



Strong from the Foundation, Up: Tips for Building a Strength-Based Organization

By **Michele Okposo, R.Ph.**



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This continuing education article is intended for pharmacists, nurses, and other alternate-site infusion professionals.

Continuing Education Objectives

1. Discuss the trend in strength-based organizational development, and current research supporting its growth
2. Explain the rationale for beginning with self-identification of strengths when building a strength-based organization
3. List the steps for building a strength-based organization
4. Describe the STAR (Situation or Task, Action, Results) interview technique and how it can be utilized to identify employees with the strengths considered critical for the position under consideration

About the Author

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Okposo is also a faculty member at the University of Minnesota and lectures on time management, leadership, team building, human resources, business development and communication in both the Center for Spirituality and Healing and the College of Pharmacy's business and leadership courses. She can be reached at Michele@leadershipBALM.com or by phone 612-310-8876, or through her website: <http://www.leadershipbalm.com>.

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Strong from the Foundation, Up: Tips for Building a Strength-Based Organization

By Michele Okposo, R.Ph.

Does your home infusion workplace proactively recognize and develop the strengths of its employees and organization? Thought leaders in a variety of fields from human development and performance to human resources management assert that if your answer is “yes,” you may realize a rich array of benefits. This growing management style is based on recognizing individual talents and developing them into strengths. By managing this way, a “strength-based” organization is better equipped to outperform the competition as well as engage and retain employees who will, in turn, continue to develop as individuals and positively contribute to moving the organization forward. Success breeds success.

In one of the most widely acclaimed examples of this theory, the *Gallup Management Journal* began asking the question, “**At work, do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?**” This question was part of Gallup’s core employee engagement survey, which has been asked of 6.1 million respondents working in more than 540 companies worldwide. Through continued reporting and cross referencing, the survey results show that people who answered “strongly agree” were:¹

- 】 50% more likely to work on a team with lower employee turnover
- 】 38% more likely to work in more productive business units
- 】 44% more likely to work in a group with higher customer satisfaction scores

These findings document what many managers have known for some time: by integrating the principles of the strength-based organization, they can develop, engage, motivate, and inspire employees. It takes diversity and a wide range of talents, knowledge, skills, and strengths to have an efficient and effective alternate-site infusion team. Billing, sales and marketing, intake coordinators, drivers, warehouse clerks, nurses, pharmacists, and managers all have different skill sets—and even personality traits—and perform very different tasks day in and day out. A person’s strengths in one role can contribute to excellent performance, while the same strength in a different role can lead to frustration.

Strength is defined as consistent, near-perfect performance in an activity. It is a combination of talent, knowledge, and skills. To build a strength, identify the most powerful talents, then hone them with skills and

knowledge. Knowledge is the experience you gain as you apply your talent—as well as things you learn reading, studying, and talking about utilizing them.¹ Skills are the result of bringing those talents and knowledge into your everyday living.

THE STRENGTH-BASED SELF

The first step in building a strength-based organization—or life for that matter—is to “know thyself,” as Plato suggested many centuries ago. Let’s start with your talents.

To identify a talent in yourself, stop and think about what is easy for you to learn, what brings you satisfaction, and what causes you to lose track of time and become lost in moments of enjoyment. Practice self awareness. What part of your job gives you energy? What are you passionate about? When do you feel “in the flow?”

Talents occur naturally and are defined as any reoccurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied.¹ Examples include being inquisitive, competitive, responsible, driven, motivated, determined, analytical, able to find words for thoughts and feelings, energetic, decisive, accurate, attentive, a planner, or curious to name a few. Another option for discovering your talents is through personality profiling assessments and other instruments. There are many tools available through various professional development programs, and on the internet.

