

PROBLEMS IN PARADISE: The strength-based movement is stuck, and you can help get it moving again.

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Editors Note: This article is written for funders, advocates and professionals working in family support, mental health, and youth programs.

Over the last year, using the evidence-based and fail-safe “show of hands” research methodology, I have been asking social service audiences two questions. Question One: How many of you gather a fairly comprehensive list of strengths during the assessment or intake process you use with folks you are helping? In every case, almost everyone in the audience raised his or her hand. Question Two: How many of you would say employees in your organization do a good job of utilizing those listed strengths in the specific activities on the plan you develop with the person? Regardless of the size of the audience, there has never been more than a half-dozen hands raised.

Although it would be difficult to create a strength-based list of my shoddy research methods, the message is clear—we have a long ways to go before the strength-based movement makes it out of the basement and more fully into the life of organizations and people being served. How is your organization doing?

Make no mistake—I am very hopeful about the future of the strength-based movement. Social service movements always hit a lull. We are involved in a predictable and naturally occurring event. There is always a flurry of hopeful energy at the start, and everyone’s spirits are lifted further by the promising initial stories of success. Then come the tougher changes—resistant staff, leaders misunderstanding and/or stonewalling change, funding requirements creating burdens of documentation and procedures which interfere with the daily work, the natural tendency to return to the comfort of ‘how we used to do it’, and getting past the inevitable “See, it didn’t work!” stories that surface as the new methods are tried and sometimes fail as people learn how to do the new thing.

It’s important that we keep moving. The consequences of not doing so could eradicate our hard won gains. I remember sitting on the porch of a retreat center, talking with the manager of a state children’s social service system and the manager of a large statewide technical assistance organization. In the course of the conversation, both of them agreed that if there wasn’t more hands on implementation of strength-based practices within organizations in their state, the money for those initiatives would disappear within three years. They were a little too optimistic. It went away shortly after they talked.

In this day and age, someone is going to ask me for the research study showing the strength-based movement is stalled. I can’t provide you with any. But that doesn’t mean, using other kinds of equally reliable observation and truth finding, we don’t collectively know for certain we’re stuck. It’s more about noticing the little things that keep repeating themselves. For instance, most helping professionals talk as if the strength-based movement is a done deal—it’s in place, alive and well, and now we’re ready to get on with something else. However, basic awareness of what it really means to be a strength-based organization easily informs us that we are far from having this be a done deal. Why are we so eager to move on...could we be avoiding the more difficult aspects of implementing strength-based practice? In another vein, I’ve had a difficult time finding an organization that has an active learning plan in place for becoming more strength-based. We tell our customers that, without intentional plans for learning and change, it’s unlikely positive and healthy growth will occur. Why would it be any different for us? On a more personally discouraging note, I’ve observed many organizations still practicing, on a daily basis, what could only be referred to as punitive and deficit-based responses to their customers. Although I’m

sure these actions are not intentionally hurtful, the effect in the person or family is often a sense of defeatism and loss of hope and, in us, a reaffirmation that we are, after all, the experts in charge.

Community organizers have a saying that is meant to explain the puzzling condition of people who know the “right” thing to do and yet refuse to take action. It goes something like, “Sometimes acknowledgement of a problem is so relieving that we are no longer concerned with acting upon it.” The sweet relief that comes from finally getting the truth out in the open, coupled with self-congratulatory accolades for having “figured it out”, are powerful incentives for a person or group to stop in their tracks and bask in the comfort for a moment. The problem—in social services— is that there are multiple pushes and pulls in the daily work life of often overworked and stressed out leaders and staff that capitalize on this temporary respite and use it as the turning point back towards the way things used to be. Could our understanding of the importance of strength-based practices, coupled with the increasing difficulty in fully integrating the practices on a daily basis, be conspiring to relieve us of some of the initial urgency so many of us felt? Are we being lulled back to sleep?

If we choose to wake up from the nap, and not have it turn into a deep sleep, what could we do to get the strength-based movement chugging along again? The easy things have already been done, so we might as well begin to tackle ideas and strategies that will take us some time to figure out, but will result in deepening our understanding of what it means to be sustainably strength-based and lead us to even greater success.

What have we accomplished so far? Last year, I worked with employees from more than fifty different social service organizations who are trying to adopt—with varying levels of commitment and success—strength-based practices. I’ll bet your shoot-from-the-hip summary would be similar to mine: Most organizations have adopted the language of strength-based practice, and it’s visible in their written documents. Most organizations collect lists of strengths as part of their intake processes for individuals/families. Most organizations understand the importance of having people with similar stories share their lives and stories with each other. Most organizations have recognized the legitimacy that comes from hiring a few advocates who have the experience of the people the organization is serving.

