

How Do You Become a Strength-Based Organization?

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This article describes the ongoing journey of Craigwood Youth Services toward becoming a strength-based organization. Having embraced a strength-based model of service delivery, this organization continues to build systems and align structures to achieve their vision.

The Organization

Craigwood Youth Services is a children's mental health centre serving south-western Ontario, Canada. With a broad array of community and residential programs targeted primarily at adolescents, the purpose of the organization is to facilitate change in individuals, families or communities. Craigwood has served this population for almost 55 years with a primary focus on those 'hardest-to-serve', particularly those whom other organizations find too difficult to serve. One could therefore categorize our organization as a primary change agent – an amalgamation of individuals in various capacities who collectively represent a deep understanding of people and the forces that both invite us into and dissuade us from a change process. We are recognized experts in this field.

The sector in which we operate has been the recipient of cutbacks and underfunding for 15 years despite significant increases in expectations. Typically of our sector, we do not have the sufficient people to carry out the required tasks. At the same time, there is a huge untapped reservoir of potential in people that we would like to access.

The Genesis of the Journey

This chronicles the start of a five-year journey to create a strength-based organization.

The determination to move in this direction arose from a number of areas:

- 1) Buckingham's *Now, Discover Your Strengths*¹ became the focus of a discussion between the author and the Manager of HR on its applicability to the organization. An affirmative response led to a wider distribution of this book to the senior management team and more discussion.
- 2) An extensive trends analysis with implications for the organization.
- 3) An in-depth review of the therapeutic and management literature.
- 4) An analysis of the internal functioning of the organization, particularly with an eye to whether our structures and processes were operating from deficit based positions and whether we functioned in a manner that built on our learnings versus repeating them.

We had also arrived at a natural point in formulating a new strategy for the organization. With the ending of a yearlong consolidation phase, we had entered a period of organizational reflection and were ready to move on. These deliberations in combination with the organizational journey led to a discussion on whether moving in the direction of strengths offered the organization an opportunity to progress further on the road to becoming a high-performance organization. At that point we were approximately eight months into training our staff on a treatment model that we had developed as a core for every program. A solution focused approach – identifying client strengths – constituted a key component of this model. Most therapeutic training arises from a problem-based approach. Therapist focus is on what is wrong in a client's life and how it can be corrected. The

development of the solution-focused approach preceded positive psychology and was premised on answering a similar question: what if instead of spending most of our time finding, understanding and categorizing problems, we channelled our energies into unearthing and understanding our client's strengths?

Discussions on these issues led to a key question: *Is it possible to practice strength-based therapeutic approaches in a deficit-based culture?* We function not unlike the medical system. Clients come to us with difficulties in their lives. It is our job to diagnose the nature of the difficulties, fashion an appropriate treatment plan, and then carry it out together with the client. We have a good reputation as problem solvers.

We came to the realization that this presented an enormous challenge for us. We are in a highly regulated environment, a sector in which mandatory reports focus on risk management and compliance. We are embedded in a deficit culture, one of finding problems and being constantly vigilant of this. Our hearts told us that within this environment and the constant barrage of deficit-based thinking, our staff would be hard pressed to practice from a strengths focus. As a result, we concluded that we would need to totally redesign the organization to provide an appropriate 'home' for a strength-based perspective.

The Decision

Our discussions encompassed every aspect of the agency. We had a variety of initiatives we decided to consolidate under the broad rubric of knowledge network. We concluded that the task of becoming a strength-based learning organization required a substantial cultural shift. It required a new mental framework that allowed us to see our organizational structure and processes from an appreciative perspective, providing insights into how to build a supporting structure for strength-based work. We engaged Maureen McKenna, a consultant with expertise as an AI practitioner to facilitate this holistic transformation.

In beginning this process, we did not know (and still don't) what the end entity will look like. It is an emerging process, guided by principles and general directions.

Key desired outcomes include:

- 1) A culture change that brings life to the organization
- 2) Optimization of human resources
- 3) Employee internalization of continuous growth
- 4) A re-imagining of agency identity to one of a provider of solutions
- 5) Leadership talent for the future
- 6) A performance oriented culture
- 7) The generation of new knowledge and practices

How are we doing this?

Step One: A Three-day Retreat for the Whole Management Team

We began with a three day retreat for the entire management team. Maureen facilitated an in-depth orientation to Appreciative Inquiry, followed by a one day retreat with the management team and team leaders with a focus on HR challenges in the organization.

Step Two: Shared Leadership

We wanted to develop a more formal leadership training process than we had in place. A one day retreat with the entire management team and the team leaders laid out the groundwork with a crucial determinant being that the organization move to a shared

leadership model – one that would invite every employee, from orientation onwards, to step forward and be part of the leadership process. Supervisors and team leaders (unionized positions), with senior management leadership, are developing the leadership model.

Step Three: Introduce AI to Program Areas

A full day retreat has been conducted with senior staff from each program area, introducing them to AI and a strengths orientation. This is being followed up with one day retreats for all employees in each service area in the next few months so every employee will have received a more structured introduction as well as more details about the thinking and planning that have led us in this direction and how Appreciative Inquiry, a strengths focus and a learning culture are core components of our future identity.

Step Four: StrengthFinder

All members of the management team have taken the Gallup StrengthFinder with the information being shared and worked with in a variety of ways. Many have also taken the VIA Signature Strengths assessment. Supervisors have integrated a strengths focus into their supervision processes.

Step Five: Hiring Strengths

Work is presently underway on bringing a strengths focus more into the hiring and performance management process.

Step Six: Priority – Communications

Since the start of this process, communication with the entire organization has been a priority. Memos have explained various aspects. Senior managers have attended staff meetings in all program areas to speak to ongoing changes. Bulletin boards share personal strengths. AI ‘thoughts for the day’ are broadly shared. Stories of strengths, achievements and successes have been integrated as standing agenda items in meetings.

Final Thought

To effect this kind of total transformation requires a DNA changeover in the organization. Repetition of the message in as many modalities as possible is necessary, as often as possible. The journey requires courage and faith in the capacity and willingness of others to co-create something new, to embark on a journey of unknown end with course markers that become established as one goes along. It is more a compass-setting journey than a strategic plan. It challenges us to the core. There are many who thought (and continue to do so), that this only represents a slight shift in what we have already been doing; we only need to do more of it and better. Perhaps the greatest challenge of all is gaining an awareness and acceptance of how fundamental a change we are really engaged in, for doing so presents a very serious question: ‘Am I prepared to see the world and my work through a different lens than that which I have been using? If so, what kind of changes will I have to undertake?’

Endnote

ⁱ Marcus Buckingham. (2001) *Now, Discover your Strengths*. New York :The Free Press.