

Building on employee strengths at Sony Europe

A three-step process to maximize staff contributions to the business

When Sony Europe began a restructure in 2003, Roy White, VP of HR, realized that focusing on each employee's key strengths and introducing mentoring projects would be crucial to enhancing performance.

IN 2003, SONY EUROPE, part of the Sony Corporation, a global electronics and music company, was faced with the need to restructure and a difficult market position (due to increasing competition from Korea and China). Focusing on the company's strengths became mission critical.

Sony needed to retain its most talented people if it was to regain its market position as leader in the television sector of the electronics industry. With the backing of the leadership group, I set about integrating "The Strengths Way"¹ into Sony Europe's people strategy. The Strengths Way is a people management approach devised by mentoring expert Mike Pegg, based on achieving success through focusing on strengths and setting specific goals.

Aligning talents to roles

Peak performers do what they do best and do it brilliantly. Whether they play in a sports team or work in a knowledge organization, it's vital for people to play to their key talents – their "A" strengths. At the same time, it's important for them to learn tools to manage the consequences of their lesser-impact strengths and employees – their "Bs" and "Cs."

We see evidence of this everyday at Sony. For example, one of our high-potential female employees working in Spain as a procurement specialist within a manufacturing environment, was becoming increasingly frustrated that she was unable to make the contribution of which she knew she was capable. This was due, in part, to the nature of her role, which she was clearly outgrowing. At the same time, we were faced with a problem implementing a new sales order processing system in Eastern Europe. Her strengths matched the job description, so, with her agreement, we changed her role.

By simply placing a high-potential person into a role that matched her strengths while giving her new challenges, we not only turned around a floundering project, we also retained a talented person who we may otherwise have lost.

Coordinating talents for maximum effect

Playing to our strengths is not new to Sony. Masaru Ibuka and Akio Morita, realized this back in 1946 when they founded Sony Corporation. Ibuka stated in our founding document in 1946 his vision of: "... the establishment of an ideal plant, free, dynamic and pleasant, where technical personnel of sincere motivation can exercise their abilities to the maximum."

The HR challenge for Sony is to make sure that we identify and coordinate people's talents for the maximum business benefit. It's fine to hire bright sparks but to fail to plant them where they can fuel fire is wasteful.

Frequently, I talk with our Sony graduate program employees who are moving onto permanent roles in the

business. My message to them is: “Do what you are passionate about and find a way to use your talents to contribute to the business.” This is a message which we’ve threaded through our recruitment, appraisal and internal communication programs from the top down, using a series of frameworks, tools and techniques. In all of these areas we focus on people’s strengths and encourage them to structure their role to make best use of these strengths. For example, in our appraisal process, people spend time analyzing the competencies in which they’re strongest and then discuss how they’re using these in their current role. We do not discuss areas of weakness unless it’s fundamental to the role.

Legislating for strengths

As organizations evolve, expand and grow increasingly complex, there’s a tendency to stop focusing on core capabilities, and instead become distracted by non-core activities.

This happened with Sony, but since the introduction of The Strengths Way, we’ve refocused on identifying our core capabilities and reducing our non-core activities. This is done by sitting down with senior management teams in each of our subsidiary organizations and spending quality time linking our strategy to the capabilities that are needed to achieve the goals. We’ve also identified the jobs that are key to realizing these capabilities, and analyzed whether we have our best people (our A players) in the most strategically important jobs. This takes place in a detailed meeting between senior management teams and often leads to long discussions and debate – a positive side effect of getting the senior team on the same path.

Doing this gave us a clear picture of the gaps we had in the organization and where we needed to introduce A players. We then adapted all of our appointment and appraisal processes to focus on strengths and talent. This sounds like common sense, but we realized that we didn’t measure the *quality* of our recruitment and appointment decisions. Recruitment didn’t have the same standing as “Development” or “Compensation,” so we’re now in the process of putting people whose passion is to recruit, into these roles.

Step 1: Structure performance management

We began by tailoring our performance management system to focus on people’s strengths. The type of questions organizations need to ask to identify people’s strengths can be found in Figure 1, top right. We built such questions into our procedures to assist us in building people’s jobs around their talents, rather than to try to mould their talents to fit their job descriptions. We now see regular evidence of how aligning people’s jobs with their strengths is making a positive impact.

