

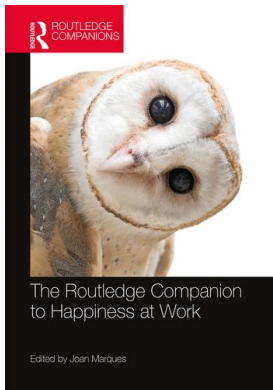
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The Routledge Companion to Happiness at Work

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Nurturing Happiness at Work Through Strengths Use

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NURTURING HAPPINESS AT WORK THROUGH STRENGTHS USE

Maria Christina Meyers, Philippe Dubreuil, and Claudia Harzer

Introduction

All too often, individuals think that they could be much happier if only they were freed of one of their flaws. It makes intuitive sense to assume that individuals, who do not overthink as much, who are less compliant, who are not as nosy, or who procrastinate less—to name just a few examples—are happier than we are. However, pondering on our flaws will only rarely contribute to our happiness. On the contrary, pondering on the aspects that we do not like about ourselves may give rise to pronounced negative feelings such as sadness, shame, and guilt.

Instead of focusing on our worst self, we should therefore focus on our best self to nurture happiness. This implies focusing on our strengths—the unique qualities that allow us to excel in certain domains (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011). If we take just a few minutes to think about the things we do well (i.e., our strengths), we may already feel our mood lifting. Even stronger effects on happiness can be expected if we start using our strengths more often, or in new ways at work or in other life domains (Seligman et al., 2005).

In this chapter, we will explain what strengths are, and how and why using strengths is linked to happiness. Subsequently, we will illustrate different approaches that organizations can adopt to foster strengths use among their employees. We will conclude with a discussion of how strengths use can benefit us, including a few notes of caution.

Strengths

Human strengths belong to the core concepts within the scientific field of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Introduced by Martin Seligman around the turn of the century, positive psychology is dedicated to studying factors that help individuals, groups, and institutions thrive (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Among these factors are human strengths, such as curiosity, perseverance, kindness, fairness, prudence, and humor (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Strengths are positively valued personal characteristics that are relatively stable across time and situations, but can be developed to some extent (Gander, Hofmann, Proyer, & Ruch, 2019). In the broadest sense, they are the characteristics that make a person excel at certain tasks or in certain domains (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011). Note that the notion of “excel”, in this context, means that a person performs at his or her personal best, but not necessarily at a higher level than others. “Excel” also implies more than just performing well: it implies that a person

performs well while experiencing high levels of energy, motivation, and pleasure (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). A consultant who possesses the strength of teamwork, for example, will be at her personal best when collaborating on projects with her colleagues. The collaboration will energize her, and allow her to achieve better results than when working alone.

Several groups of researchers have focused on developing classifications or lists of strengths that individuals can possess. The most widely researched of these classifications is the Values in Action (VIA) classification of strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The VIA classification comprises 24 so-called character strengths (see Table 20.1). All included character strengths can be found across cultural contexts (Biswas-Diener, 2006; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). In addition, they are valued in their own right and not for the outcomes to which they relate (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Peterson & Seligman (2004) propose that every individual possesses three to seven dominant or core strengths, so-called signature strengths. Signature strengths are the strengths that are most central to a person's identity. That means that people have a strong drive to use their signature strengths and to behave in accordance with them. Moreover, signature strengths are used frequently, and are accompanied by feelings of fulfillment, excitement, and authenticity when applied (Harzer & Ruch, 2013; Littman-Ovadia, Lavy, & Boiman-Meshita, 2017).

Next to the VIA Inventory of strengths (a self-rating questionnaire assessing the 24 character strengths of the VIA classification; McGrath, 2017), other commonly used strengths identification tools include the Strengths Profile (CAPP, 2019), and the CliftonStrengths assessment (Rath, 2007). Both tools draw on their own classifications of 60 (Strengths Profile) and 34 (CliftonStrengths) strengths, respectively.