I encourage you to examine and work with your strengths more intentionally—and be sure to call upon your staff to do the same (I will cover more on engaging your team members later on in this article). Taking time to discover and develop your strengths can enhance your own professional life as well as fortify the teams you work with and your entire organization. For example, in my experience testing and building a personal profile, one of my top strengths continues to be **strategic**.² This strength enables me to sort through the clutter and find the best route. It is not a skill that can be taught. It is a distinct way of thinking, a special perspective on the world at large. This perspective allows me to see patterns where others simply see complexity.²

I spent many of my 10 years at a national home infusion provider in the role of regional operations manager. We were often a beta test site and tried out new business models before they were adopted companywide—or not. Our branch tested new staffing models, purchas-



ing processes, and regionalized billing to name a few. For me it was fun to be in on the discussions during the creation process of improving workflow, and even more energizing to figure out how to execute the changes.

I recall one discussion with a new regional infusion purchasing coordinator. The position had just been created and made a lot of sense from a big picture perspective. As we talked through various action steps and timelines, she looked at me with increasing frustration and said, "This is difficult, we don't have any policies and procedures to follow." I replied with a smile, "That's the exciting part."

Where she was looking for structure, I was excited by the possibility of creating our own framework. After I explained that we were charged with building the policies and procedures from the ground up and bringing them back to the leadership team for review and improvement, she did such a great job that she eventually became the head of infusion purchasing for the entire country.

In accordance with the strength-based organizational theory:

- 】 I have a natural talent and enjoy strategic planning
- 】 I gained much knowledge in home infusion over my many years as a pharmacist, branch manager, and regional manager
- 】 And I continued to develop my skills through seminars and reading articles like this one

It was a win-win for me to be in a position that played to my strength on a daily basis. I was fully engaged and passionate about contributing to my organization's success—we both benefited, and ultimately the patients we cared for benefited, as well. Juggling lots of balls and finding solutions to bottlenecks in our business were tasks that delighted me. As you may have guessed, being a staff pharmacist day in and day out and paying careful attention to the fine detail required for patient safety did not play to my strength.

Once you understand your talents more fully, seek out and follow through on opportunities that build your strengths at work and in professional organizations. Maybe it is a committee, a promotion, stepping forward to assist in developing a new process, training new staff, analyzing options, or writing up documents. When you have the opportunity to cultivate your strengths, you feel successful and fulfilled.

ENGAGING THE STRENGTH-BASED TEAM MEMBER

According to strength-based organizational theory, the best managers recognize that each person's talents are enduring and unique, and that the greatest room for growth is in the area of his or her greatest strength.

After you have cultivated awareness of your own strengths, it is easier to recognize the strengths of others. If you are in a leadership position, work with your team members to identify and develop their talents into strengths on your team.

One of the most powerful leadership skills you can develop to assist in this process is listening. Listening is the complex, innate, and learned human process of sensing, interpreting, evaluating, storing, and responding to messages.³ The importance of this skill was emphasized most eloquently by the Greek philosopher Epictetus, who observed, "We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak." The great news about listening is that it is a skill that can be developed. You can dramatically improve your listening skills by learning and practicing active and authentic listening strategies.

FACTS ABOUT LISTENING

- 】 Listening is our primary communication activity.
- 】 Listening is an innate, learned, and improvable behavior.
- 】 Poor listening is costly; effective listening is rewarding.
- 】 Responsible and active listeners are productive team members.
- 】 Listening can only be commanded to the degree developed.

Source: Steil L and Bommelje R. *Listening Leaders, The Ten Golden Rules to Listen, Lead, and Succeed*. 2004; Beaver Pond Press.

One excellent activity where you can utilize authentic listening for strength development is during your formal and informal performance reviews. This is especially effective if you keep in mind, that Gallup survey question (At work, do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?) To find the answer and build on the opportunities, devise open-ended questions to get at each team member's strength areas. Suggestions include:

- 】 What part of your job do you enjoy the most?
- 】 What ideas for improvement have you provided to your work group that you were excited to share? Were they discussed? Implemented?
- 】 What part of your job or skills for a future job with us would you like to know more about?
- 】 What kinds of activities are you involved in outside of work that excite you?
- 】 Do you have leadership roles in your community?



To build a strength-based organization, managers need to become personally invested in their team members' success

Decide on action steps that provide specific activities where each person **does** have the opportunity to do what they do best every day. Insist your leadership team does the same. To build a strength-based organization, managers need to become personally invested in their team members' success.¹ Not only does this buy-in and support create a healthy, productive work environment for employees, but it strengthens the organization by positioning it as an employer of choice.

