

# Strengths-Driven Leadership: Fueling High-Performance Nonprofits

Rather than focusing on people's weaknesses,  
try this way of highlighting their strengths.

*By Maura Koehler-Hanlon*

**A**staggering three-quarters of nonprofit leaders say that employee burnout is getting in the way of their ability to achieve their mission and goals, according to a Gallup survey. This lack of engagement is making it harder to achieve excellence in an era of shifting workforce expectations and increased community needs. Read on to learn how to reverse this crippling trend.

## Culture as the Catalyst for Evolution

In every phase of an organization's evolution, culture drives everything. When employees share a strong sense of purpose, align with organizational values, and are motivated to meet and exceed their goals, a high-performance culture emerges. A growing number of leaders are recognizing the value of strengths-based leadership in building this culture at the individual, the team, and the organizational level. By identifying and nurturing unique team member strengths, leaders create an environment where employees feel valued, energized, and empowered. This approach encourages resilience, fosters innovation, and enables continuous improvement.



## Individual Strength: Identify & Invest

Traditional performance management tends to focus on improving employees' weaknesses, with formal input at annual performance reviews. In contrast, a strengths-based model enhances employees' strengths, delivering feedback frequently in both formal and informal settings. This approach tailors coaching to develop areas of strength that can have monumental impact on connection, engagement, and results. Research by Gallup indicates that employees who use their strengths daily are more productive and less likely to resign.

A strengths-based leader's role is to help grow the strengths of each individual. This involves understanding what employees love to do, what they excel at, and the areas in which they want to grow, then cultivating these strengths by finding growth opportunities. This process helps employees feel seen, valued, and purposeful. Highlighting strengths has impacts on the individual and also fosters an environment where everyone can show up as their true selves, enhancing overall team cohesion and performance.

**Get started:** Pinpoint people's strengths either through formal assessments or simple questions embedded into conversation – What gives you energy? What work are you drawn to? – to suss out areas of excitement, which are almost always fueled by natural talent.

## Team Strength: Embed in Daily Conversation & Work Planning

Once you focus on investing in individuals' strengths, you can apply this approach at the team level. Visibility and collaboration are key elements of an effective and healthy team – and a strengths lens can be a powerful tool in building both. Ensuring that people understand their peers' strengths and styles allows them to support one another and do their best work. The goal is for strengths to become a part of daily conversation.


When teams understand who excels in which areas, they naturally start turning to one another to collaborate. This not only supports the individual looking for help but also engages the whole team and improves results.

A strengths-based lens can open the door for flexibility in the way work is divided. Traditional models typically assign work based on pre-defined job roles; a strengths-based model upends that paradigm by considering how work aligns to



“Use existing touchpoints or take a deeper dive.”

## Steps to Strength

You can start small or big, with formal strengths-based coaching or informal tactics. The key is to keep strengths an ongoing conversation. Ask your employees, your teams, and your leaders: What’s giving you energy this week? What are you loving, and what do you feel like you’re doing really well? What do you need to do your best work? What are you excited to invest in learning? By working these types of questions into the regular routine, you can start to build a high-performing culture that celebrates and builds on individual, team, and organizational strengths. 

individuals’ growth plans. By shifting to “the team owns this work” and divvying up the details based on strength, you can maximize productivity, collaboration, and output.

**Get started:** Build discussions of strengths into team conversations. You can use existing touchpoints (such as a strengths highlight in each weekly team meeting) or take a deeper dive into teambuilding (for example, as part of an offsite or annual planning meeting). A strengths-based conversation can be an especially powerful tool when paired with strategic planning conversations. By highlighting the power of diverse perspectives, a strengths-based model boosts problem-solving and innovation.

## Organizational Strength: Build a Strengths-Based Culture

The final evolution of strengths-based leadership extends its impact organization-wide. With a broad reach, you can celebrate excellence by emphasizing strengths in the design of performance management, making it a consistent conversation in team and org-wide forums, and using the language as a platform to talk about organizational values and strengths. This constant emphasis on growing strengths embeds the approach into the organization’s culture. To nurture a strengths culture, leaders should focus on ongoing coaching, modeling, reinforcement, and celebration of individual, team, and organizational strengths.

To increase the impact, offer trainings and resources to help everyone implement strengths-based practices, facilitating peer-to-peer collaboration. By incorporating the language and practice of strengths into the culture, you can create structures that leverage and celebrate diverse strengths.

**Get Started:** Use self-reflection to pinpoint and explore your own strengths. You can then model what it looks like to talk about personal and organizational strengths. Help others discuss what they’re excited to be working on and where they can benefit from others’ support.

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## Enhance the Possibilities

Forge a culture of engagement, resilience, and high performance with the resources available at NonprofitWorld.org. Start here:

**Accomplish More by Climbing the Productivity Pyramid** (Vol. 36, No. 3)

**Going Beyond Why: Three Powerful Ways to Cultivate a Culture of Purpose** (Vol. 39, No. 1)

**Bring Yourself Fully to Your Nonprofit Role** (Vol. 41, No. 1)

**One-on-One Coaching: The Most Effective Way to Develop Your People** (Vol. 41, No. 3)

**Fostering Organizational Resilience** (Vol. 39, No. 3)

**Take It Up a Notch: Using Kaizen for Continuous Improvement** (Vol. 37, No. 2)

**Assess Your Work Style for Better Communication** (Vol. 37, No. 4)

**A Path to Stronger Programs, Greater Engagement, and Less Burnout?** (Vol. 36, No. 1)

**Why Feedback Is the Key to Your Success** (Vol. 35, No. 3)

**Grounded Visioning: A Quick Way to Create Shared Visions** (Vol. 26, No. 4)

**Diverse Workgroups Spur Positive Change** (Vol. 37, No. 3)

**Productive Employees: Two Crucial Ingredients** (Vol. 37, No. 2)