How Strengths Use at Work Relates to Happiness

Positive psychologists assume that using strengths at work is closely related to happiness (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In the work context, happiness is commonly used as a synonym for the concept of well-being (Grant, Christianson, & Price, 2007; Van De Voorde, Paauwe, & Van Veldhoven, 2012). Well-being can be categorized into hedonic and eudemonic well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Broadly speaking, hedonic well-being refers to experiencing pleasure, whereas eudemonic well-being refers to realizing human potential. Hedonic well-being is often equated with subjective well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999) implying high levels of positive affect and satisfaction, as well as low levels of negative affect. Eudemonic well-being, by contrast, is also often referred to as psychological well-being (Ryff, 2014), and encompasses aspects such as self-actualization (Maslow, 1943), finding meaning in one's work (Dutton, LoBuglio, Berg, & Wrzesniewski, 2013; Wrzesniewski, 2003), and pursuing one's calling (Hall & Chandler, 2005). In line with other researchers in the field of work and organizational psychology, we therefore consider happiness as an umbrella term that captures different hedonic and eudemonic well-being concepts such as work engagement, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and experiencing one's job as a calling (Fisher, 2010; Van De Voorde et al., 2012).

In the following, we will explain how the use of signature strengths, and of so-called "happiness strengths", relates to happiness.

Use of Signature Strengths and Happiness at Work

The use of strengths at work depends on the fit between an employee's strengths profile and the requirements of the work environment (cf. Harzer & Ruch, 2013). In other words, employees are more likely to use their signature strengths at work if the work environment calls for these strengths (i.e., strengths are helpful to fulfill the task at hand) or if it, at least, gives them room to apply their strengths (i.e., time restrictions are not overly tight). Think, for example, of a person with

Table 20.1 The 24 Character Strengths Included in the Values in Action Classification of Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and Short Descriptions Defining the Strengths, reprinted from Harzer and Ruch (2015)

-
- 1 Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge—strengths of wisdom and knowledge
 - *Creativity [originality, ingenuity]*: Thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualize and do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it
 - *Curiosity [interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience]*: Taking an interest in all of ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering
 - *Judgment [open-mindedness, critical thinking]*: Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one’s mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly
 - *Love of learning*: Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one’s own or formally; obviously related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add systematically to what one knows
 - *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
 - 2 Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal—strengths of courage
 - *Bravery [valor]*: Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what is right even if there is opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it
 - *Perseverance [persistence, industriousness]*: Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; “getting it out the door”; taking pleasure in completing tasks
 - *Honesty [authenticity, integrity]*: Speaking the truth but more broadly and presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one’s feelings and actions
 - *Zest [vitality, enthusiasm, vigor, energy]*: Approaching life with excitement and energy; not doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated
 - 3 Interpersonal strengths that involve “tending and befriending” others—strengths of humanity
 - *Capacity to Love and Be Loved [short name: love]*: Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people
 - *Kindness [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, “niceness”]*: Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them
 - *Social intelligence [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence]*: Being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick
 - 4 Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life—strengths of justice
 - *Teamwork [citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty]*: Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one’s share
 - *Fairness*: Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; not letting personal feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance
 - *Leadership*: Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the time maintain time good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen
 - 5 Strengths that protect against excess—strengths of temperance
 - *Forgiveness [mercy]*: Forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting the shortcomings of others; giving people a second chance; not being vengeful
 - *Modesty [humility]*: Letting one’s accomplishments speak for themselves; not regarding oneself as more special than one is

(Continued)

Table 20.1 (Continued)

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- *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
- 6 Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning – transcendence/theological strengths
- *Appreciation of beauty and excellence [awe, wonder, elevation; short name: appreciation]*: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience
 - *Gratitude*: Being aware of and thankful for 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; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about
 - *Humor [playfulness]*: Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes
 - *Spirituality [religiousness, faith, purpose]*: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort
-

Note

The character strengths are grouped together content-wise on a theoretical basis. Labels of character strengths and expressions in brackets emphasize family resemblance to acknowledge heterogeneity of strengths and to minimize subtle (political or otherwise) connotations (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

appreciation of beauty and excellence as a dominant strength. This person will likely be able to use this strength in many professions related to the fine arts (e.g., photographer, dance teacher, curator of a museum), because such professions actively call for this specific strength (among others). Moreover, this person may also be able to use this strength in other professions (e.g., as a programmer), if he has enough freedom to conduct tasks in his own way (e.g., to write not only functional, but also visually pleasing, tidy code).

