Strengths Management, Realistic Optimism, and Impressions Management for Managers

Dr. David Bartz
Professor Emeritus
Department of Educational Leadership
Eastern Illinois University
Charleston, IL

Dallas T. Bartz, Juris Doctor
Dickson, Francissen, & Bartz, LLP
Aurora, IL

Abstract

Managers need to be astute and consciously focus on how to manage themselves to “be their best.” Positive psychology components of strengths management, realistic optimism, and impressions management provide managers with skills that enhance productivity and increase job satisfaction. Strengths management means managers consistently use their strengths. It also means they avoid the use of their weaknesses to the extent possible and do not waste time trying to improve them. Realistic optimism refers to managers being hopeful and motivated within the scope and limitations of plausible possibilities for goal achievement. Impressions management means intentionally focusing on persuading and influencing others, usually via face-to-face interactions, to view the manager’s way of thinking and lend support and resources for the manager’s accomplishment of an identified goal.

Key words: strengths management, realistic optimism, impressions management, managers

Context

Managers need to “manage themselves” so that behaviors result in their performance being “their best” in order that productivity and satisfaction from the work environment is maximized. Managers performing at peak effectiveness will enhance the productivity and job satisfaction of their staff. Strengths management, realistic optimism, and impressions management are components of the positive psychology movement useful to managers.

In 1998, Seligman coined the term positive psychology to represent the scientific study of the positive aspects of the human experience. Such psychology examines the strengths that enable people to thrive and reach full potential, both at work and in their personal lives. Positive psychology focuses on the well-being, satisfaction, and positive aspects of mental health, as opposed to psychology that has traditionally focused on negative factors such as weaknesses and mental illness (Seligman, 2011). In addition to strengths management, realistic optimism, and
impressions management, examples of positive psychology include: mindfulness, mindset, integrity, resilience, grit, managing and regenerating energy, emotional intelligence, social intelligence, image, reputation, and maximizing satisfaction and enjoyment from work.

**Strengths Management**

For managers, the messages of the strengths management concept are: (1) use talents that represent strengths and continue to nourish and develop them; and (2) accept weaknesses, minimize their use, and do not waste time and effort attempting to improve them. Playing to strengths means intentionally and consistently focusing on their use and enhancement to increase success. Accepting and admitting weaknesses represents managers minimizing their use and not allocating time spent on them. As D. M. Bass and Bass (2008) note, “The greatest room for growth is not in the areas of greatest weaknesses, but rather in strengths” (p. 1070). It is imperative that managers constantly have their strengths in mind, and identify tasks they do not do well and stop doing them. Figure 1 summarizes information for managers understanding strengths management.

- **Myth 1:** Fixing weaknesses will make everything all right.
  Many managers subscribe to the notion that fixing their weaknesses and those of staff members will make everyone stronger. This thinking has a common-sense appeal but is wrong and, at best, leads to average work by managers and staff members. Excellence is achieved by focusing on strengths and managing weaknesses, not through the elimination or “shoring up” of weaknesses.

- **Myth 2:** Let the strengths take care of themselves.
  Managers should operate on the premise that their strengths, as well as those of staff members, need to be continually nourished and developed with time best spent on the intense focus and practice of strengths.

- **Myth 3:** Success is the opposite of failure.
  Strengths and weaknesses have their own unique bases and are not opposite of each other. Managers and staff members cannot enhance their understanding and development of strengths by studying and focusing on their weaknesses.

- **Myth 4:** Everyone can do anything to which they put their mind.
  Each manager has a unique set of strengths and weaknesses. A manager can be strong on some factors and weak on others. Managers can be anything their strengths allow them to be, but cannot be anything that requires outstanding performances of their weaknesses. Managers will be most successful when they work in positions that play to their strengths because this helps them to be more engaged, productive, and satisfied (Clifton & Nelson, 1992).

*Figure 1.* Common misperceptions managers may have about the relationships between strengths and weaknesses.
The Clifton Strengths Management Self-Assessment (StrengthsFinder 2.0)

StrengthsFinder 2.0 by the Gallup Organization is beneficial for managers in identifying their talents and can serve as a basis for strengths usage and development. It is a reconfiguration (update) of StrengthsFinder 1.0. The main application of StrengthsFinder 2.0 is in the work domain, but it has also been applied to other environments. The self-assessment of 177 items is delivered online and usually takes about 30-60 minutes to complete.