It's true that not all performance reviews are held to discuss a team member's job satisfaction and potential growth. Sometimes these meetings occur because a team member is not meeting expectations. Regardless, if conducted positively—by a manager who is using active listening skills—even negative performance reviews can reap positive results.

I have had these tough conversations with several team members. In truth, the job functions some were expected to perform did not capitalize on their strengths. I remember one young pharmacist who just could not get the hang of keeping track of the ever-changing action steps required for each patient throughout the day. He would occasionally forget a shipment, not follow up on labs in time, or sometimes forget to follow up on a supply change request. Needless to say, it was creating all kinds of rework for the team and frustration for staff and patients. As he and I discussed particular incidents, he relayed how difficult this was and the stress symptoms it was producing in him. He left home infusion therapy, and is now working for a company selling stand-alone clean rooms. Someone else manages his calendars, and he builds relationships—a much better fit for all.

Listening and building strengths is also a key component in promotions. It is especially critical for managers to be mindful of promoting a team member right out of his or her strength area. How often have excellent nurses with strengths of empathy, harmony, sensitivity, and teaching been put in a role of managing

budgets and productivity with very little patient contact? Unfortunately, in my years as a home infusion manager, I've seen too many of these excellent patient-centered clinicians struggle in roles that did not play on their strengths and choose to move on. Similarly, we have all seen pharmacists with strengths related to analysis, attention to detail, consistency and personal accountability move up the ladder with the expectation that they be strategic, commanding, futuristic, and analytical.

BUILDING A STRENGTH-BASED TEAM

Perhaps the most critical way to apply the principles of strength-based organization theory is in identifying the right people and bringing them “on the bus” in the first place. Interviewing and hiring expertise is crucial for decreasing employee turnover, as well as ensuring productive employees, sound clinical outcomes, and high customer satisfaction. Over the years, I have found that it's easy enough to teach which tubing goes with what pump, but it's much more difficult to teach the innate qualities that make a great home infusion employee such as empathy, adaptability, motivation, and flexibility.

Many years ago in my first manager position, I learned the STAR strategy for interviewing new hires. STAR stands for Situation or Task, Action, and Results.⁵ This is a behavioral interviewing technique based on the idea that the most accurate predictor of future performance is past performance in similar situations. The responses to STAR interview questions must come from real-life experience, rather than general questions, such as “Tell me about yourself.” or “What would you do if...” This method of interviewing is said to be predictive of future on-the-job behavior 55% of the time, while traditional interviewing is predictive only 10 percent of the time.⁶ Exhibit 1 explains how the system works and lists desirable behaviors that alternate-site infusion therapy managers might want to explore in an interview.

Here are examples of how this may apply to your hiring needs for an alternate-site infusion team. Let's say you are interviewing for a warehouse supervisor. You look through the list of behaviors or talents, and you come up with four to six top requirements for this position. You may choose **adaptability**, since people in this position are always adjusting priorities based on very fluid patient and staff needs.² A question about a success may be, “Tell me about some situations in which you have had to adjust quickly to changes in organizational priorities. What was the impact of the change on you?” If you choose to explore **analysis**, you could ask, “Describe any significant projects,



EXHIBIT 1 STAR INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUE

Step 1. Choose about a half dozen desired behaviors (talents/strengths) you find essential for a person performing a particular job (see the list below for suggestions).

Step 2. Develop interview questions that ask a potential team member to describe a situation or task they were involved in that demonstrates that behavior, what action they actually took, and what the result was. Some of the situation or task questions ask for examples when things did not work out as planned, and some are about successes.

Step 3. Listen attentively to the answers. If the response is theoretical or hypothetical, follow up with probing statements such as: "Tell me more about the situation." "What were you thinking at that point?" "Lead me through your decision process."

