lens through which we look at ourselves and others. For example, once we know that there is something like a strength called “forgiveness,” we can reflect upon our actions and the actions of others through the lens of this strength; Do I believe forgiveness is a personal strength? When have I expressed forgiveness? To what extent is this friend using the strength “forgiveness”? By labeling “forgiveness,” we have created a new way to look at reality. If we are not aware of the label, it is difficult, if not impossible, to detect it in ourselves and others.

Another important benefit of strength labels is that they allow us to inform others about what we love and do well in life. For example, during a job interview, we may inform the interviewer that “creativity” and “teamwork” are two of our core strengths. In turn, sharing information about our strengths allows others to consider these strengths when making plans, assigning tasks, and asking for help. Moreover, a strengths vocabulary allows us to communicate about the strengths we observe in others. We may compliment a colleague for using her strength “perspective-taking” during the meeting or thank a friend for using his strength “kindness.” By labeling other people’s strengths, we can increase their awareness of their strengths.

Numerous approaches have been developed to identify an individual’s strengths, and while there is some overlap in terms of strength labels across these approaches, many strengths are unique to each approach. For instance, while the strength “humor” is included in both the Values In Action approach (VIA; Peterson & Seligman, 2006) and the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology approach (CAPP; Linley, 2008), the strength “narrator” is included only in the latter approach. Importantly, these strength assessments address only a limited set of human strengths. In reality, many more strengths are likely not currently listed by any of the aforementioned approaches. Probably, most strengths have yet to be explicitly identified, defined, or named. This group exercise helps people expand upon their strengths vocabulary by inviting them to be creative and come up with new and inspiring words to describe each other’s strengths.

► GOAL

The goal of this tool is to practice looking through a strengths lens by being creative and coming up with kind, inspiring, and funny words to label other people's strengths.

► ADVICE

- Group facilitators should allow at least 5 minutes for Step 1 so that participants have an opportunity to remember using their strength in real life. This will then allow them to describe their strength use to the group in more detail (Step 2), which will help group members come up with new strength labels (Step 3). If participants struggle to think of a personal strength, ask them to recall something that others have praised them for in the past when operating at their best.
- Participants who grew up in families that discouraged talking about personal strengths, perhaps because it was seen as boasting or showing off, may experience some hesitation or reluctance around sharing their strength stories in Step 2. Facilitators can encourage participants to be open and take pleasure in talking about their strengths, as this is the aim of the game. Their openness will only help other group members to do their part in Step 3.
- After the exercise is complete, encourage participants to stretch themselves beyond this single activity by setting a goal to observe personal strengths (of both themselves and others) for a week. Each time they see one in action, come up with a label for it, whether that label is as generic as "creativity" or as playful as "creatasaurus." Remind participants that only ongoing practice will help them master this skill.

► REFERENCES

- Linley, A. (2008). *Average to A+ : Realising strengths in yourself and others*. CAPP Press.
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► INTRODUCTION

In this group exercise, we are going to focus on strengths. A strength is something at which we are naturally good. When we use strengths, we feel energized and engaged. In this exercise, we are going to take turns to share a personal strength and then come up with different and creative ways to describe this strength. The idea is to expand our strength vocabularies, and perhaps to even see ourselves in a new and more positive light. Be creative and have fun with this, as life does not often hand us the opportunity to talk openly about things we are good at and enjoy.

Preparation

This exercise requires the facilitator to do the following:

- Set the room up by arranging participants' chairs in a circle, facing inward.
- Write down each participant's name on a whiteboard. Space names out, leaving room around each name.
- Provide each participant with a pad of sticky notes and a pen.

Step 1: Think about a personal strength

Invite group members to close their eyes and take a moment to think of a personal strength, something they naturally thrive at and enjoy doing. For example, they might throw wonderful dinner parties. Ask them to bring their strength to mind and allow themselves to, individually, delve into some recent memories of when they were thriving in this way. Allow 3 or 4 minutes for group members to complete this step.

Step 2: Share your strength story

Invite participants to open their eyes and come back together as a group. Then, one at a time, have each participant share their "strength story" with the group. To do this, ask participants to simply describe to the group a time when they were thriving and operating at their best (Step 1). Encourage participants to relish in the details of the memory so that the group can get a real sense of how the participant flourished during the experience.

Step 3: Come up with a strength label

Group members will now take turns to come up with different 'labels' for each participant's strength. For example, for the participant who shared her strength of throwing good dinner parties, group members might suggest: 'energizer,' 'entertainer,' 'uplifter,' and 'gatherer,' 'provider,' 'hostess with the mostess,' and 'generosity.' Have group members write down their strength labels on a sticky note, and then stick the notes on the whiteboard around the participant's name. Encourage group members to have fun with this and be creative, and not to worry about strength labels being particularly clever or witty. There are no wrong answers here.

Step 4: Reflect

As a group, discuss the following:

- How was it to share your strength story with the group?
- How did it feel to hear the strength labels that others created for you?
- Was it easy or difficult to come up with strength labels (Step 3)?
- What have you learned about yourself from this exercise?

■ DAILY STRENGTHS AWARENESS

“What is necessary to change a person is to change his awareness of himself” is a famous quote by Abraham Maslow, one of the grandfathers of positive psychology. Strengths development requires a process of self-examination, reflection, and self-discovery. For a client to know and develop his/her strengths, he/she needs to look inward and become introspective. This exercise can be a valuable tool for enhancing self-knowledge in terms of strengths.

► GOAL

The goal of this exercise is to increase the client’s knowledge of his/her strengths by promoting daily introspection. During strengths-spotting interviews, clients are typically asked to reflect on past experiences. However, how accurate these experiences may seem, they are all reconstructions from memory. This exercise circumvents this problem by addressing experiences in real-time, in daily life. This is a straightforward way of getting to know one’s strengths.

► ADVICE

- Many clients have busy lives filled with routine activities. This exercise works best if a new routine is created. Clients may set their phone alarms at three random times throughout the day. These alarms require clients to pause for a moment and consider their current activity, their experiences, and possible strengths or weaknesses that are used during the activity.
- This activity is facilitated using introspection. Note that good introspection requires an open and honest attitude. Clients may experience resistance or a lack of energy when performing tasks that they feel they should like or should be good at (for instance because the task is a large part of their current job or role). This exercise requires clients to step beyond their beliefs and opinions about how they should be or should feel and start focusing on what is going on in terms of their experiences. It can be helpful to inform clients beforehand about the need for honest introspection and self-awareness when completing this exercise.

► REFERENCES

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► INSTRUCTIONS

Use the table on the next page to list activities that give you energy. Consider the following questions to guide you:

1. Record the date of the activity.
2. Briefly describe the activity. Make sure to write down activities that you performed/accomplished rather than emotions you felt due to someone else's actions (for example: don't write down "I felt happy for receiving positive feedback on my marketing presentation").
3. Write down what you experienced during the activity (emotions, feelings). Try to be specific when listing your experience and emotions. For example: "I felt happy and accomplished after presenting my new marketing campaign without stuttering" or "I was feeling dreadful when I realized that I had forgotten my sister's birthday." Avoid vague sentences such as: "I enjoyed going to the park with my family" or "I feel bad that my sister is upset."
4. Record the extent to which you enjoyed the activity.
5. Record the amount of energy that the activity provided.
6. List possible strength(s) that you were using during the activity.