This emphasizes the relevance of the person–environment (PE) fit literature for understanding the effects of strengths use on employee happiness (Cable & DeRue, 2002; Caplan, 1987; Kristof, 1996). Commonly, PE-fit researchers differentiate between two types of fit: on the one hand, the fit that emerges when the person possesses the right abilities to meet the demands of the environment (*demands-abilities fit*), and, on the other hand, the fit that emerges when individual needs are satisfied through the rewards and incentives offered by the environment (i.e., *needs-supplies fit*) (Cable & DeRue, 2002). PE-fit experts have proposed that *needs-supplies fit* is the most important type of fit from an employee perspective (Cable & DeRue, 2002). An employee's overall satisfaction with the job, for instance, will be largely influenced by the employee's evaluation of how well the job provides rewards that are desired or needed (Schaffer, 1953). This reasoning is relevant for understanding the benefits of strengths use for happiness because strengths theory proposes that individuals have an inherent need to behave in congruence with their signature strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The more frequently the work environment allows for the use of individual signature strengths, the more the environment satisfies these needs (Harzer & Ruch, 2013). Need satisfaction, in turn, is a key predictor of individual well-being.

In line with this, research has repeatedly shown that the use of signature strengths at work, as a form of character strengths-related PE-fit, is positively related to favorable work outcomes like positive affect at work, job satisfaction, meaning, engagement, sense of accomplishment, and calling

(Harzer, Mubashar, & Dubreuil, 2017; Harzer & Ruch, 2012, 2013, 2016; Littman-Ovadia et al., 2017; Meyers et al., 2018; Meyers, Kooij, Kroon, deReuver, & Van Woerkom, in press; van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015).

Use of Happiness Strengths and Happiness

Instead of further increasing the use of a person's core or signature strengths, one may also opt to increase the use of specific strengths that display close links with happiness. In this case, it would not matter whether these strengths belong to a person's core strengths: universal benefits of using these strengths are expected for all people. Out of the 24 VIA character strengths, hope, zest, gratitude, love, and curiosity display the strongest associations with happiness and life satisfaction (Park et al., 2004; Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park, & Seligman, 2007). Therefore, these strengths are often referred to as "happiness strengths" (Harzer et al., 2017; Littman-Ovadia et al., 2017). Definitions of these five strengths can be found in Table 20.1.

Notably, with the exception of curiosity, all of these strengths are characterized as strengths of the heart, related to one's feelings rather than one's thoughts (Peterson, 2006). The close relationship between using the four heart strengths and happiness has been described in the following way (Park et al., 2004): gratitude is about having positive feelings about one's past, whereas hope is about having positive feelings about one's future. Zest is about positive feelings (energy, vigor) in the here and now. Finally, love is about having positive feelings for others (Park et al., 2004). If people are stimulated to use these strengths, they will inevitably experience an increase in these positive feelings, and thus feel happier. Moreover, Park et al. (2004) describe the link between curiosity and happiness as tautological: individuals cannot be curious and unhappy at the same time. This is supported by the argument that curiosity allows individuals to "seek out personally meaningful interests and desires and thereby is intrinsically motivating" (Kashdan, Rose, & Fincham, 2004, p. 291). Empirical studies have shown that employees who frequently apply these happiness strengths at work report higher levels of various aspects of work-related well-being like work engagement and sense of meaning (Harzer et al., 2017; Littman-Ovadia et al., 2017).

How to Foster Strengths Use at Work: Strengths Interventions

Organizations can use a range of different interventions at different levels to foster strengths use in organizations. In the organizational context, strengths interventions mostly refer to interventions that aim to increase signature strengths use rather than happiness strengths use, which is why we will also focus on the former in the below paragraphs. We distinguish four different types of strengths interventions depending on the intervention target: individuals, work teams, leaders, or the entire organization.

Strengths Interventions at the Individual Level: Strengths Coaching

On the individual level, organizations may provide their employees with coaching based on their personal strengths (Linley & Harrington, 2006). Coaching, in general terms, is considered a developmental activity that centers around goal-directed interactions between a coach and his or her client (Sue-Chan, Wood, & Latham, 2012). Coaches help or facilitate clients "to improve their performance in various domains, and to enhance their personal effectiveness, personal development and personal growth" (Hamlin, Ellinger, & Beattie, 2008, p. 291). Strengths coaching can be seen as a specific form of coaching that differs from other forms of coaching in that it is based on the principles of positive psychology. In line with the latter, strengths coaching focuses on achieving client's goals through harnessing their unique strengths (Govindji & Linley, 2007; McQuaid, 2017). In that, it is a solution-focused rather than problem-focused form of coaching (cf., Grant, Curtayne, & Burton, 2009).

