International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring
Vol. 7, No. 2, August 2009

Book Review

By Ian Wycherley
International Centre for Coaching and Leadership Development, Oxford Brookes University, UK.

Average to A+: Realising Strengths in Yourself and Others
Linley, P.A. (2008). Coventry, UK: CAPP Press.

This book takes a broad view of the evolution of strengths, how to recognise and develop them in others, and invites us all to contribute to helping people reach more of their potential in the world. The back cover claims that this book represents the state-of-the-art in understanding strengths and how to apply them. The author's aim is to make strengths understandable for everyone, developing a much richer, fuller strengths vocabulary the process. Many of the earlier chapters are highly relevant for coaches and mentors wishing to use positive psychology in their practice. Some of the later chapters are more specialised. Overall this is an interesting, stimulating and helpful contribution to our thinking on strengths.

The first chapter introduces some specific strengths language from the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP). Linley's definition of a strength is

> "a pre-existing capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking, or feeling that is authentic and energising to the user, and enables optimal functioning, development and performance" (page 9).

The author emphasises the importance of being precise about our strengths, especially since we don't have a good strengths vocabulary yet. He cites research that only around one third of the general population are able to give a meaningful answer concerning their strengths. These comments appear useful for coaches when discussing with coachees exactly what it is that they are good at, or have potential to do. The book also points out that some people may react negatively to the language of strengths as being too positive and "happy-clappy" or "touchy-feely". Linley discusses several conscious and unconscious reasons for such resistance. He deals with the most widespread reason under negativity bias in chapter 3.

Chapter two is a useful aid to our understanding about where strengths come from, and the importance of recognising our specific strengths. We need to be clear about our strengths, for example "being good with people" is too vague to be useful. In the CAPP framework this might be analysed into several component strengths such as "initiating relationships", "building rapport" and "deepening relationships". The argument is that identifying our strengths helps us to grow them and use them to achieve our goals. This gives a wealth of psychological and outcome-related benefits. The strengths approach is underpinned by the humanistic and self-actualising perspectives adopted by Rogers, Maslow and others.

Thus far the book has a strong argument for coaches and mentors to actively consider how they are using strengths within their practice, whether implicitly or explicitly. It raises the question of which language to use when discussing strengths with a coachee. There are several lists of strengths from Seligman's VIA (Values In Action), to Buckingham and Clifton's StrengthsFinder and the even longer list from CAPP's www.realise2.org website. It might help if a coach studied this area and deliberately chose one set of strengths language to

use. Linley is also aware that it may be better to use the coachee's own language rather than impose a standardised external framework.

Chapter three is about the growth and deployment of strengths. It starts with a discussion of the widespread negative bias that stems from the human condition. Linley argues that there is an opportunity cost of failing to build on strengths and opportunities. He suggests that using strengths more can lead to a virtuous cycle of positive emotions, better performance, and countering the negativity bias.

The chapter argues that a precisely targeted and carefully chosen use of a relevant strengths will give optimal results. It discusses why strengths may be over-played or under-played. It is common for coaches to help others to identify and develop their strengths. But this chapter offers an additional perspective by noting that some coachees may be overplaying their natural strengths. Linley cites evidence that this has been the cause of executive derailment in the past, for example being too tough-minded and task-oriented without balancing this with empathy.

Chapter four suggests techniques for spotting strengths in ourselves and others. It covers online tools and also observing how people talk about themselves. Each method has its limitations. Linley provides a fairly comprehensive list of non-verbal behaviours associated with someone discussing a personal strength versus a weakness. He suggests that we should explore thinking, feeling and behaviour in the present, past and future. CAPP offers training in this area, however it is helpful guidance for coaches who wish to work with strengths coaching. The book also suggests listening for the consistency of how people talk about their strengths. It is encouraging that the conversation in coaching may lend itself to a more complete and individually-tailored assessment of a person's unique strengths, framed in that person's language.

The book provides sources for several online tests. Readers may wish to investigate the new strengths test offered by CAPP at www.realise2.org, currently scheduled for February 2009.

Chapter five encourages us to adopt the growth mindset that is familiar to coaches and mentors. Linley argues that this should not lead to thinking that anyone can do anything. Conversely, the growth mindset does not assume that people have a fixed set of strengths. It assumes that humans can improve their strengths by practising in a variety of different contexts, and that people will focus on different combinations of strengths depending on the context. The chapter encourages us to find new ways to deploy existing strengths as a way of guarding against habituation. Linley gives his own example of being strong on academic reflection as an academic, and then moving to using more strategic strengths as head of CAPP. This is a useful chapter for coaches and mentors. It offers sound advice on building confidence by opening someone up to more positive feedback and by making healthy comparisons with others. There is a model of using strengths, giving rise to increased energy, but also to build in periods for recovery and renewal. Linley builds on the advice of others (notably Drucker) that weaknesses should be made irrelevant. He suggests that good self-awareness and an ability to discuss one's strengths may lead to greater comfort in acknowledging one's weaknesses.

Chapter six uses consultancy experience and some limited academic evidence to build a case that organisations should use strengths in areas such as organising teams and using

strengths-based performance reviews. The author argues that many individual and organisational benefits will result from a strengths-based program. The chapter is a more organisation-based application of the previous chapter on using strengths at work. As such, it will be more interesting for those coaches practising with managers and leaders in organisations.

Chapter seven may be valuable for coaches and parents who interested in developmental psychology. It applies the growth mindset to young people. It may also be helpful for those working in schools. I would recommend reading the story of ”The Samurai In The Tea Shop” as a commentary on an unusual way to help children flourish.

The closing chapter invites readers to develop their own strengths, those of others, and to contribute to positive change in society. It is clear that the author is deeply committed to helping the less fortunate people in developing nations, and to making more of a practical impact than he would have done as an academic. The chapter speaks to the fundamental aims of what we do as coaches. It challenges our values and beliefs on why we choose to help people fulfil more of their potential. Whilst some readers might not agree with some of the specifics within the chapter, there are some useful questions at the end which might trigger reflection on the purpose of our coaching. The book concludes with a good set of notes and references, and a glossary of a sample of 24 strengths from the www.realise2 tool.

Overall, this book is a valuable and clear contribution to current thinking about strengths. Most of it is highly relevant to coaching and mentoring, and it will also be of interest to managers and leaders in organisations. It is written by a knowledgeable and enthusiastic standard-bearer of the positive psychology movement. Whilst it sometimes has limitations on the depth and extent of evidence for some of its claims, this reflects the short history of the field.