■ RED AND GREEN ACTIVITIES

According to Linley (2008), a strength is “a pre-existing capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking or feeling that is authentic, energizing to the user, and enables optimal functioning, development and performance” (p. 9). In this definition, perhaps the most important characteristic of strengths is that they are energizing. Activities that rely on our strengths are enjoyable and feel as if our energy levels are being raised. While high performance can be the result of both strengths use and learned behavior, the experience of increased energy most often applies when using character strengths.

Moreover, the perceived amount of energy also provides information on weaknesses. According to Linley, Willars, & Biswas-Diener (2010), “Weaknesses are the things at which you both perform poorly and find de-energizing or draining. When weaknesses are used, they lead to feelings of negativity, disengagement, and lack of motivation” (p. 68). In this exercise, awareness of personal weaknesses and strengths is being increased by analyzing daily activities in terms of the energy levels that the client experiences.

► GOAL

The goal of this exercise is to increase the client’s awareness of activities that rely on his/her strengths or weaknesses. An advantage of this exercise is that it relies on daily reflection to increase the client’s awareness of strengths and weaknesses. Rather than relying on general post hoc reflections, daily reflection is often more specific and accurate.

► ADVICE

- To clarify the concept of energy, it is advisable to inform clients that we refer to mental energy here. Activities that allow clients to use their strengths may cause them to become physically tired but psychologically more energized than before.
- The current form of exercise requires clients to record activities for one week. However, the client may also decide to spread the reflections over a longer period. In any case, it is advisable to use multiple measurements because more measurements will provide more accurate and detailed information.
- Instead of using pen and paper, clients may also use an electronic device (e.g., a phone or tablet) to record their activities throughout the day.

► REFERENCES

- Linley, A. (2008). *Average to A+ : Realising strengths in yourself and others*. CAPP Press.
- Linley, A., Willars, J., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2010). *The strengths book*. CAPP Press.

► INSTRUCTIONS

Step 1: Introduction

A hallmark of strengths is “energy.” When we use our strengths, we feel energized and engaged. Activities that rely on our strengths are enjoyable and feel as if our energy levels are being raised.

In contrast, using weaknesses drains us. When we operate from our weaknesses, we feel negativity, disengagement, and lack of motivation. Activities that rely on our weaknesses feel as if our energy levels are being drained.

In this exercise, we call activities that rely on your strengths and provide you energy “green activities.” These are activities that:

- you genuinely enjoy doing
- make you feel energized
- make you forget the time
- you look forward to
- you can do well even under conditions of stress or fatigue

Activities that rely on your weaknesses and deplete your energy are referred to as “red activities.” These are activities that:

- you do not like doing
- make you feel depleted
- seem to pass very slowly
- you don’t look forward to
- require a lot of effort and self-control to do well

Step 2: Record Red and Green moments

During the upcoming week, record your “green” and “red” moments daily. Use the table in Appendix A. In the first column of this table, provide a brief description of the activity. In addition, indicate energy levels per activity by registering the extent to which the activity at hand enhanced energy or depleted energy. In the second column, put a sign next to each activity to indicate the change in energy level:

- required a lot of energy
- required some energy
- o did not require energy but did not give energy either
- + gave me positive energy
- ++ gave me a lot of positive energy

Step 3: Strengths reflection

After completing the reflections, closely examine your answers. Select the five activities that make you feel most energized and use the first column of the table in Appendix B, “My Top 5 Green Activities, “ to list them.

Next, use the second column of the table to indicate what strength(s) you may be using during each activity.

Step 4: Weakness reflection

Now do the same thing for the 5 activities that depleted your energy. Select the 5 activities that make you feel most depleted and use the first column of Appendix B, “My top 5 Red Activities,“ to list them.

Next, use the second column of the table to indicate, for each activity, which strengths you lack during this activity.

Step 5: Evaluation

What have you learned from this exercise?

How can you use your strengths more often?

How can you effectively deal with situations that deplete your energy? For instance, you can delegate your energy-draining areas to someone or reframe those tasks? Alternatively, you may marshal your strengths to help or build your energy ahead of time so that you have the baseline energy you need to get through an energy-draining task.

► **APPENDIX A: DAILY REFLECTION FORM**

Date:

Green activities		
Activity	Energy levels	Note

Red activities		
Activity	Energy levels	Note

► **APPENDIX B: MY TOP 5 ACTIVITIES - REFLECTION**

My Top 5 Green Activities	
Activities that make me feel most energized:	Strength(s) that I am using during these activities:
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

My Top 5 Red Activities	
Activities that make me feel most depleted:	Strength(s) that I am lacking during these activities:
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

■ A REFLECTED BEST SELF PORTRAIT

The Reflected Best Self Portrait (RBS Portrait) is a multi-step process wherein clients begin to understand and see themselves at their best based on the reflections from a diverse set of others, for instance, classmates, colleagues, friends, and family members. In this exercise, feedback is gathered in the form of short anecdotes about times when clients were at their best. Clients then look for patterns in this feedback to identify themes and construct an RBS Portrait. This RBS Portrait includes the core themes of the feedback and integrates them into a coherent narrative. Finally, clients create a personal development action plan inspired by the insights from this exercise.

Research shows that the RBS Portrait exercise helps build social resources by promoting the expression of love/attachment and kindness/generosity. The interpersonal interactions that allow people to learn more about their valued contributions also help people strengthen their social support, trust, intimacy, and feelings of being loved (Roberts, 2007).

► GOAL

In general, high-quality appreciative feedback is rare. Although our clients may have received occasional general positive feedback from others, they often lack receiving feedback on a deeper level, such as feedback that specifies what they did that made a meaningful difference. In addition, many clients do not actively seek this kind of information, as they may be unaware that a deeper level of feedback is possible, or they may not even know what questions to ask to elicit such feedback.

The main aim of the Reflected Best Self exercise is to give your clients a better understanding of their strengths to see which of these strengths are broadly useful in many different settings. This exercise offers a structural and systematic process for gathering data about your clients' best selves and assist them in creating a plan for effective growth and development.

► ADVICE

- This tool can be very valuable in the context of work. It can help clients identify their personal strengths and capabilities to add value to organizations. Moreover, the results can be used to create personal and career development plans and increase understanding of what work situations bring out the best in clients.
- It is important to keep in mind that an RBS Portrait is highly dynamic: it represents a continuously changing self-knowledge structure that is shaped and influenced by interactions with the social world. In other words, over time, the nature of the portrait is susceptible to change.