StrengthsFinder 2.0 provides specific information on five signature themes referenced to four domains: (1) executing, (2) influencing, (3) relationship building, and (4) strategic thinking. Theme is defined as “recurring and consistent patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior” (Asplund, Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2007, p. 4). Including the five signature themes identified by the StrengthsFinder 2.0, there are 29 other themes of lesser intensity for a given manager’s StrengthsFinder 2.0 results. In totality, there are 34 themes that represent the raw talent of a manager which serve as a basis for intrapersonal strengths development. Figure 2 lists these 34 possible themes anchored to the four domains.

Each theme has a narrative description. For example, people exceptionally talented in the Achiever theme work hard and possess a great deal of stamina. They take immense satisfaction in being busy and productive (Asplund, et al., 2007). The number of items measuring themes is from 4-14, with a reliability coefficient ranging from .50 to .76. (Theoretically the range can be from .00 to 1.0, with higher being more desirable.) The five signature themes listed for a manager through the StrengthsFinder 2.0 identify talent areas that can be further developed as strengths to enhance productivity and job satisfaction. These themes also inform the manager on probable strengths to utilize on the job. These signature themes are identified based on the intensity (i.e., high to low response rates) of a manager’s responses.

1. Executing: achiever, consistency, focus, arranger, deliberative, responsibility, belief, discipline, and restorative

2. Influencing: activator, competition, significance, command, maximizer, “woo” factor, communication, and self-assurance

3. Relationship Building: adaptability, empathy, individualization, developer, harmony, positivity, connectedness, include, and relator

4. Strategic Thinking: analytical, ideation, learner, context, input, strategic, futuristic, and intellection

Figure 2. The 34 themes for the StrengthsFinder 2.0 anchored to the four domains of executing, influencing, relationship building, and strategic thinking.

Gallup makes video and print information for each of the 34 themes available to managers utilizing the StrengthsFinder 2.0. Gallup also has other development support services available, such as coaching. These services are fee based (Asplund, et al., 2007). Rath’s (2007) StrengthsFinder 2.0 book is an excellent supplemental source for managers to use in understanding how to apply the information from the instrument’s results. Regarding strengths management, Rath (2007, p. 20) notes that:
**Talent** (a natural way of thinking, feeling, or behaving)

\[ \text{Talent} \times \text{Investment} \]

**Investment** (time spent practicing, developing your skills, and building your knowledge base)

= **Strength** (the ability to consistently provide near-perfect performance).

Managers are cautioned to place the philosophy of strengths management into the specific expected skill sets for their positions and the culture of the organization. For example, a manager’s weakness may be making presentations, but taking the lead in preparation and presenting may be an expectation of her/his boss. Managers do not have the luxury of choosing which skill sets to avoid because they are weaknesses. The organization may place a high value on effective social skills in formal and informal situations, and use social skills as criteria for advancement. If this skill set is a weakness of a manager, ignoring the development of social skills may limit upward mobility in the organization.

StrengthsFinder 2.0 is based on managers’ self-perceptions of strengths contrasted against the perceptions of those with whom the managers work, both superordinates and subordinates. It is uncertain if the StrengthsFinder 2.0 identifies managers’ weaknesses. Feedback referred to as “360” (meaning all around) from superordinates and subordinates is essential to managers in assessing their strengths and weaknesses.

Managers may choose to forego the StrengthsFinder 2.0 and develop their own process for identifying their strengths and weaknesses. As noted, this should include feedback from those with whom they work and a truly honest assessment of what they consider their strengths and weaknesses. Feedback from mentors and significant others in their work and personal lives will also be helpful.

**Realistic Optimism**

Optimism in the traditional application of positive psychology is often contrasted with pessimism and discussed in the context of managers overcoming adversity. Bartz (2017) notes that there are two fundamental ways for managers to view adverse events: (1) imagine the worst and wallow in self-pity (pessimist); or (2) view such events as temporary, surmountable, and challenges to overcome (optimist). While optimists view an adverse event as merely a temporary setback that is not all encompassing to effective performance, pessimists believe that an adverse event makes them helpless, has a long-lasting impact, and is their fault.