For example, one Sony employee – a star performer with a history of outperforming sales targets – was

Figure 1. Questions used to help employees recognize their strengths²

1. What are the activities in which you consistently deliver A’s, rather than B’s or C’s?
2. When do you feel in your element?
3. What are the situations in which you feel ease and yet also able to excel? When do you feel: “This is what I was meant to do”?
4. What are the situations in which you quickly see the destination – the picture of perfection?
5. When do you go “A, B...then jump to...Z”? Where do you quickly see patterns and have good “personal radar”?
6. Where do you continuously rehearse scenarios and have a “memory of the future”?
7. When do you balance seeming paradoxes – such as seeing the big picture but also having attention to detail?
8. “When are you calm, clear and deliver concrete results?”
9. When do you go into your equivalent of the “zone”?
10. When do things go “lowly but speedily”?
11. When do you enjoy the journey as much as reaching the goal?
12. What are the activities in which you are a good finisher?
13. When do you flow, focus, finish and, as a by-product, gain fulfilment?
14. When do you follow your passion, translate it into a clear purpose, achieve peak performance and sometimes gain a sense of peace?
15. What are the activities in which you have the ability to become a class act?

moved into a business group role from consumer sales, but his performance suddenly began to drop. He was still performing adequately, but he was no longer at the top of his game. What had happened? During his appraisal in the new role, it became clear that this person was no longer playing to his strengths. He was good at selling, but he was good because his A strengths revolved around dealing with people face-to-face. In the business group, which didn’t have the same public interaction, he was clearly in the wrong role.

We decided to move him to new role as MD of a sales company that had previously been performing satisfactorily, but had never delivered anything special. We also provided mentoring support. Within a year, this team brought in record sales, 9 percent above budget, increased profits (6.6 million Euro above budget), reduced costs as a percentage of sales (by 2.5 percent), reduced the headcount (by 30 percent) and increased sales (by 7 percent per head).

Additionally, the employee survey indicated his team’s engagement levels had increased by 5 percent. By simply playing to this natural leader’s A strengths and giving him the tools to succeed, we had facilitated a complete turnaround of an entire sales company.

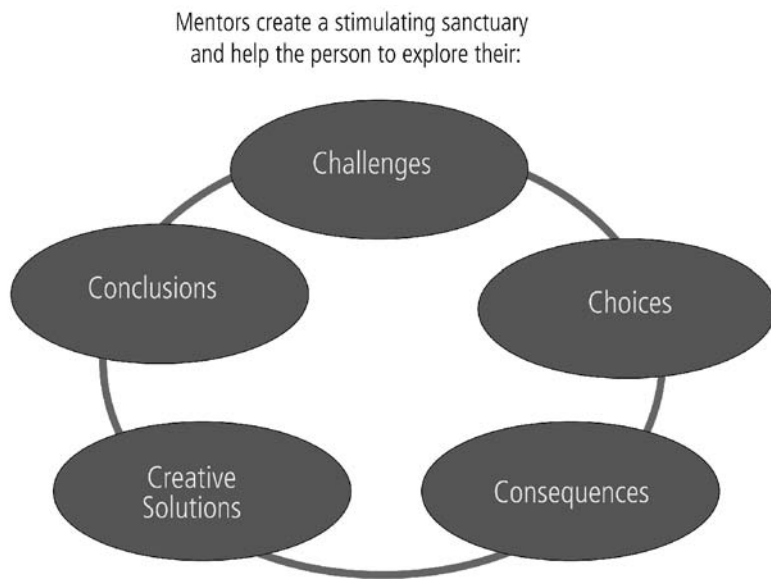
Step 2: Cascade mentoring

The implementation of a strengths mentoring program, which we’ve cascaded throughout Sony Europe, has had a huge impact on our people’s



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Figure 2. The Strengths Way model for mentoring



performance. The program, based on The Strengths Way model (Figure 2, above), offers members of our four talent groups – graduates, high-potential employees, executive successors and executives – access to a mentor and feedback about their strengths.