- The RBS Portrait is not about what your clients love, but what others love and/or value about your client. It provides insight into your clients' presence and their influence on others and their surroundings.
- Although the RBS Portrait can be used in (job) evaluations, it must be noted that it is not a standard performance feedback evaluation. The focus of traditional models of performance evaluation (such as 360-degree feedback and one-on-one performance appraisals) is typically on identifying performance deficits and competency gaps. Moreover, based on this deficit focus, the goal of these performance evaluations is to eliminate these gaps or overcome these weaknesses and limitations. In contrast, the RBS portrait focuses on strengths to create an agenda for their further use and development.
- For some clients, doing this exercise is difficult because the explicit focus on positive attributes can create uncomfortable feelings (clients often report that they feel like they are bragging or boasting). Moreover, many clients are used to seeking and valuing deficit-oriented feedback because they believe it helps them manage risks and learn and develop more effectively. The coach should make clients aware that the main goal of this tool is to explore ways to promote their development by focusing on their strengths rather than to generate overused, inflated, or insincere praise. Building on strengths allows for higher achievement and a stronger trajectory towards goals.
- Reading others' positive stories can elicit a great deal of (positive) emotions in clients. It is important to let clients know that it is very normal to be surprised by the positive views of others. Clients may wish to find a quiet time and space where they can be free from interruptions and can reflect fully on the feedback.
- Sharing and discussing the draft and/or final portraits with trusted others can provide a valuable opportunity for clients to gain even more insight into themselves.
- Clients should be aware that a better understanding of strengths that may result from this exercise does not mitigate their responsibility to know and manage their weaknesses.
- After reflecting on the feedback, clients may discover that it is easier to be the "best selves" in some contexts than in others. It can be useful to reflect on the (social) contexts that motivate your clients to be at their best. Clients may deliberately choose to focus more on these contexts. However, it should be noted that it is not always possible to choose one's surroundings, and it is unrealistic to expect that clients can always be at their best.
- Although the feedback of others plays an important role in this exercise, clients need to remember that such feedback reflects the perspectives of others and thus *their* version of reality rather than objective truth. Ultimately, making sense of the information is a matter of a personal standard. For instance, clients may notice that not all the strengths that people describe are important to them. Clients are always in charge of how the information is used.

► REFERENCES

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- Link: <http://webuser.bus.umich.edu/janedut/POS/best%20self%20from%20amr.pdf>

► INSTRUCTIONS

Exercise Objectives:

- Identify personal strengths (Part I)
- Leverage those strengths for success (Part II)
- Develop an action plan for growth (Part III)

Part I: Identify personal strengths

1. *Ask as many people as you need to receive thirty short stories describing you at your best.*
 - a. The stories can be from any aspects of life: work-related, personal experiences, achievements, and other aspects, as long as they represent you at your best.
 - b. You can collect stories in different ways. You could ask six people to provide five stories each, ten people to provide three stories each, etc. Although the number of stories provided by each person is not significant, at least three people should provide stories to obtain different perspectives.
 - c. Select people who will be honest, fair, and forthright.

Tip 1: The following are examples of people to potentially ask: family members, friends, colleagues, bosses, subordinates, clients, customers, landlord(s), teachers, mentors, teammates, financial advisors.

Tip 2: Review all your contacts to compile a list of people to ask: email contacts, Facebook friends, phone contacts, LinkedIn contacts, other social networking site contacts.

Tip 3: A template on the next page can be used to organize your contacts.

Family	e.g., mother(s), father(s), (step-)brother(s), (step-)sister(s), aunt(s), uncle(s), cousin(s), niece(s), nephew(s), grandmother(s), grandfather(s)			
Friends	e.g., teammate(s), best friend(s), classmate(s), childhood friend(s)			
Work	e.g., past colleague(s), current colleague(s), past boss(es), current boss(es), subordinate(s), client(s), customer(s)			
Education	e.g., professor(s), mentor(s), peer(s), roommate(s), faculty sponsor(s), club member(s)			
Other	e.g., landlord(s), financial advisor(s), volunteer group(s), neighbor(s)			

Tip 4: Draft a generic letter to send. An example is shown below.

Dear [name],

I hope all is well.

I am writing to ask for a quick favor. I am participating in an exercise that requires me to ask for stories of when I was at my best. Due to our experiences together [fill in the personal relationship here], I thought of you.

Would you mind providing me with one or two short stories, highlighting my top three strengths, by [date]? Please let me know either way.

Thank you in advance for your help!

All the best/ Love/ Warm Regards/ or Sincerely,

[Name]

2. *Write three of your own strength stories.*

Specify:

- What your role was in each story
- What happened/the context of each story
- What actions were taken
- The reasons behind the actions that were taken

See below an example of a story:

“I was at my best when I went to the gym four out of five workdays per week. When I went to the gym first thing in the morning consistently, I noticed that I started the day on the right foot and felt energized to have a great day. I also noticed that I was increasingly motivated: the more I worked out, the stronger I became, which led to heavier weights and longer runs. As I got in shape and looked and felt the way that I had always imagined, I became happier, more confident, and increasingly self-assured.”

3. *Upon receiving all strengths stories, take time to read and reflect on each one individually.*

For each story, answer the questions below (if applicable)

- How does each story describe you?
- What actions did you take?
- What strengths were portrayed?

Tip 5: A template on the next page can be used to organize your stories.

Author	Insights	Top 3 strengths
1.		1. 2. 3.
2.		1. 2. 3.
3.		1. 2. 3.
4.		1. 2. 3.
5.		1. 2. 3.
6.		1. 2. 3.

Author	Insights	Top 3 strengths
7.		1. 2. 3.
8.		1. 2. 3.
9.		1. 2. 3.
10.		1. 2. 3.
11.		1. 2. 3.
12.		1. 2. 3.

Author	Insights	Top 3 strengths
13.		1. 2. 3.
14.		1. 2. 3.
15.		1. 2. 3.
16.		1. 2. 3.
17.		1. 2. 3.
18.		1. 2. 3.

Author	Insights	Top 3 strengths
19.		1. 2. 3.
20.		1. 2. 3.
21.		1. 2. 3.
22.		1. 2. 3.
23.		1. 2. 3.
24.		1. 2. 3.

Author	Insights	Top 3 strengths
25.		1. 2. 3.
26.		1. 2. 3.
27.		1. 2. 3.
28.		1. 2. 3.
29.		1. 2. 3.
30.		1. 2. 3.

My story	Insights	Top 3 strengths
1.		1. 2. 3.
2.		1. 2. 3.
3.		1. 2. 3.

4. *Identify high-level patterns and themes from all stories.*

Tip 6: “Patterns” are frequently recurring behaviors, actions, etc. Patterns can be found by looking for verbs, adjectives, and nouns within stories.

Tip 7: “Themes” are typically about your values and beliefs. Values are things you consider to be important in life. Beliefs are viewpoints and ideas that characterize you.

Tip 8: If it is helpful, have a willing best friend or family member read your strength stories to see if they notice other patterns or themes.

5. *Create self-declarations from your identified patterns and themes.*

For example, a theme in the sample self-story (from step two above) is persistence. The declaration may be “I believe in myself to stay in shape and take action to do so.” Three specific examples from other stories relating to “persistence” might then also be identified.

Tip 9: A template on the following page can be used to construct self-declarations.

Pattern or theme	Declaration	Examples from stories

6. *Compile findings and create an RBS Portrait.*

Your RBS Portrait can be in written form, PowerPoint presentation, pictorial representation, quotes, video, etc. The way you present your strengths is entirely up to you. The sky is the limit. To make the best use of your RBS Portrait:

- It should be in a format that allows you to refer to it at some point in the future.
- It should synthesize patterns and themes in a cohesive manner that is meaningful and important to you.

Part II: Leverage those strengths for success

In the second half of this exercise, the following four points are addressed:

- a. Apply the insights and information gained from the RBS Portrait to enhance your quality of life
- b. Incorporate the strengths noted in the RBS Portrait into career and relationships
- c. Identify contexts where strengths come naturally
- d. Identify ways to manage opportunities for growth

1. *Review your RBS Portrait, as well as all the stories, patterns, and themes identified in Part I, considering both what helped and/or what hindered you in being your best within each story.*

Three ways in which you could have been helped or hindered include:

- Personally: By your attitudes, beliefs, or actions taken
- Relationally: By your relationships with others
- Situationally: By the context of your setting

Tip 10: A template on the next page that includes an example can be used to organize what was helpful and what got in the way of being your best self.