Optimists are not fazed by defeats in the work environment, but motivated to work harder to overcome obstacles posed by the situation. Pessimists are likely to easily give up and get depressed when facing adverse events (Seligman, 2006). In essence, optimism is a manager having a mindset and beliefs regarding adversity that: (a) the event has merely caused a temporary setback; (b) whatever caused the adversity is confined specifically to this particular event and nothing else in the person’s life; (c) the results flowing from the adversity are not the person’s fault; (d) the adverse event happened for multiple reasons, many of which the individual could not control; (e) is unfazed by what others might perceive as defeat from the adverse event; and (f) perceives an adverse event as a challenge to try harder and do better in the future (Seligman, 2006; Seligman, 2011).
Gordon (2017) concludes that optimism is a competitive advantage for managers which prompts them to view the future in a positive light and work harder toward creating a brighter and better future. Realistic optimists demonstrate trust and confidence in those they supervise, and nurture them to “be their best.” Gordon indicates that pessimistic managers give up because of the struggle, negativity, frustration, fear, rejection, naysayers, and circumstances. Such managers give up because they do not have the optimism, positivity, and confidence to keep moving forward. The philosophy of Blue Ocean Shift counters pessimism by advocating that managers should “see opportunities where before only constraints were visible” (Kim & Mauborgne, 2017, p. 54). Shore’s (2017) ideology in Conscious Communications is also apropos to managers combating pessimism. Shore states that “Conscious Communications is a simple process that consists of eliminating negative language, using words that work, and focusing on what you want” (p. 4).

Managers work in environments that require a mindset of being realistic about possible outcomes. As Dalio (2017) states, “There is nothing more important than understanding how reality works and how to deal with it” (p. 133). Can the realistic and optimistic mindsets be merged so they have the benefits of each or are they mutually exclusive? Schneider (2001) answers in the affirmative through the concept of realistic optimism which she defines as “the tendency to maintain a positive outlook within the constraints of the available measurable phenomena situated in the physical and social world” (p. 253). Put simply, realistic optimism is being hopeful within the scope and limitations of plausible possibilities. It can also mean managers focusing on the favorable aspects of a situation and believing, as well as striving, to nurture these aspects to accomplish desired results. A manager applying realistic optimism answers the question: “What does an objective analysis of the available data and information reveal in relation to the realm of possible outcomes?”

D. M. Bass and Bass (2008, p. 1070) and Wade (2008, p. 2) summarize a manager’s mindset representative of realistic optimism as: (1) being lenient about past failures to meet expectations and accepting what cannot be changed (the benefit of the doubt principle); (2) appreciation for the present, concentrating on the positive aspects of the current situation (the appreciation of the moment principle); and (3) seeking opportunities for the future (the window of opportunity principle). The pure optimistic manager, as contrasted to a realistic optimist, can suffer from “optimistic bias” that is indicative of self-deception by convincing oneself of the desired outcome without the support of relevant data and information.

Managers that are realistic optimists have a sense of self-control that leads to enhanced confidence and the motivation to create solutions for overcoming difficult situations. They create solutions by expanding their field of vision where opportunities exist to overcome adversity, and inspire others to support and work hard to implement the solutions (Kim & Mauborgne, 2017). They seek out what is needed to make goals happen (Charan, Willigan, & Giffen, 2017). Managers practicing realistic optimism remain positive about the future, even when the present circumstances turn against them. As Collingwood (2016) notes, “Realistic optimists are cautiously hopeful of favorable outcomes, and they do as much as they can to obtain the desired results” (p. 2). Some realistic optimists adhere to the adage “hope for the best, but prepare for the worst” (Collingwood, p. 3).

Managers with realistic optimism set challenging goals for themselves and those they supervise, anticipate obstacles, and take proactive measures to eliminate or minimize these obstacles. The manager with realistic optimism also knows that, on occasion, there is a fine line between a challenge and an impossible situation. As time progresses, when objective data and
information reveal little to no likelihood for success, a manager must know when to terminate pursuit of a goal.

