5

A Strengths Focus and Quality Leadership

Success is achieved by developing our strengths not by eliminating our weaknesses.

— Marilyn vos Savant

❖ A DIRE NEED TO EMPHASIZE STRENGTHS

Up to this point in the book, great emphasis has been placed on the importance of discovery and making meaning of worker needs, values, goals, and strengths as a means to foster quality leader–member relationships and to inspire and engage workers to feel better, develop better, and perform better as they carry out their important roles of helping. While needs, values, and goals all form important aspects of a Responsive Leadership Approach, it is for very important reasons that a strong emphasis be made regarding a strengths focus as a key ingredient in enhancing worker morale, engagement, commitment, and overall performance—a need for an emphasis so strong that a focus on strengths and quality leadership warrants its very own chapter!

There are several very notable reasons for making the strengths focus aspect of the Responsive Leadership Approach a stand-alone chapter in this book. First, a focus on values, needs, and goals is

already quite common and forms an integral aspect of frontline worker training, performance development, and most approaches to supervision and employee management. A focus on strengths, however, while theoretically and philosophically in line with social service values and guiding principles is less common and, from the experience of many workers in the field, does not make up an integral aspect of employee supervision, performance development, and/or performance management. As a matter of fact, when it comes to most performance management approaches, in particular, a focus on employee strengths is often rare altogether and in some cases nonexistent.

A second reason for making an emphasis on strengths in supervision and management a necessary focus has to do with the reality within the current political, bureaucratic, organizational, training, work, and service-delivery realities of social services. Many of these social service dimensions are actually antithetical and/or provide countercurrents or impediments to the use and sustainability of a strengths focus within supervision and/or management. Finally, promoting and illustrating a strengths approach in supervision and management is critical because consistent operationalization of a strengths perspective in leadership is difficult to do and maintain, especially if it is not the most common modality utilized by most supervisors and managers. In addition to the myriad of social services context challenges that exist as impediments to a strengths focus, the reality is that many supervisors and managers have not been taught to operationalize a strengths-based approach in practice. Most of us can understand what a strengths-based approach is philosophically and in principle, but most supervisors and managers have not been taught how to apply, integrate, and/or sustain a strengths-based approach in practice with their team members.

It is for these reasons and many others that a strengths focus as it relates to quality leadership occupies a full chapter in this book. The remaining discussion will focus on the challenges that exist to utilizing and sustaining a strengths-based approach to social services supervision and management, including the negative implications a problem-saturated environment has on supervisors, workers, and clients. In addition to this, the discussion will outline what a strengths perspective in leadership can look like and will make strong linkages between a strengths focus and quality leadership. A variety of strengths-focused tools, strategies, and practice examples will be offered. Finally, the chapter discussion will conclude with a clear illustration of the powerfully positive implications of a strengths focus in the context of supervision and management in order to create a greater quality leadership experience for all team members.

❖ CHALLENGES TO A STRENGTHS FOCUS IN SUPERVISION AND MANAGEMENT

The Importance and Relevance of a Strengths Focus

Very few people would disagree about the importance of utilizing a strengths perspective in the context of social services supervision and management. More than ever, a focus on strengths forms an integral cornerstone to most frontline-person and family-centered helping interventions and is consistent with social service philosophy and guiding principles. Many social service workers find a strengths perspective favorable and in line with their personal and professional values and goals for helping. Focusing on strengths with individuals, families, and communities is in line with the way most frontline social service workers prefer to work. In addition, many organizational and program missions and visions have incorporated and/or reflect the importance of a strengths focus within operational support and service delivery. It is in this light that a strengths-based organizational and management approach seems like it would make sense and be commonplace. Unfortunately, however, there exist a myriad of environmental influences and challenges that unintentionally operate as impediments to the utilization and implementation of a strengths-based approach in supervision and management.

Social Services: A Problem-Saturated Environment

In order to gain an understanding of the incongruence between the importance of a strengths focus in theory and what is actually happening in practice, we must consider the overall environment—the context in which supervision and management of workers occurs. Social services in general maintain a predominantly problem-oriented focus, and the realities that challenge a strengths perspective occur at every level of the system, impacting and thereby influencing the way worker supervision and performance development training occur and how these processes are carried out in the field.

Most social services organizations operate from mandates that maintain a focus on safety, risk assessment, risk management, and reduction of harm, albeit in the context of promoting overall well-being and health. Unfortunately, what is inherent in most problem-oriented paradigms and service delivery approaches is that the area of inquiry and/or focus of attention is centered on what is not working or what needs to be fixed. Such a focus inevitably leads to a starting point of

inquiry and operation based on deficits, weaknesses, threats, dysfunc-tion, and deficiencies. A problem orientation is prevalent and evident at all levels across various social service sectors and influences the context of most approaches to the structure and process of social ser-vices supervision practice.