Helped	Hindered	Type (Personally, Relationally, Situational)
I am consistent in the routines that I set for myself.	n/a	Personal
People are there to support me when I overcome an obstacle.	n/a	Relational
When in a stressful meeting, I can remain calm and composed, which helps the team.	n/a	Situational
n/a	I have a challenging time communicating with my boss about what I need to be successful.	Personal
n/a	I have a hard time connecting with very excitable people; their energy is overwhelming.	Relational
n/a	I have a hard time staying focused at work when there is noise in the background. Staying focused, in general, is a challenge.	Situational

Helped	Hindered	Type <i>(Personally, Relationally, Situational)</i>

Part III: Develop an action plan for growth

1. Create an action plan.

After identifying the strengths and factors that help and hinder you in the use and expression of these strengths, the insights and knowledge gained can be used for further growth and development. The next step involves identifying how this can be achieved.

Two steps in creating your action plan include:

The Vision: Think of the actions that you will want to take moving forward by reflecting on your strength stories, your strength profile, factors that help you, and factors that hinder you.

- What actions can be taken to enhance your strengths?
- What actions can be taken to work around or manage factors that hinder you?
- In what ways can you further improve the best version of you?

Action: Think of ways to bring your intended actions to life.

- How will you know when progress has been made?
- How will your progress be tracked?
- What resources* are needed to take action?
- How will you develop or obtain these resources?

Your action plan can be in any form, written, PowerPoint presentation, through pictures, quotes, videos, etc. Calendar reminders on your phone may be helpful. How you create your action plan is entirely up to you; it is yours to create and yours to achieve.

**Note that resources could be money, but resources could also be personal (e.g., courage) or interpersonal (e.g., spousal support or time at work). For example, you may team up with a person who is already effectively using the strengths you would like to develop yourself.*

■ THE STRENGTHS OF INSPIRATIONAL PEOPLE

Inspirational means “offering something valuable or uplifting to motivate others to bring out the best in themselves.” We all know people who inspire us. When we look at them, we may find courage or become motivated. They are the living proof that a human being can overcome anything, or maybe they just show us that it is ok to be who you are. Inspirational people come in many different forms and sizes. What they all share is one or more strengths that are very pronounced.

► GOAL

This exercise has several goals. The first goal is to learn to look at others, especially those who are inspirational, through a lens of strengths. The more we become accustomed to “looking through the lens of strengths,” the easier and more natural the process becomes. This exercise can be a beneficial way to start cultivating a strengths perspective in teams. The second goal is to analyze why a person is considered inspiring. Why does someone choose a particular person? The choices people make in this exercise often reveal personal preferences or wishes. Perhaps they consider the strengths of the chosen person as important. Perhaps they would like to develop the same strengths as the person that inspires them. The personal nature of this part of the exercise can also be beneficial in terms of team building.

► ADVICE

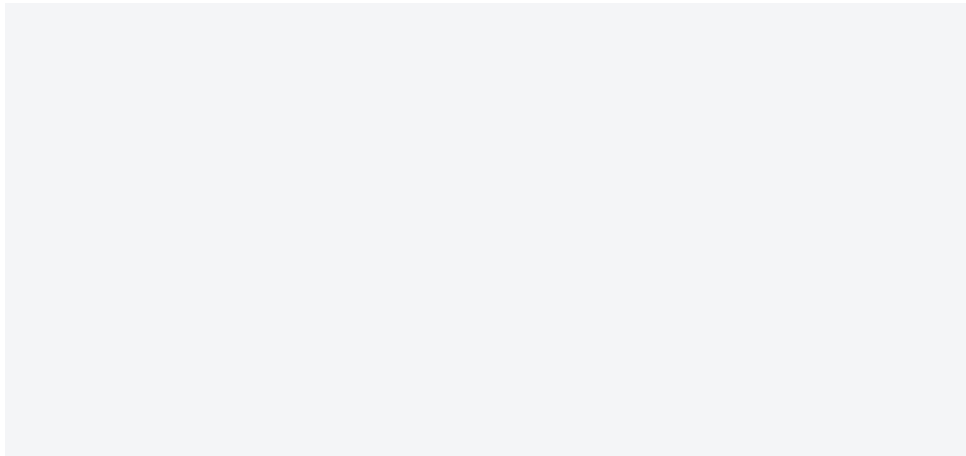
- It can be helpful to define the underlying meaning of inspiring. A person can be inspirational because he/she has been successful in terms of achievements. Alternatively, a person may have a valuable perspective on life that is considered valuable or is in line with values that are believed to be important. Sharing a personal example first may be helpful. This not only helps clarify the goal of the exercise but also decreases the psychological distance between you and the client.
- When groups are too large and/or time is too restricted to permit individual sharing in front of the entire group, it is also possible to ask people to team up and discuss this exercise in couples. Afterward, couples can share their experiences with all group members.

► REFERENCES

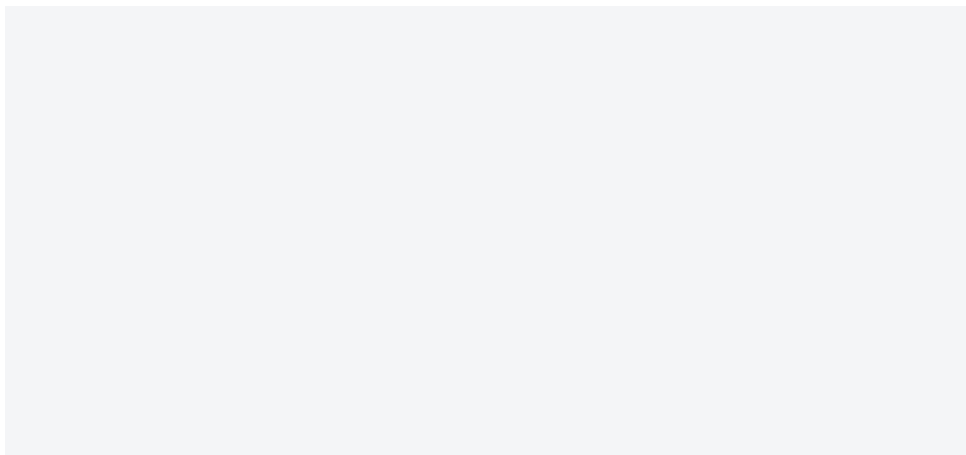
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► INSTRUCTIONS

Think of a person who inspires you. You do not necessarily need to know him/her in person. It can be a famous writer, your neighbor, a movie star, or fictitious character in a book. In your own words, describe the characteristics that a person possesses that make him/her inspiring to you. Below, write the strengths that this person possesses that makes him/her inspiring.



Consider the strengths that you have mentioned in the first part of this exercise. Can you, in some way, relate to these strengths? For instance, are those strengths important to you? Do you think you possess (some of) these strengths as well? Would you like to develop these strengths yourself?



■ THE BENEFITS OF STRENGTHS

Step 1

Ask the other person to select one strength to work with in this exercise.

Strength:

Step 2

Now ask the other person to consider the benefits of using this strength.

How does this strength help you? (what are the benefits, which values are being realised when using this strength?)

How does using this strength help others? (How do other people benefit when you are using this strength?)

