

THE 3-CIRCLES OF THE STRENGTHS REVOLUTION

Foreword to AI Practitioner's Special Issue on Strengths-Based Organizations

– David L. Cooperrider

To appreciate the magnitude of strengths revolution is to appreciate possibilities such as these:

Imagine what would happen to you if you had the ability to consistently see, and connect with, every strength—every one of the capacities—inherent in the world around you; or to see every positive potential in your son or daughter; or, like Michelangelo, the intellectual ability to sense the towering, historic figure of David “already existing” in the huge slab of marble—even before the reality.

Imagine settings—organizations, communities, businesses—designed not only to obsessively notice and employ each partner’s most valued strengths every day, but settings that are also designed to connect and magnify the reverberating strengths of the whole, much like a terrific fusion-energy explosion that leads to the birth of new stars.

Imagine even further the world thirty years from now and consider the following scenario for the economy and ecology of organizations: its’ a bright-green restorative economy that purifies the air we breathe; it’s a system that has eliminated the concept of waste and toxic byproduct; extreme poverty has been eradicated through prosperity; it is powered through solar and renewable energy innovations; it is a system that has united the strengths of markets with the power of universal ideals, where positive incentives have been aligned with the long-term social good (thus, it has virtually eliminated “perverse incentives”); it is a globally inclusive system that respects and replenishes the health of people, diverse communities and the wealth of nature; and it is all built in and through institutions that are widely trusted as *positive institutions*—workplaces that elevate, magnify, and refract our highest human strengths (wisdom, courage, humanity, compassion, inspiration, creativity, freedom, hope, joy, integrity, love and meaning) into the world.

This, in a brief few paragraphs, is what the 3-Circles of the strengths revolution are all about. Take a look at it now; it’s a model I want to come back to and elaborate on.

Figure 1: Three Circles for Understanding the Strengths Revolution and the Design of Strengths-based Organizations



In this special issue of the *AI Practitioner* edited by Bernard Mohr and... the authors propel us forward to the next major question in the strengths revolution: What does it mean to design not just strengths-based interventions—for example appreciative inquiry coaching, or strength-finder and VIA surveys, or appreciative inquiry summits—but what does it mean to discover and design enduring strength-based organizations and institutions capable of embedding a strengths-based focus into everything they do?

It's almost hard to believe that there was ever a time when we were *not* focused on strengths as "the real stuff" of leadership, strategic management, and the positive material for igniting change. I look back now at the industrial-era's deficiency focus—not just the field of management but literally all the "helping" professions—and it almost looks like a giant caricature now.

It was just a few short years ago when Marty Seligman, for example, noticed that out of 44,000 published articles in the professional journals of psychology more than 99% of those articles were focused on human deficiencies of all kinds—depression, anger, fear, co-dependency, substance abuse, schizophrenia and the like. Only 1% (about 400 out of the 44,000 articles at the time) had to do with human strengths such as hope, inspiration, joy, wisdom, courage, and human flourishing. "Working exclusively on personal weakness and on damaged brains" wrote Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi in the 2000 millennium issue of *American Psychologist*, "has rendered science poorly equipped...Psychologists need now to call for massive research on human strengths and virtues."

The implicit theory of change, of course, was one of recovery. It's a simple theory that says change is all about correctly diagnosing the problem and moving from a 2 to 0 – as distinct, for instance, from a theory that says positive transformation can accelerate development from a +2 to +20 and then perhaps leap to a + 80. The same deficit-based management model obviously holds its grip in many other domains as well. In our big city newspapers it's now been well documented by Harvard's Sisela Bok, that 90% of the front-page headlines are focused on the very worst, not the courageous best, in the world. In business management too, for example Gallop Poll surveys *still* show, that people have several times more potential for growth when they invest energy in developing their strengths instead of correcting their deficiencies, and that they are six times as likely to be invested and engaged in their jobs when they *do* have the opportunity to focus on their strengths—yet in spite of all this evidence, fewer than two out of ten of us get to play to our strengths most of the time (Buckingham, 2009; Rath, 2007) . It's staggering: 80% of the people—workers and managers alike—report and feel that their strengths are institutionally *underappreciated*, not noticed, and not put into play every day in their work. Somehow it's a continuing mantra. In surveys of communities, families, corporations, and governments alike the conclusion continues to be "let's fix what's wrong and let the strengths will take care of themselves." Think about your own experiences for a moment, and the grip of the problematic. Think about the last seven projects you've worked on and the last dozen organizational meetings you've attended. How many of those projects were designed to "fix" something? How many of the meetings were called to address "the problem of...?"

In his recent best seller, Marcus Buckingham takes note of the strengths movement as a wave of change that, over the past ten years, has the potential to sweep us all forward. Buckingham (2008) writes:

"It's hard to say when the strengths movement began. Some will identify Peter Drucker as the first mover, citing his seminal 1966 book, *The Effective Executive*...Some will trace it back to a 1987 article (by David Cooperrider and

Suresh Srivastva) which launched a new discipline called *Appreciative Inquiry*...Some will point to Martin Seligman's 1999 speech on becoming the president of the American Psychological Association (launching the positive psychology movement)...More recently, some might even reference the book I wrote with Donald Clifton, *Now Discover Your Strengths*."

But the bottom-line conclusion for Buckingham?

It's true, he argues, that the strengths movement has been launched in earnest. But we have scarcely just begun. The evidence of how it works better than deficit-based perspectives is now pouring in. The theoretical groundwork is there, for example the proposition that a person, or an organization, will excel only by amplifying strengths, never by fixing weaknesses. Indeed it sounds good. But such lofty vision now needs to be matched by what and how we teach, the tools and practices needed to pragmatically enact strengths-based management, and by *the design of strengths-based organizations*.

Going back to figure-one and our opening three paragraphs—about Michelangelo's ability to see the David already inside the mass of marble; then about the need not to just see strengths everywhere but to have the tools to combine and magnify (like fusion energy) connected strengths; and thirdly, to organizationally extend and refract our highest human strengths out into the world—these are what this special issue is all about and here is a compass definition:

Strength-based organizations are *organizations, including groups, families, and communities, explicitly designed and managed for the elevation of strengths, the combination and magnification of strengths, and ultimately, the amplified refraction of our highest human strengths outward into the world.*

What do I like most about this whole special issue and its topic? In a word it is an exciting "invitation" to unite across disciplines, levels of analysis, and fields. It's an invitation to unite everything we have discovered about (1) the **elevation** of human strengths: positive psychology, appreciative intelligence, strengths-finder tools, and the amazing VIA inventory of strengths; (2) the **alignment and magnification** of connected collective strengths: e.g. Peter Drucker's leadership principles, whole-system strength magnifiers such as large group Appreciative Inquiry Summits and Future Search methods, insights about strength-amplifying and innovation-amplifying nets and webs, and finally (3) the organizational magnification and **refraction** of our higher human strengths outward building better worlds and societies. Elevation, magnification, and refraction—these are the three circles for a strengths revolution 2.0.

As the authors of this volume show—they all are great theory/practice professionals— it all begins and ends with a special spirit of inquiry: where do we see strengths-based organizations at their life-generating best—and what can we learn about peak performance? What do strengths-based organizations really look like and precisely how are they designed? When and how do they create new and better value? And why now? Why when we look at the world, the universe of strengths we hold in our hands, and the call of our time, why do we need strengths-based organizations now?