What else is there to do? The next stages of the movement will require us to deepen our knowledge and skills in three key areas. First, within *direct service practices*, to learn more about how to help a person fully utilize their strengths within the context of their current struggles. Second, *within organizational culture*, for employees to walk the strength-based talk and become living examples with each other of the practices they are using with the people they serve. And third, *for leaders* to courageously and vigorously lead towards innovative strength-based practices in addition to managing day to day activities.

Below, I’ve described a few things in each of these three categories that I believe would help refocus and re-energize our learning and action. They are certainly not the only things, and you may have better ideas. They are offered with the spirit of getting some of the roots of our collective stuckness out in the open so we can get moving again.

Within direct service practices

The bottom line indicator of a strength-based organization is its ability to help a person identify and utilize their strengths to move forward in their life. We will learn how to more comprehensively identify and tap the genuine and readily available power in strengths when we:

Understand and act on the idea that a strength is not simply a strength—it is a skill, a talent, or a gift. Knowing the difference, and using each of them in different ways during planning and subsequent on-going support activities, is critical to our success for three reasons. First, the intensity of a person’s motivation and passion to act is directly related to whether they see their contribution as a skill, a talent or a gift. There’s not a helping professional alive who isn’t interested in a highly motivated and passionate person to work with. Second, knowing the person’s gift provides considerable insight into the flip side of the gift—how the person has framed their most difficult life experiences. Without going into

detail, suffice it to say that behavior change can be shifted exponentially with this knowledge. And third, clarity about talents and gifts gives deep insight into how to structure opportunities for a person to be welcomed and included in community places of his/her choice. The simple technology to make and use these distinctions is readily available. Let's put it to use.

Stop making lists of strengths in assessment processes. Identifying strengths is THE cornerstone task in a strength-based service system. We're just doing it at the wrong step in the helping process. Humans are readily able to identify their strengths and weaknesses when they are immediately faced with a task to achieve—there's a natural motivation to weigh the circumstances and decide what we can do and what we will need help with. Creating general strength lists in intake processes, prior to identifying changes and developing a plan of care—and usually before we really even know the person—is not useful. I have consistently noticed that many committed strength-based professionals do not like the strengths list-making process, do not do a very thorough job of it, and generally don't use that list of strengths in the plan of care. I have heard helping professionals say they think it's patronizing to the people they are helping and done mostly in service to the agencies rules and protocols. I think the reasons for their hesitance are entirely logical—there's not much point in it until there is some plan of action and an urgent motivation to get into some change activities. Instead, why don't we begin to make an on-going documentation of strengths, if we have to document them at all, as we help a person make plans for change and engage in those changes? If regulatory or funding agencies insist on strength-based lists during assessment, let's get the rule changed over time. Most importantly, in the meantime, let's not fool ourselves by seeing this list-making as actually contributing to or validating our work as "strength-based."

See "behavior problems" and "motivational issues" through the lense of gifts and wounds.

Cultures around the world understood the simple dynamics of gifts and wounds long before the therapeutic profession laid its claim to healing. Using this lense offers any helping professional, licensed or not, an elegant set of practical operating principles and practices. There are two primary benefits. First, using this paradigm reminds us that the unhealthiest behavior in a person is often their greatest strength—in fact, it's usually their core gift— being given in a way that drives others away from them and often causes harm to themselves. For instance, a student in high school who argues with the teacher at every turn in the road and ends up in a special education classroom may, in fact, have a gift for discovering the truth, or having all voices be heard, or expanding other people's imagination. He/she is just doing it in that particular environment in a way that upsets learning and creates trouble. The typical response of trying to change the behavior, i.e. reduce the outbursts, is like trying to eliminate the bubble under the carpet...it will just show up somewhere else, equally as destructive. Instead, the wise helping professional will find ways for the person to exaggerate this same behavior in situations where it will be valued. Second, the gift/wound paradigm helps us reclaim the useful idea that a person's ability to heal is directly connected to identifying the strengths they have gotten from their toughest life experiences, and then finding ways to give those strengths and be acknowledged for them. This is not clinical or therapeutic work limited to licensed professionals—this is the job of every helping professional. Plans of Care should, without exception, focus on helping a person identify strengths built during their ordeals and then provide action plans that include opportunities for them to give those strengths in settings where they will be acknowledged and valued. This is an essential component for healing and helps return the person to wholeness.

Within organizational culture:

Learn how to offer strength-based services by building a strength-based work climate. The rule for organizational behavior is that people won't give to others—over the long haul—what they aren't getting themselves. Most of us have witnessed a co-worker who has been treated poorly by their boss and responds by becoming a behavior problem with other workers or rude to their customers. If we want

strength-based services to be delivered by employees, then we'd better be providing employees with a strength-based work climate in which to operate. How do you create a strength-based work culture? There are many steps, but if you haven't done these three, there's a pretty good chance Paradise is still a ways down the road.