■ STRENGTH REGULATION

Our strengths reflect our capacity for thinking, feeling, and behaving in ways that facilitate the pursuit of valued outcomes (Linley & Harrington, 2007). The comprehensive study of strengths is a new initiative for psychological research and hallmark of the positive psychology movement. Examples of strengths include curiosity, kindness, fairness, perseverance, humility, and hope.

According to Niemiec (2014), strengths can be underused or overused, and this misuse leads to negative functioning and psychopathology. Niemiec suggested finding a balance between the underuse and overuse of one's strengths to achieve their optimal use (Niemiec, 2014). Optimal strength use is also referred to as the "golden mean," and one achieves the golden mean through strength regulation.

Our context and needs at a given moment in time influence our ability to use our strengths optimally. For example, your best friend asking you if you like her wedding dress moments before she walks down the aisle may require you to "dial down" your strength "honesty" and dial-up your strength "kindness." In this way, strength use can be compared to a volume control knob on a stereo, rather than an on/off switch. This exercise invites clients to examine times in their life where they misused a personal strength and what happened because of this. Clients are also asked to indicate visually, using the metaphor of a volume dial, the extent to which they misused the strength. Clients then examine a personal (or hypothetical) example of when they used this same strength optimally.

► GOAL

The goal of this tool is to help clients become aware of the consequences of underusing and overusing strengths and to examine the optimal use of strength. As such, this exercise offers a nice starting point for creating plans to increase or optimize strength use.

► ADVICE

- Be aware that clients may have difficulty recalling a time in their life when they used their given strength optimally (Step 4). If this occurs, practitioners should help clients devise a hypothetical example of using this strength optimally in everyday life. It is important to keep the hypothetical example simple, realistic, and achievable, so as not to overwhelm the client or make him/her think that optimal use is unfeasible. The client can then use the insight gained from this hypothetical example to try to regulate his/her strength use to the optimal level in the future.

- Clients may benefit from taking home a few blank copies of this exercise so that they can continue to monitor the extent to which they are regulating their strengths in daily life.
- A prerequisite for this exercise is for the client to know at least one of their strengths. The following tools in the Toolkit can be used to identify client strengths: 30 Strength Spotting Questions, 5 Kinds of Strengths Questions, and The VIA Classification of Character Strengths & Virtues.

► REFERENCES

- Linley, P. A., Maltby, J., Wood, A. M., Joseph, S., Harrington, S., Peterson, C., ... & Seligman, M. E. (2007). Character strengths in the United Kingdom: The VIA inventory of strengths. *Personality and individual differences*, 43(2), 341-351.
- Niemiec, R. M. (2014). *Mindfulness and character strengths: A practical guide to flourishing*. Hogrefe

► INTRODUCTION

The best way to play to our strengths in day-to-day life is to manage the way we use them mindfully because sometimes, overplaying or underplaying a strength can lead to problems. Take, for example, your best friend asking you whether you think her wedding dress is pretty moments before she walks down the aisle. At this moment, if you happened to dislike the dress, overplaying your strength “honesty” could have dire consequences. You (as well as your best friend) would benefit most from regulating your ‘honesty’ at this moment.

Like the volume knob on a stereo, playing to your strengths can be dialed up and dialed down for the best result in a given situation. In this exercise, you will choose a personal strength and explore the consequences of overplaying (i.e., dialing up) and underplaying (i.e., dialing down) this strength in a particular context. You will then explore what it would be like (and what the outcome would be) to use this strength in an optimal way (i.e., to set the volume at the perfect level).

► INSTRUCTIONS

Step 1: Select a strength

First, select a personal strength for this exercise. You might like to choose one of your strengths that you wish to use more of or that you know you tend to underuse or overuse in your life (e.g., honesty, creativity, perseverance).

My strength:

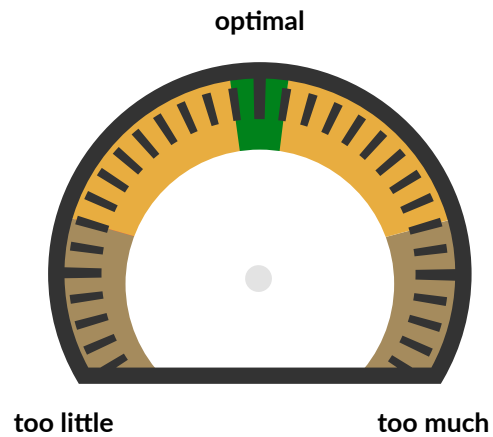
Step 2: Overplaying the strength

Can you think of an example when you overplayed this strength?

What did you do (i.e., what did overplaying this strength look like)?

What were the consequences?

In the illustration below, draw an arrow on the dial to indicate the extent to which you were overusing your strength (an example is shown in Appendix):



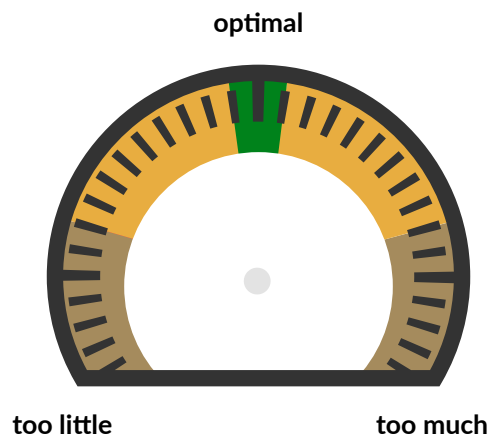
Step 3: Underplaying the strength

Can you think of an example when you underplayed this strength?

What did you do (i.e., what did underplaying this strength look like)?

What were the consequences?

Draw an arrow on the dial to indicate the extent to which you were underusing your strength in this situation:

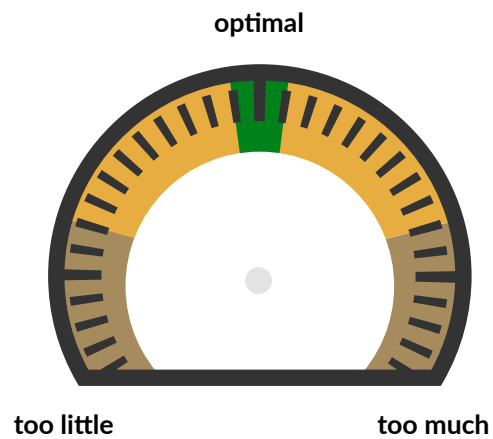


Step 4: Optimal use of the strength

Can you think of an example when you used this strength optimally? If not, what would the optimal use of this strength look like?

What was/would be the outcome?

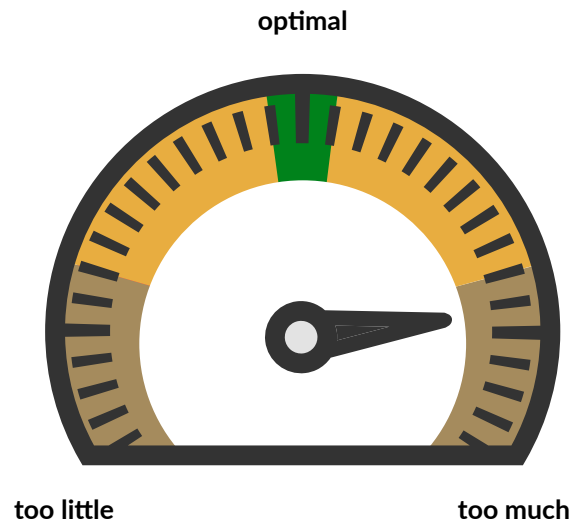
Draw an arrow on the dial to indicate the extent to which you used or would use your strength optimally at this time:



Step 5: Reflection

1. Do you tend to misuse this strength in your day-to-day life? If so, is your tendency to overuse or underuse it?
2. What triggers you to misuse this strength?
3. What could you do to use this strength more optimally in the future?