McQuaid (2017) proposes that strengths coaching should follow the same four steps as Appreciative Inquiry, a positive, solution-focused tool to facilitate organizational change (cf. Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). These four steps, commonly referred to as the *4D cycle*, include (1) *discovering* peak experiences in the past, (2) *dreaming* about what may be achieved in the future, (3) *designing* pathways towards the desired achievements, and (4) *delivering* on the desired achievements by following the pathways. McQuaid (2017) further suggests a range of tools that can be used during each of the four steps. In the *discover* step, for instance, coaches can invite their clients to complete the reflected best self exercise (Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy, & Quinn, 2005). This involves asking friends, family members, or colleagues to describe past situations when they had seen the clients at their best. Based on these descriptions of peak experiences generated by others, clients can then compose a portrait of themselves at their best, including their most prominent strengths. Subsequently, this exercise can be followed up with the best possible future self exercise (cf. King, 2001) in the *dreaming* step. It asks clients to write about the best possible future they would attain if everything went according to plan, and if they developed and used their strengths in an optimal way. In the *designing* step, the coach can then help the client to outline different pathways towards attaining his or her best possible future self (McQuaid, 2017), placing emphasis on pathways that draw on the client's strengths (Govindji & Linley, 2007; Linley et al., 2010). Finally, the coach helps the client to attain their best possible future self by making sure that the client *delivers* and progresses along his or her chosen pathways. This can, for instance, be facilitated by asking the client to tie the development of a strength to an already existing habit (McQuaid, 2017). Imagine that a client possesses humor as a dominant strength, and has the habit of going out for lunch with her colleagues once a week. The client could choose to focus on using her humor more during these lunch meetings to build a stronger social support network at work.

Strengths Interventions at the Work Team Level: Fostering Collective Strengths Use

One of the most frequently conducted strengths interventions in organizations is team-based strengths development. Team strengths interventions allow members to discover and acknowledge each other's strengths, and therefore fully harness their potential in order to achieve team goals (van Woerkom, Meyers, & Bakker, 2020). Indeed, research has shown that teams in which members benefited from an intervention that made them feel appreciated for their unique strengths performed better at creative problem solving tasks than other teams (Lee, Gino, Cable, & Staats, 2016). Similarly, teams in which members are aware of each other's strengths, trust in them, and distribute team tasks in alignment with the members' strengths have been found to display higher levels of team work engagement, team learning, and team performance (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2019).

A typical team-based strengths intervention involves five main steps: (1) preparation, (2) identification, (3) integration, (4) action, and (5) evaluation (Miglianico, Dubreuil, Miquelon, Bakker, & Martin-Krumm, 2019). In the *preparation* phase, participants are introduced to the strengths approach, the objectives of the intervention, and the overall process that will be followed. Intervention facilitators here take the necessary time to explain how and why the intervention will be conducted, answer all questions, and ensure that participants are fully engaged in the process. In the *identification* phase, participants are then asked to identify their strengths, usually through the completion of a strengths assessment such as the VIA Survey (McGrath, 2017), the Clifton Strengthsfinder (Asplund, Agrawal, Hodges, Harter, & Lopez, 2014), or the Strengths Profile (CAPP, 2019). Once the assessments are completed, some authors also suggest to give participants additional time and specific questions to help them further reflect on their results, gain a deeper appreciation of their strengths, and prepare for the following step (Dubreuil & Forest, 2017; Dubreuil et al., 2016; Harzer & Ruch,

2016; Meyers, van Woerkom, de Reuver, Bakk, & Oberski, 2015). At this stage, participants are usually eager to know each other's results. It is therefore the perfect time to launch the *integration* phase, which involves participants presenting and discussing their results with the whole team. In this step, the objective is not for participants to brag and boast, but rather to acknowledge their strengths and make them better known and understood in the team, creating mutual strengths awareness (van Woerkom et al., 2020). When correctly performed, the result is a powerful team process which allows members to present their areas of expertise in a humble way, to gain an external confirmation of their strengths from their peers and to explain, with the help of examples, discussions, and answers to questions, where their maximal contribution to team performance can reside. The next step, *action*, naturally follows. In this step, participants plan in collaboration how they want to make the most of their strengths in the team (cf. strengths coordination; van Woerkom et al., 2020). Some teams will review their current objectives and decide to reallocate tasks according to strengths, while others will simply create new complementary partnerships between members in order to be more efficient. There are no specific guidelines at this point and each team must decide how they want to proceed. The key is to make teams responsible for their strengths and facilitate a process in which they will optimize their use. Finally, the *evaluation* step involves continuously monitoring strengths use in the team and making the necessary adjustments to maintain performance. For example, regular meetings can be conducted to follow-up and discuss new team configurations and development opportunities, as well as strengths underuse and overuse. Research evidence tends to indicate that this step is crucial in order to maintain the initial benefits obtained from strengths interventions (Dubreuil et al., 2016; Meyers et al., 2015).