First, ask employees to define what a strength-based work climate would feel like and look like. They are already acutely aware of what feels like capacity based, nurturing, and healthy work tasks and those which do not. Wise leaders both acknowledge and temper their desire to protect the status quo during these awareness-building discussions. Use this information as a guide for building more strength-based interactions and practices.

Second, it's impossible to maintain a strength-based work culture when you aren't using strength-based activities with customers. Think of the steps in serving your customers as 1) initial welcome, 2) intake/authorization/assessment, 3) developing a plan, 4) on-going activities and support, and 5) exit. Define the activities within each of these types of customer interactions that are, and are not, strength-based. Oftentimes, organizations are using strength-based strategies in one step, and then move into deficit-based practices in the next step. Again, take action to change.

Third, a genuine strength-based work culture requires that each employee's specific gifts and talents are known to other employees. In addition, they must have regular opportunities to contribute these gifts and receive public and private acknowledgement for them. Has the leader provided time for each staff person to discover/remember and then carefully describe their gifts and talents to other co-workers? Are they being relied on for those gifts and talents? Are staff encouraged to use work time to learn more about how to use and contribute those gifts and talents? Have employees been given the opportunity to discover and dialogue about the inevitable and often dramatic difficulties that their gifts and talents will create with other co-workers and the people they are helping? Until staff have integrated gifts and talents into their own workday, and see the benefits, it is unlikely they will fully engage in helping the people they are serving to discover and utilize their talents and gifts. In my view, this is currently the single largest hurdle to fully realizing strength-based practice.

Don't get oversold on the evidence-based practices bandwagon. Alright, burn me at the stake, but hear me out before you strike the match. As I travel around, I've become convinced most leaders and staff think adhering to evidence-based practice means they should only be implementing model programs and ideas that have been previously proven to work in some other organization. It's seen as a kind of urgent program replication mandate. Clinging to this definition will result in the death of innovation for all but the most innovative organizations. Why? Because it encourages leaders to look for already established models rather than utilize the wisdom and creativity of their own staff. Although it seems counterintuitive at first glance, research shows that designing and improving programs is not seen by staff as a further burden, but rather as a significant source of inspiration, hopefulness, and creativity. What would get your enthusiasm going more: copying someone else or thinking up something new yourself? When you simply adopt model programs being used elsewhere, you rob employees of significant sources of fresh air and renewed commitment. There's also an element of courage at work here. Courageous people don't wait for somebody else to prove something works before they go out and try to solve it themselves. With all the rules and regulations, we're becoming an industry that is risk averse, and it's spreading into our willingness to invent programs that have a hint of danger and risk, and fully capture our hearts and minds. The field of evidence-based practice is useful in helping to bring the laggard organizations up to the current norm by requiring certain standards, but when it's used as the model for organizational development it can and will stifle innovation. Remember, when a movement is stuck or moving slowly, the evidence of what is working is also moving slowly. We've got to get a little more courage going, pick up the pace, and not be afraid to make some mistakes while we are learning.

Pay attention to what the rules of the system tell you is impossible. Most often, this is exactly the path to follow. Systemic structures and rules are, by their very nature, not tolerant of community-spirited

and strength-based action because it: 1) defies usual definitions of authority, 2) blurs traditional boundaries between helpers, those being helped, and other community members, 3) often relies on knowledge and wisdom found outside of professional training, and 4) often doesn't depend on institutions for its permission to do things. When the rules of systems collide with the rules of community, there is usually food for truth finding and resulting right action. Strength based organizations learn how to stay under the radar and live in the middle between the rules of institutions and the rules of community.