► **APPENDIX: A GRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF STRENGTH OVERUSE**



■ THE STRENGTHS WHEEL

After a client is aware of his strengths and the way they are manifested in his or her life, the next step is to explore ways to optimize strength use. To optimize strength use, it is important to become aware of the potential for growth in a given context. Individuals may have enough room and opportunities to use some strengths more frequently and/or more intensely compared to others. On the other hand, individuals may experience certain limitations that may prevent them from using some strengths more. The present exercise can be a valuable tool for gaining access to this information.

▶ GOAL

The goal of this exercise is to create a graphical representation of the potential use of the existing strengths that could be used more or less frequently. The advantage of using this approach is that a client can immediately see what strengths are used too little or too much. In addition, this exercise offers a nice starting point for creating plans to increase or optimize strengths use.

▶ ADVICE

- Clients' indications of the extent to which they currently use certain strengths and the room they believe that exists for using the strength more is subjective.
- For clients, it would be beneficial to receive a copy of this exercise. For instance, they can use it to discuss and explore possibilities with other people who may be involved in the context at hand (e.g., their employer).

▶ REFERENCES

- Driver, M. (2011). *Coaching positively - Lessons for coaches from positive psychology*. Open University Press/McGraw Hill.

► INSTRUCTIONS

After identifying your clients' strengths, it can be helpful to investigate whether there is room to use those strengths more often. The Strengths Circle on Page 71 can be used to make a graphical representation of the extent to which strengths are used (current use) and the room that exists to use the strengths more (scope). The center of the circle represents a score of '0' and the outer rim, a score of '10'. The circle has 5 segments. In each segment, ask the client to place two marks indicating (1) to what extent, from 0 to 10, they currently use that strength in the chosen context (e.g., work); and (2) how much scope, from 0 to 10, there is for using that strength more in that context. Next, draw create a triangle that connects the two marks. The bigger the gap between the current use and the scope, the bigger the triangle should be, indicating the more potential for using that strength more.

Example

On page 70, you will find an example of a completed graph. In this graph, it becomes immediately obvious that the chosen context (work) is far from ideal for expressing and building the strengths of social intelligence and leadership. This is indicated by the small arrows close to the core of the circle. These arrows indicate that the current strength is not used much and that there is not much potential for growth. Often, when this pattern applies to three or more strengths, it is highly likely that the current context of the client is far from ideal. These patterns are often visible for clients who do not like their jobs. It can be both an eye-opening and confronting experience for clients to plot their strengths in this way.

What is more visible in the graph is that gratitude and love of learning represent areas of growth. Both areas are used to a certain extent, but there is ample room for using them more, as indicated by the bigger grey triangles.

Finally, in this graph, one arrow points in the opposite direction. Some strengths may be overused in a given context. In the case of this client, it seems that he may use humor too much in the workplace. Although humor has been associated with many benefits [such as more active coping styles (Lazarus, 1966; Janis, 1958) and optimism (Carver et al., 1993)], when overplayed, it can become a weakness. Note that this applies to all strengths; every strength that is used too much or used in the wrong context loses its adaptive value. As indicated by the grey arrow that points towards the center of the circle, it appears that humor is used a lot by the client, but the scope is not that big. In this case, it is important to manage this strength by using it appropriately according to the situation and context.

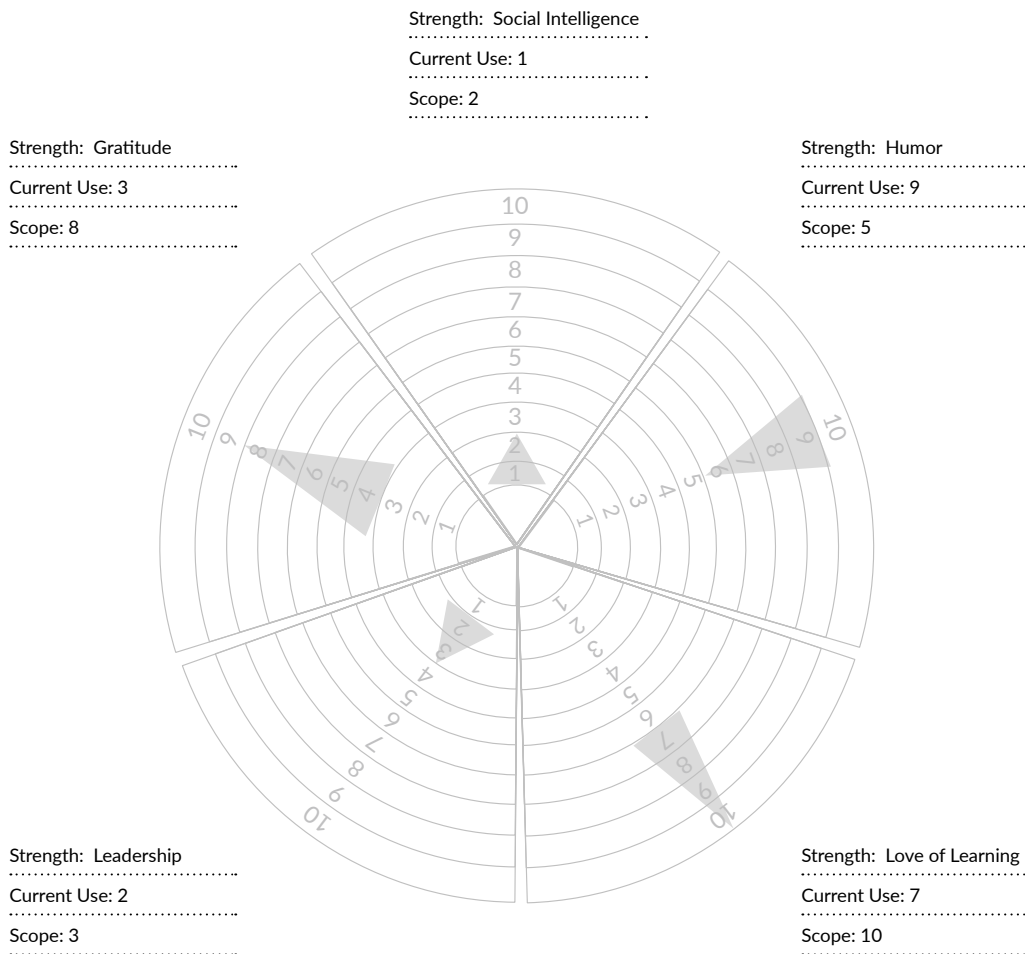
Evaluation

As noted before, this exercise provides a good starting point for creating a plan to optimize strengths use. Here are some questions that you can ask your client when the graph is completed:

- What do you notice when you look at the graph?
- Overall, how would you consider your strengths to be useful in this context?
- Which strengths could be used more?
- Which strengths leave little or no room for expansion?
- What could you do to start using your strengths more in this context?