Desirable Behaviors

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|-------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| › Ability to learn | › Impact | › Presentation skills |
| › Adaptability | › Independence | › Rapport building |
| › Analysis | › Initiative | › Resilience |
| › Attention to detail | › Innovation | › Risk taking |
| › Communication-oral | › Integrity | › Safety awareness |
| › Communication-written | › Judgment | › Sales ability/persuasiveness |
| › Decisiveness | › Leadership/influence | › Sensitivity |
| › Delegation | › Listening | › Strategic analysis |
| › Development of subordinates | › Motivation | › Teamwork |
| › Energy | › Negotiation | › Technical/professional knowledge |
| › Entrepreneurial | › Organizational | › Technical/professional proficiency |
| › Equipment operation | › Participative | › Tenacity |
| › Insight | › Sensitivity | › Training |
| › Fact Finding-oral | › Management | › Work standards |
| › Financial analytical | › Planning and organizing | |
| › Flexibility | › Practical learning | |

ideas, etc. you have conceived within the past year? How did you know they were needed and would work? Were they used? Did they work?"

Let's say you are interviewing for a pharmacist and you decide **attention to detail** is one of your top behavioral picks. An example of a question about something that did not go as preferred is, "Can you give me some examples of when you found errors in your work? What were the causes? How did you handle it?" If you choose **oral communication**, you may ask, "Give examples of some of the worst communication problems you have experienced."

Again, there are a plethora of resources on STAR interviewing online and in bookstores (look under management and/or career development). I encourage you to learn more about this method in addition to identifying the behaviors you desire—and don't desire—from team members in certain positions. Then take the step of listing out STAR questions—this will build your knowledge and skills. "Learn, do, and

teach" is a great way to build knowledge and skill and turn your talent into a strength!

BUILDING A STRENGTH-BASED ORGANIZATION

Clearly developing your strengths and those of each team member will have a profoundly positive impact on your entire business, both internally and externally—and both clinically and financially. As you build a "culture of strength," you also improve: employee retention, efficiency, effectiveness, and customer satisfaction. Simultaneously, creativity, passion, and growth will begin to flourish from this productive base.

As listening skills excel, your entire business blossoms. In large part, this is due to better communication at every level. As noted organizational communications professor Richard Heyman, Ed.D., observed: "Systems that ensure clear communication increase operational efficiency and thus create value for the



organization. Better operational procedures and processes can be built upon the base provided by these systems. A result may be a better good, service, system or idea. Another result may be better relationships within the organization and between the organization and its customers, clients and anyone else in some relationship to it.”⁷

Identifying specific performance criteria that reflect building strengths in your organization is essential. Measure outcomes for business results, impact on customers, and impact on culture. Be sure your financial incentives, promotion parameters, performance reviews, salary increases, recognition programs, and hiring practices reflect building your organizational strengths.

Strength development is a life-long venture. As you look ahead in your own career, be sure to mentor and coach your staff. Doing this, while envisioning the future for your organization and utilizing the principles of the strength-based organization, adds depth and breadth to the process.

As my career has progressed, I continue to develop my strength of *maximizer*.² Accordingly, one of my talents lies in seeing the strengths, talents, and emerging abilities in other people—even before they can see them. Being able to see what people could be like if they were to fully develop and maximize their talents allows me to have an incredible impact in the lives of others. Managers with this strength can cultivate the strengths of others by holding up pictures and mirrors of what they see to help their team members form new concepts of themselves. This gives them the motivation to achieve and be what they have the capacity to be. Additional mentoring helps move them into roles where they can live out their potential and contribute to the overall improvement and success of the organization.

Knowing and understanding your talents (and their associated strengths and frustrations) can help you seek experiences and develop skills that maximize your own potential. As you hone in on your profile, you can use it to select continuing education programs; focus on relationships you build; and as a guide throughout your career planning. And again, as you better cultivate your ability to engage in this process within yourself, look to foster—and harness—that same growth in your team and within your organization, as well.

I invite and encourage you to continue to develop your strengths through gaining knowledge, both didactic and experiential, and practicing your skills within your alternate-site infusion business and professional organizations, such as NHIA. Utilizing this strength-based approach will, without question, deepen the capacity for you, your team, and your organization to excel.

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