Establish and maintain rituals that sustain organizational health. There are two rules in old cultures—you never suffer alone and you never celebrate alone. In this individualistic culture, which permeates organizations, employees are expected to tough it out and do good work. There isn't much time, given the high caseloads and often crisis nature of the work, to gather with other employees for what are seen as “feel-good” activities that take time away from the real work. We are forgetting that certain rituals are more than niceties—they are essential to sustain personal and organizational health, particularly in helping organizations. To further complicate things, in this melting pot culture we live in, it is increasingly difficult to design and carry out a ritual that someone does not object to on the basis of his or her culture or faith tradition. Amazingly enough, some people even object to the word “ritual” being used within an organizational context. This means, more than ever, we need to be focusing on learning how to re-create these essential events that have held communities together for centuries. What are the necessary rituals? First, employees must participate in rituals that help to release the weight of the stories they are carrying. Without release, the stories become a burden that deadens hope and stifles creativity. Gathering to tell stories, and then releasing those stories through some kind of simple gesture in the form of a ritual, frees the space inside a person to carry new stories and continue helping. Second, rituals of public remembering of successes and why those successes occurred. This act of honoring successes, along with the accompanying step of helping others learn why it was successful, carries the seed of hope for future action in the organization. Third, rituals that acknowledge and provide opportunity to attend to what needs healing in the organization. By healing, I mean focusing on processes the organization uses and relationships between employees that are not contributing to the health of the workgroup. The common practice of apologizing for continuing to use processes that deaden hope, but never changing them, or allowing employees to carry on unhealthy interactions with each other over extended periods of time, are a sign of hopeless and/or uninformed leadership. And fourth, frequent rituals of welcoming and inclusion are necessary which acknowledge each employee's gifts and provide opportunity for them to be told how the organization benefits from their membership in the group.

For Leaders:

Take a deep breath and read the next line: When an organization is stuck or staff are feeling too overwhelmed or crisis-oriented, the root of the trouble can almost always be traced to a lack of people- management skills or clarity of vision in the leader. Period. This does not mean that the leader has no skills or no vision, it simply means that they need to increase their skills or rework their vision. For an organization to be truly innovative and strength-based, the leader(s) need to be learning at the same rate the organization is innovating. Wise leaders fight the tendency to believe that they know what should happen, and don't spend their time lamenting the staff's inability to carry out their noble vision. After all, if staff aren't doing the right thing, can't that be traced right back to the leader's doorstep? Wise leaders are actively searching for understanding about the elements of their leadership style that are holding the organization back. Strength-based staff training will not produce sustainable results unless there are strong and clear leadership skills and accountability structures.

Leaders must treat and sustain the organization fundamentally as a learning group rather than a service delivery organization. From the outside, it looks like service delivery. From the inside, everything is organized around what we are trying to learn. We serve people on a daily basis, but

we have structured time to talk about innovating those practices. We have set yearly goals around what we are trying to learn, and we have specific people in our organization who are held accountable for that learning. We have set up the environment so that risk is tolerated, but there are clear guidelines from leaders about what kinds of risk will not be tolerated. We openly acknowledge the things we have tried that have not worked.... the people involved are held in our esteem and encouraged to go out again and try something new. People promoted to management positions have demonstrated the ability to create an innovative idea, planfully think it through, and implement it over time. They are relentless and experienced change managers. The strategies for creating and sustaining a learning organization are fully understood and documented in other fields—we just need more leaders who have the courage to and make time to adopt these well-known practices. What is holding us back?

Have a vision that's big enough to excite people. Creating more collaboration between organizations, helping to improve people's quality of life, and expanding services to reach unmet need are all examples of critically important but yawn producing efforts if they are included as part of the organizations vision. What will people really get fired up about? A leader must have an undeniably energizing vision that can carry people forward into an uncertain but hopeful future. If the leader doesn't have strong feelings and personal attachment to the vision, it's hardly worth having the vision. In addition, the leader has to make it clear how his or her personal story is directly tied to this compelling vision. Read the following vision statement. Although you may disagree with some of the content, the urgency and passion is unmistakable, and leaves no question about the intention of the vision.

“We must act now. I am actively looking for employees and partners who share my intense interest in and passion for the fragile condition of many youth in our community. The mission of our organization is to help young youth answer the two primary questions that all young people have: “Where can I belong and find acceptance?”, and “What am I supposed to be doing with my life?” I believe that, in order for us to be successful, we must actively help youth discover their gifts and locate places where those gifts can be utilized and acknowledged. Welcoming places for youth exist in our community, and where they do not exist we will help to build them. I believe that youth want to be understood, not fixed. They want to be encouraged to take the next step and desire the active involvement of adults in their lives. This is not a “youth” problem—when adults begin to do the right things, young people will generously and enthusiastically respond. As adults, we have learning to do. I intend to take responsibility for our organization's continued learning and for fearlessly nurturing the young people on whom our future depends. We must act now.”

Conclusion

The strength-based movement started from an outcry of frustration, disenchantment, and downright anger at the assumption that people asking for help could be defined mostly by the difficulties they are facing. In the same vein, the strength-based movement should not begin to define itself solely by the difficulties it is facing. Although we are stuck we, like the people we are serving, have tremendous capacity waiting to be discovered and used. It's time to name our struggles, locate and rally the strengths and resources we have at our disposal, and get on with it. We should be giving ourselves the same advice we would be offering to a person coming to our organization for help. “You are bigger than the current situation you are facing. We have faith in you and hope for your future. What is the first step we can help you with?”

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