Example completed Strengths Wheel

Context: **Work**

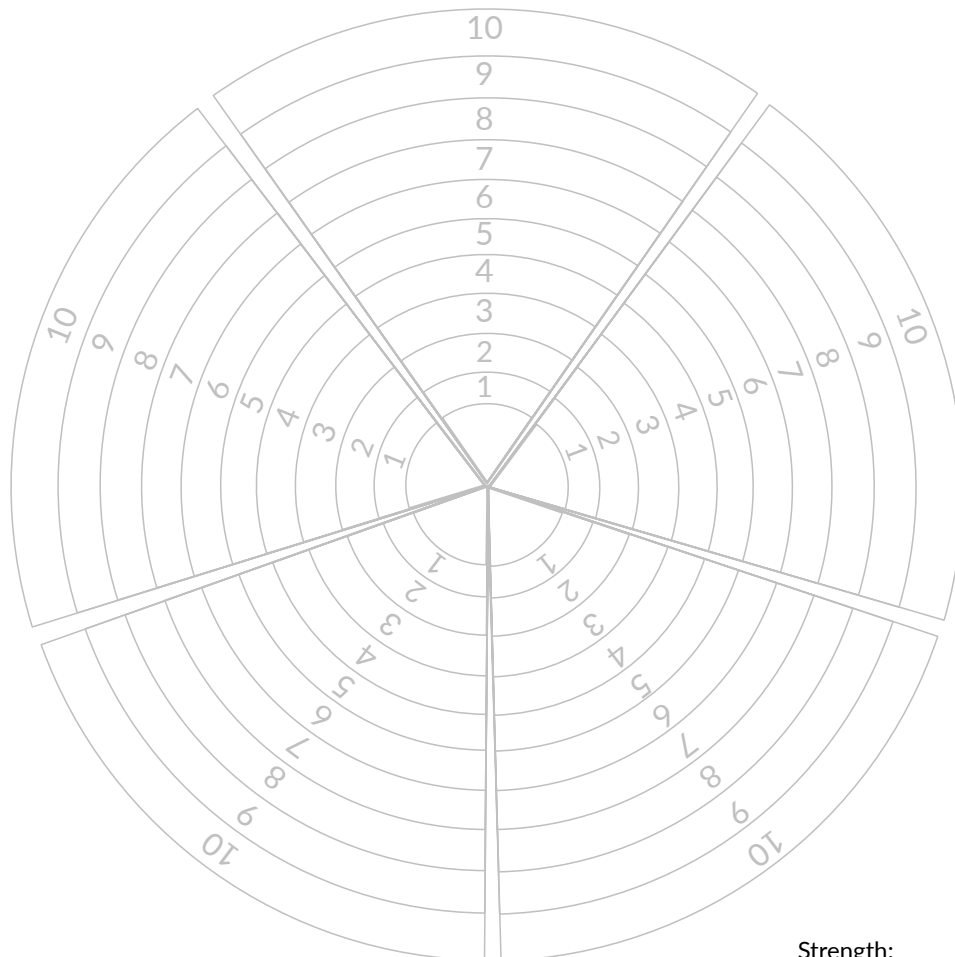


Context:

Strength:
Current Use:
Scope:

Strength:
Current Use:
Scope:

Strength:
Current Use:
Scope:



Strength:
Current Use:
Scope:

Strength:
Current Use:
Scope:

■ INWARD AND OUTWARD STRENGTH EXPRESSION

At our very core, we each have our own set of strengths. Strengths are things at which we are naturally good and thrive in using. Strengths have been defined as positive, trait-like capacities for thinking, feeling, and behaving in ways that benefit oneself and others (Niemiec, 2013).

In general, it is possible to distinguish between inward and outward strength use. Specifically, outward strength use is the extent to which an individual expresses a given strength toward others while inward strength use is the extent to which an individual expresses this strength toward him- or herself. For example, a mother may express her strength ‘generosity’ outwardly, to others, by spending much of her time and energy caring for her family. However, she may also express ‘generosity’ inwardly, to herself, by allowing herself to have a weekly massage.

It is important to consider the extent to which an individual expresses his or her strengths inwardly versus outwardly due to discrepancies between the inward and outward strength use. For example, a person may be ‘honest’ with other people but dishonest with him/herself; he/she may be dissatisfied at work and unhappy in his/her marriage, but chooses to ignore or suppress these negative thoughts and feelings. Another example might be a person who tends to be very ‘forgiving’ of others for their transgressions, but not at all forgiving of herself. By understanding the scope of one’s strength use (that is, the extent to which they use a given strength inwardly *and* outwardly), one can address such discrepancies to increase strength expression and subsequently well-being.

► GOAL

The goal of this tool is to help people examine the extent to which they express a given social strength outward (to others) and inwardly (to themselves) to identify and address discrepancies between these types of strength use.

► ADVICE

- This exercise can be repeated with multiple strengths; simply print out multiple copies of Appendix A for clients.
- It is important to note that not all strengths are suitable for this exercise, as not all strengths can be expressed both inwardly and outwardly. For this exercise, help clients choose the so-called ‘social strengths,’ which are strengths that can be expressed to both oneself and others. Appendix A provides a list of suitable social strengths.

► REFERENCES

- Niemiec, R. M. (2013). *Mindfulness and character strengths*. Hogrefe Publishing.
- Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. American Psychological Association and Oxford University Press.

► INSTRUCTIONS

This exercise involves looking at your ‘social strengths,’ which are things that you do well involving other people, like being fair, forgiving, or generous, and then exploring the degree to which you apply such strengths *to yourself*.

Step 1: Identify a social strength

Consider one of your ‘social’ strengths. Remember that social strengths are things that you do well involving other people, like fairness, forgiveness, and generosity. Reflect on yourself for a moment and think about what you do well in terms of your relationships. For instance, are you a good listener? Are you generous with your time? Are you open to different views and opinions? Are you forgiving? You might like to think about what friends and family have complimented you for in the past. Or, you might like to look at our list of social strengths (Appendix B) to guide you. In the figure displayed in Appendix A, write down your social strength at the top of the middle column under “strength.”

Step 2: Identify outward use of social strength

How do you typically express this strength (Step 1) in your daily life? What is it that you say and do to demonstrate this strength in the context of your social relationships? Examples of this ‘outward’ strength use include putting aside your plans when friends call you to discuss personal problems, demonstrating the strength ‘altruism,’ or offering to babysit for friends and family, demonstrating the strength ‘generosity.’ In Appendix A, write down how you use this strength with others under the heading ‘Outward (to others).’

Step 3: Identify inward use of social strength

Now let us consider this social strength in a different context, that is, to what degree do you apply this strength *to yourself*? Examples of this 'inward' strength use include regularly buying yourself things you love, demonstrating the strength 'generosity,' or letting yourself off the hook for a past mistake, demonstrating the strength 'forgiveness.' Write down as many examples of how you typically apply this social strength to yourself in the figure below under 'Inward (to yourself).'

Step 4: Compare inward and outward strength expression

Compare your answers to steps 2 and 3: In general, do you express this more outwardly (toward others) than inwardly (toward yourself) or vice versa? For instance, do you tend to show 'kindness' more naturally and more frequently to your friends or family than to yourself? Indicate any discrepancies between the extent to which you apply this strength to others/yourself in the middle column by simply checking the box to indicate greater inward or outward use.