Strengths Interventions at the Leader Level: Fostering Positive or Strengths-based Leadership

Leaders have a profound influence on their followers. Through their actions, they can alter the way in which their followers view themselves (van Knippenberg, vanKnippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004). Dependent on feedback that followers receive from their leaders, for instance, they may adapt their self-view regarding their (in)competence in certain areas. Altered self-views or self-conceptions, in turn, have important implications for followers' motivation and behavior (cf., Leary & Tangney, 2012). To date, there is little research evidence on the specific relationship between leadership behaviors and strengths use (Bakker & van Woerkom, 2018), with the exception of the work by Kong & Ho (2016) on leader autonomy support. Kong & Ho (2016) found that the extent to which leaders grant leeway to their followers and allow them to take their own decisions at work is positively related to follower strengths use.

Next to supporting employees in being autonomous, leaders may also display other behaviors that foster employee strengths use. For instance, leaders who are good at spotting strengths in others (cf. Linley et al., 2010) may help their followers gain awareness of their strengths. Strengths awareness, in turn, is often seen as a central prerequisite of strengths use (Govindji & Linley, 2007). We also know that leaders often act as a coach for the members of their team in every-day interactions (Sue-Chan et al., 2012), implying that some leaders may naturally engage in strengths coaching (Govindji & Linley, 2007). Moreover, leadership styles that focus on building positive relationships with followers, such as inclusive leadership (Hollander, 2012; Nishii & Mayer, 2009) and servant leadership (van Dierendonck, 2011), may foster strengths use among employees. Inclusive leaders may stimulate strengths use because they express their appreciation for the unique qualities of all employees (Hollander, 2012; Nishii & Mayer, 2009), whereas servant leaders put the needs of their followers first, and are driven to satisfy those needs (van Dierendonck, 2011). Both inclusive and servant leaders can thereby create safe work environments that allow employees to try out new ways of working and to express their authentic selves.

As leadership behaviors can be influenced by appropriate training (Burke & Day, 1986), organizations may want to invest in leadership training that teaches leaders to display behaviors or to use tools that will likely lead to a boost in employee strengths use. Leaders may, for instance, be trained to spot strengths in others (Linley et al., 2010), to give feedback or feedforward based on strengths (Kluger & Nir, 2010), or to conduct strengths-based performance appraisals (Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011).

Strengths Interventions at the Organizational Level: Fostering Perceived Organizational Support for Strengths Use (POSSU)

Perceived organizational support for strengths use is a specific form of perceived organizational support (POS; Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). Employees perceive organizational support when they believe that the organization's policies, procedures, and practices are benevolent in nature (Eisenberger et al., 1986). When employees perceive organizational support for strengths use (POSSU), they have the feeling that the organization uses benevolent policies, procedures, and practices that facilitate employees in using their personal strengths at work (Meyers et al., 2018; van Woerkom, Bakker, & Nishii, 2015; van Woerkom et al., 2016). Research has shown that POSSU is positively related to the experience of positive emotions, satisfaction with life, and work engagement (Botha & Mostert, 2014; Meyers et al., 2018; Meyers et al., in press; van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015).

Organizations that want to provide strengths use support to their employees can do so by (re)focusing common human resource (HR) practices on individual strengths (Dubreuil & Forest, 2017). This includes, but is not limited to HR practices to attract, select, socialize, develop, motivate, and retain employees. When recruiting new employees, organizations can take hiring decisions based on a match between the applicant's strengths profile and the function in question. Subsequently, the socialization process could focus on stimulating new hires to express their authentic selves (including their strengths), rather than on adjusting themselves and their identity to the organization (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013). When training employees, organizations could allow employees to further develop their strengths in addition to mending their weaknesses (van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015), and when evaluating them, they could more explicitly address and celebrate the employees' successes and accomplishments, rather than only reprimanding them for their shortcomings (Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011). Building on previous paragraphs, organizations can naturally also invest in strengths coaching for individuals, team-based strengths interventions, or strengths-based leadership trainings.