Impressions Management

Managers applying impressions management strive to persuade others, with whom interactions occur, to see ideas “their way” by creating a favorable and influential impression. This can be in one-to-one conversations or interacting with a group. Using the concept of mindfulness—active in-the-moment awareness, sensitivity, and perspective—aids managers in effectively using impressions management (Langer, 2017). In preparation for attaining the desired outcome from an interaction, the manager needs to have his/her “situation identity” clearly focused on exactly what is the target of persuasion and desired impression to be created (Goffman, 1959). Managers need to be adept at using “reflection-in-action” skills to adjust behavior, moment-by-moment, during interactions with those they are attempting to persuade.

The manager applying impressions management utilizes all available skills and resources such as personal appearance, mannerisms, body language, setting, and background information about the person(s) with whom the interactions take place. While the manager attempts to control as many variables as possible when applying impressions management, it is imperative that her/his behaviors appear authentic rather than contrived or “phony.”

Goffman (1959), the originator of the impressions management concept, believes managers create impressions through two types of expressions:

1. **Expressions we “give.”** What one says, how one poses the situation, facial expressions, and intentionally controlling body language.

2. **Expressions we “give off.”** Behaviors for which one is sometimes less cognizant and are viewed as being inconsistent with what is stated because *body language* gives a different message (Goffman, 1959).

A manager needs to effectively manage the expressions “given off” so that verbal and nonverbal communication signals are congruent.

Five common impressions management strategies are:

1. **Ingratiation:** (a) the art of one gaining acceptance and prompting others to like them, usually in the context of an ulterior motive; (b) opinion conformity (agreeing with others); (c) flattery; and (d) cautiously guarding what is stated (e.g., choosing words carefully).

2. **Intimidation:** (a) arousing fear in the person(s) with whom interacting; (b) controlling; (c) use of power from the position held; and (d) aggressively trying to obtain desired result.

3. **Supplication:** attempting to gain sympathy and attention by revealing faults, tribulations, and the difficulty of the situation.

4. **Self-promotion:** (a) taking credit for events; (b) making others aware of accomplishments; and (c) presenting strengths to prove competency. (If congruency does not exist between the information presented and the other person’s perception of reality, this can be disastrous to a manager’s effectiveness.)
5. **Exemplification**: (a) presenting one’s moral worthiness; (b) displaying sincerity; (c) demonstrating dedication and responsibility to the issue at hand to show superiority; and (d) advocating being the “right person” for the job/task at hand (Goffman, 1959; DeePak, 2014; Bolino, Klotz, & Daniels, 2014).

It is essential for managers to be motivated and “psyched up” for persuading and influencing others in order to control a conversation and achieve their desired predetermined image. Early in the conversation, the manager must quickly determine the gap between the other person’s position on his/her predetermined desired outcome and the person’s position *at that moment in time*. As the conversation progresses, the gap should close. The manager showing the relevancy of her/his desired outcome to the other person(s) is often key to gaining support. The manager should “back off” when it becomes apparent that the gap is not closing and the other person is, in fact, demonstrating alienation. After the interaction with the person, the manager needs to objectively debrief the situation and ascertain the extent to which the desired image was achieved regarding the wanted outcome (Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

Digital communications must be considered as vehicles for impressions management. Most of the same strategies apply to digital interactions as do face-to-face interactions. However, “conversations” conducted digitally are often non-continuous and not as “in-the-moment” as face-to-face situations. Hence, the manager has more time to contemplate responses, as does the person he/she is attempting to influence. Because digital communications are sometimes less formal than face-to-face, it is important that the manager does not become lax or careless in preparation or attentiveness.

**Closing Reflections**

Strengths management, realistic optimism, and impressions management are components of positive psychology that can be tremendous assets to managers in achieving peak performance and enhancing job satisfaction. Strengths management means managers are “playing to their strengths” and not wasting time attempting to improve their weaknesses. Realistic optimism is represented by a manager having a mindset of being hopeful within the scope and limitations of plausible possibilities for achieving a goal. Such optimism is driven by answering: “What does an objective analysis of the available data and information reveal in relation to the realm of possible outcomes for achieving a goal?” Impressions management is the process of managers influencing and persuading others, usually through face-to-face interactions, to support their position and course of action for addressing a given issue to achieve a goal. Managers who are knowledgeable and skilled at applying strengths management, realistic optimism, and impressions management will be rewarded with enhanced goal attainment and the satisfaction of “being their best.”
References


Footnotes