We've scaled our mentoring program by facilitating each talent group mentoring the next: so, executive successors become mentees to executives; high-potential employees become mentees to executive successors and graduates become mentees to high-potential employees. We've also established some mentoring arrangements with leading social enterprises where Sony executives mentor people in the charitable sector. It's in the early stages, but we expect to see improved motivation among these senior managers, in addition to hopefully transferring some of the passion that exists in social enterprises back into our organization.

Pegg worked with us to design the program, provided one-to-one mentoring to some of our talent from each group and online mentoring to anyone within these groups wishing to access information via our online training portal – "Trainnet." The portal has enabled 30 mentors and 50 mentees across the UK, Germany, Hungary, Spain and Scandinavia to benefit from this in a number of ways for the last two years. The following example demonstrates how we successfully overcame

some typical resistance to The Strengths Way, that of an individual disagreeing with analysis about what their key strengths are.

Overcoming resistance

When one member of our executive talent team perceived that his future lay in an MD role, he could have hit a "brick wall." Perhaps guided by the stereotypical career ladder, he perceived this as the only way up and was willing to forfeit his future with the organization to get this title. Analysis of his strengths, which were based around creativity and entrepreneurship, soon revealed that this would be a bad fit. His talent lay in designing and implementing creative strategic marketing solutions. General management wouldn't have given him the same energy. He wouldn't have given the organization the same results as he was doing currently in a marketing directorship.

Strengths mentoring helped this executive to not only recognize the ill fit but to celebrate it and continue to build on his marketing talents. This executive continues to play to his strengths in a key creative marketing role and he's a strong contributor to our mentoring network, mentoring various members of our leader development program.

Step 3: Build strengths-based "Super Teams"

Fueled by the success of implementing a strengths-based approach to recruitment, performance management, appraisals and mentoring, and by a growing body of strengths converts, we're now building "Super Teams." Super Teams comprise volunteers – employees who proactively opt in and make their best contribution towards achieving the goals we set – as outlined in the Sony Turkey example below. They do professional work, solve problems and deliver peak performance. In HR, we work together with senior management to create Super Teams workshops for their teams, but the workshops are primarily led by the leader of the team.

Many employees take part in a Super Teams workshop, which looks at making tough decisions, especially about people: On a few occasions, the workshop has revealed that some members of the team are not and do not want to be part of the vision of the group. This has led to situations where people have then decided to leave.

The Super Teams approach needs individuals with a similarity of spirit and diversity of skills. The team is encouraged to focus on seven steps to achieve peak performance (see Figure 3, right):

1. purpose;
2. picture of perfection;
3. principles;
4. people;
5. professionalism;
6. problem-solving; and
7. peak performance.

↓ SONY EUROPE

Sony Europe, part of the Sony Corporation, a leading global audio-visual electronics and music company, is headquartered in Berlin, Germany. Sony Corporation employs 158,500 people worldwide, with 8,500 of these employed by Sony Europe. Sony Corporation is celebrating its 60th anniversary this year.

Our sales company in Turkey chose to implement the Super Teams approach in 2004, backing up the Super Teams workshop with strengths mentoring for the team members. Its business results in 2005 following the implementation of this approach in 2004 speak for themselves: sales increased by 41 percent, the company was 20 percent ahead of budget; profit increased by 50 percent and employee engagement by 10 percent.

Aligning approaches with the business

One of the benefits of The Strengths Way is that it draws from a rich tradition of approaches to people management and can be easily integrated with new approaches that share the strengths spirit. It's easy to weave into both existing and new infrastructures. At Sony Europe, we're now beginning to do exactly that, integrating a series of energizing development exercises into our newly devised "Energy Project." This project involves working with our senior European management, to increase their capacity through improving their physical, emotional, mental and spiritual energy.

We envisage it will help us to sustain the market position we've held for 60 years, thanks to our people and strengths-focused culture.

The Strengths Way ensures that everybody in Sony is focusing on what they do best. They're aligning their A talents to make their best contribution to the business and their best contributions are outstanding.



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Figure 3. The seven stages of "Super Teams"