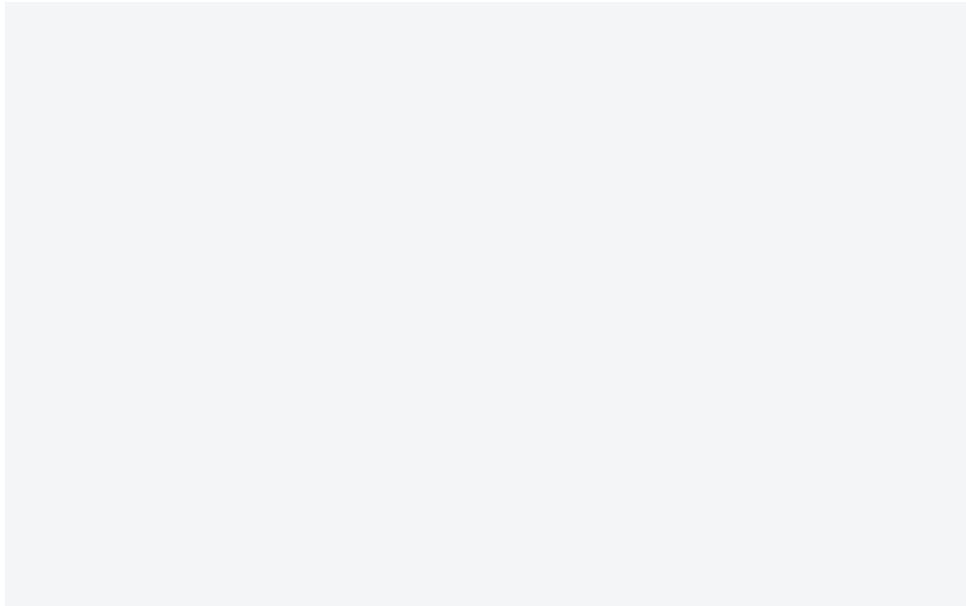
Step 5: Analyze the reason(s) for the discrepancy

If you checked the 'Balanced' box and thus found no discrepancy between your inward and outward strength use, you are doing well to express this strength of yours both to others and yourself. Well done! You may finish the exercise here.

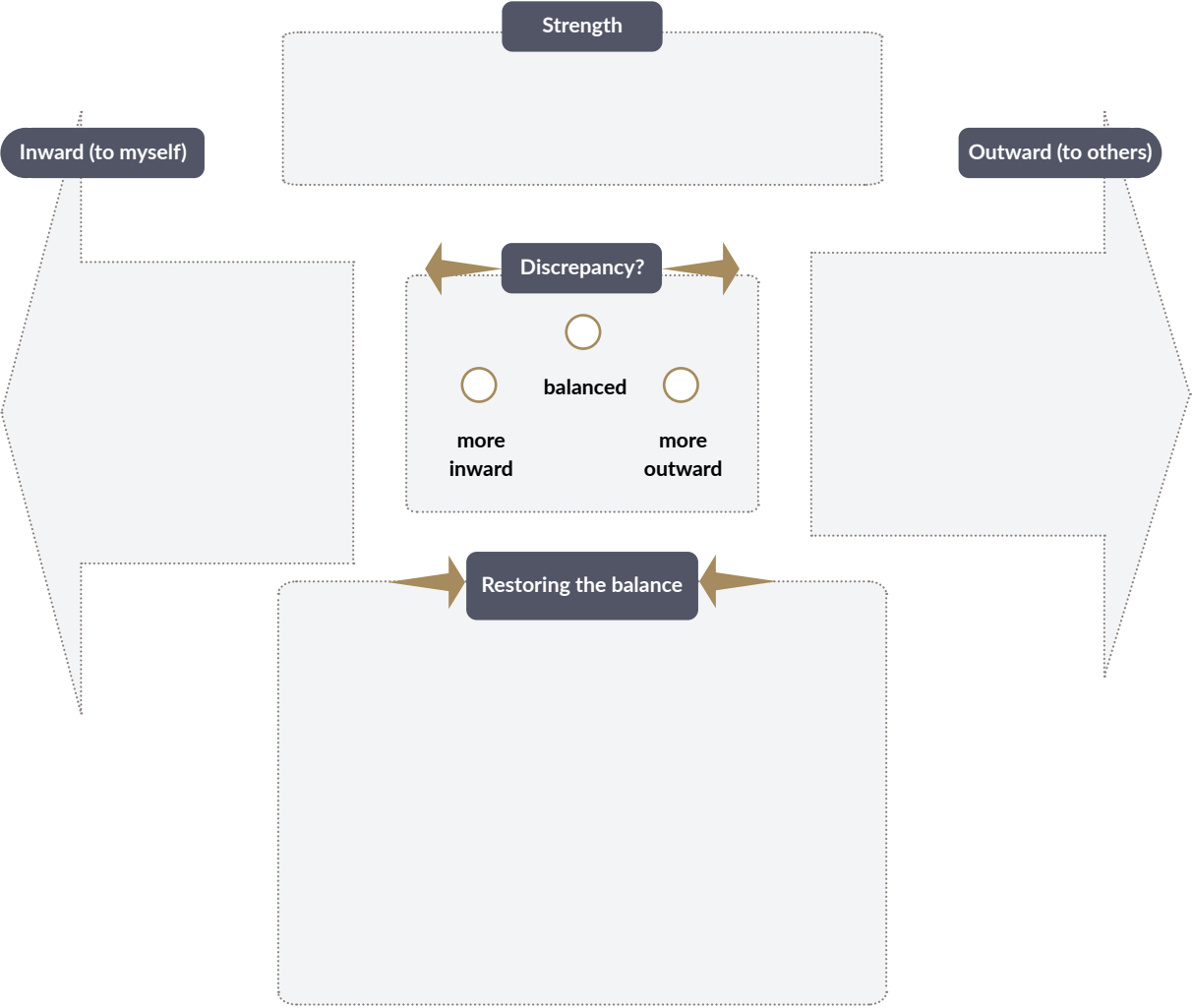
If you identified a discrepancy in the previous step, take a moment to consider possible underlying reasons for this difference. Ask yourself *why* you tend to apply this strength more to others than yourself (or vice versa). Perhaps this is something that you saw your mother or father do growing up, or maybe you hold a rule or belief about this? For example, if you tend to apply your strength 'generosity' more to your children than to yourself, you may recall that as a child, your mother did the very same thing, always putting you and your siblings before herself. Alternatively, you may explain the very same discrepancy by the fact that your mother was not at all generous with you as a child, which has to lead you to overcompensate for this and be very generous with your children. Or perhaps you hold some rule of belief about this strength, such as "I always have to be kind" or "I should always be humble." Or, perhaps, there are difficult emotions that emerge when you apply a given strength to yourself. Take a moment to work through each strength use discrepancy and write down as many potential reasons as you can think of underneath the arrows in appendix A.

Step 6: Restore the balance

Think of at least three actions you can take to restore the balance between your inward and outward use of this strength so that you are applying this strength relatively equally between yourself and others.



► APPENDIX A: INWARD VERSUS OUTWARD STRENGTH USE



► APPENDIX B: LIST OF SOCIAL STRENGTHS

Acceptance	Interest
Altruism	Kindness
Authenticity	Listening
Care	Love
Compassion	Open to experiences
Fairness	Openness
Forgiveness	Patience
Generosity	Respect
Helpful	Team-player
Honesty	Thoughtfulness
Humor	Trusting