Discussion

Based on theoretical arguments and a growing body of empirical evidence, strengths use at work can be unequivocally linked to happiness. Employees who have the opportunity to apply their core strengths while executing their daily work activities will not only experience more pleasure and joy than other employees (hedonic well-being), but they will also experience more personal growth and a greater sense of fulfillment (eudemonic well-being). Furthermore, research evidence has pointed out that strengths use, or practices that foster strengths use, can be linked to higher employee performance (Dubreuil et al., 2016; Harzer et al., 2017; Kong & Ho, 2016; Littman-Ovadia et al., 2017; van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015). This makes strengths-based (HR) practices very interesting for organizations that are often struggling to design good HR instruments that simultaneously foster employee well-being and performance (Guest, 2017). In part four of this chapter, we have outlined how organizations can foster strengths use at work by means of interventions at the level of individuals, work teams, leaders, or the entire organization.

Three notes of caution have to be mentioned with regard to the above. First, positive psychologists are often (unjustly) accused of over-emphasizing strengths and neglecting weaknesses. We do not intend to advocate that employee weaknesses should be ignored. Sometimes, weaknesses have to be

overcome before employees can function effectively in the work environment. For instance, a trainer will always need presentation and communication skills to perform effectively, and a secretary will always need planning and organization skills. In addition, some employees may derive great pleasure and satisfaction from learning to master tasks that fall outside the range of their natural abilities. We therefore do not consider the development of strengths and weaknesses to be mutually exclusive, but rather acknowledge that a combination of developing strong and weak points may deliver the best results at times (cf. Rust, Diessner, & Reade, 2009). However, given that many organizations already have elaborate systems to minimize employee weaknesses in place, we reason that they can gain most by balancing out this focus on the “negative” by a stronger focus on the positive.

Second, researchers have cautioned that too much emphasis on positive qualities such as strengths can potentially have undesired consequences. More specifically, Kaiser & Overfield (2011) propose that relying on one’s strengths at all times in all situations (i.e., strengths overuse) is undesirable. People who do so are likely to get caught in the so-called “competency trap”, meaning that they overly rely on characteristics that helped them achieve successes in the past (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Lyubchik, 2017). In line with this idea, research by Freidlin, Littman-Ovadia, & Niemiec (2017) revealed that strengths overuse is related to negative outcomes, such as low life satisfaction, and higher depression and social anxiety. When focusing on strengths, people therefore need to be (made) aware of the fact that strengths use is context dependent: a strength that helps you excel in one context is not always appropriate in another context. Think, for instance, about honesty as a strength. When giving honest, negative feedback to a peer in a one-on-one situation, the peer might greatly appreciate the fact that someone points out aspects that he or she could improve. However, when giving honest, negative feedback to a superior in a situation that also involves other people, honesty might be resented and reprimanded. Scholars have therefore proposed that individuals need to learn how to “regulate” their strengths, that is, how to use them appropriately in relation to situational demands (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011).

Third, we have focused on interventions that encourage the use of signature strengths in this chapter, while interventions that encourage the use of happiness strengths may also be linked to increases in employee happiness. The application of gratitude, for instance, can be fostered in work contexts that stimulate employees to count their work-related blessings, and to express their gratitude towards colleagues, superiors, or clients. Similarly, the application of zest and curiosity can be fostered in work contexts that value worker initiatives, stimulate employees to start new projects and generate ideas, and challenge workers in feasible ways. While we do see a lot of added value in such initiatives, they may not be appropriate for all employees (e.g., some may feel pressured to behave in an inauthentic way) in all organizational contexts (e.g., in law firms, expressing gratitude towards clients, attorneys, jury members, or judges may not be appropriate under all circumstances). In contrast to that, we presume that interventions that foster the use of individual signature strengths are appropriate for a wider variety of employees across a wider variety of work contexts.

Overall, we see great, hitherto often unrealized potential in organizational approaches that facilitate the use of employee signature strengths. Employees who use their signature strengths are not only happier, but also more productive. That means that strengths-based approaches may not only allow employees to reach their full potential, but also their employers.

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