Political agendas, bureaucratic priorities, and legislated mandates also influence and impact operations and service delivery models, sub-sequently shaping the focus and process of supervision sessions. For instance, most helping agencies utilize a biomedical approach as a foundation for assessment and intervention. In addition to this, many programs and service delivery models are highly influenced by the fis-cal need and encouragement of and/or a politically mandated use of the *DSM* (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) as a requirement for intake, assessment, and intervention. Because supervi-sors and managers are providing guidance and support for workers operating within the predominantly biomedical and *DSM*-driven para-digms, a great deal of case management and support discussions are focused on the attainment of well-being by fixing or changing dysfunc-tion, deficits, abnormalities, erroneous thinking, and/or pathological behavior. Although strengths-based assessment and intervention has become a more important aspect of social services intervention and support, the reality remains that in practice, a focus on strengths does not take up a great deal of time when it comes to supervisor–member discussions around supportive case management reviews. Instead, the predominant supervision focus continues to be around crisis situa-tions, stressful challenges, problems, and problem solving.

Problems With Training

Social service training endeavors to prepare supervisors and managers with the knowledge and skills to educate, coach, support, develop, and delegate tasks to their team members in a way that enhances the con-sistency and quality of supportive service being provided to clients. However, like the overall context of social services in general, most supervisory training programs take a problem orientation and problem-solving focus. Supervisors and managers are presented with many theoretical models and orientations for understanding a variety of people and systemic problems in order to understand and solve them. A focus on strengths is often omitted from the traditional problem-solving approach because the initial starting point for inquiry is on what is "wrong" and/or what needs to be fixed. Supervisors and man-agers are trained to ask "Why?" and to gather information so that they

can assist in successfully solving a variety of problems. In essence, they are taught to assess and interpret situations so that they can manage to problem solve them successfully. There are curricula that attempt to incorporate a focus on strengths, but it is often minimal in comparison to the predominantly problem-oriented approaches offered. In addition, when curricula offer a segment on strengths-based supervision, I have found that the emphasis pertains more to the *looking* for strengths, falling short, however, on the skills and tools for a tangible and practical application of a strengths approach to supervision practice.

A key area that often forms a core element of supervisor and manager training is employee performance development. Most approaches to employee development operate from an overall behaviorist approach, meaning that supervisors are encouraged to learn a variety of human-behavior and system theories and models in order to interpret the attitudes and behaviors of employees so that they can develop more capable, confident, and competent employees. While employee development and management represent positive endeavors geared toward enhancing staff capacity to work toward better outcomes for clients and organizations overall, a behaviorist approach contains an inherent bias toward interpreting and managing employees, versus engaging and understanding their individual experiences. In addition to this, most developmental and behavioral approaches focus on competency development from the perspective of a deficit-based and/or performance-weakness model, once again minimizing the emphasis and/or omitting altogether a focus on employee strengths.

Problems With Professional Development

Finally, when it comes to supervisory training curricula for working with "challenging" employees, most approaches to performance management for supervisors take on an "undesirable performance" lens while emphasizing management of performance through the interpretation of a variety of human-behavior models and theoretical and developmental orientations, all geared toward managing or changing poor employee attitudes and behaviors in order to bring about more desirable outcomes. In my experience as an academic and a trainer in a variety of course modules, very few performance management approaches contain a focus on strengths.

Performance development and performance management are actually the same thing; however, the former term is often used in the context of proactive and positive employee development whereas the latter term is often used in a not-so-positive context, usually when an

employee is struggling with competency development and/or is involved in some sort of discipline process. This dynamic is evident when a manager is talking about an employee plan. Often when we hear someone referring to a performance plan, it's in the context of regular performance appraisal and development. However, when we hear reference to a performance management plan, it is often in the context of a "challenging worker" and/or a worker who is demonstrating and/or engaging in "undesirable" behavior. Regardless of what term is used and/or the context, both performance development and performance management processes operate from a deficit base and/or performance weakness stance. The predominant focus is on development of the undesirable performance behavior. In my conversations with thousands of frontline workers, their experience in general has been that performance development focuses on areas of weakness or required development and is often lacking in a strengths focus. Similarly, a performance management plan rarely contains a focus on strengths as the behavior that is being targeted is often problematic and the documentation that has been gathered to build a plan is often focused on areas such as undesirable, inappropriate, or unprofessional attitudes and/or performance.

An important contextual reality that challenges the consistent utilization of a strengths focus within supervision and management is that the above-mentioned problem orientations are often in operation in a highly stressful, crisis-oriented, fiscally and resource-restrained environment where workers and supervisors are expected to do more with less. When supervisors have a strong desire to help workers solve a variety of people and systemic problems in the context of perceived time and energy limitations, they are naturally encouraged to get to the problems quicker for the sake of overall efficacy. Unintentionally and inevitably there is less space and time for a discussion of what is going well, a discussion and subsequent development regarding team-member strengths.

Problems With Managing Performance Problems

While many workers in various fields report that their experiences with performance evaluations and appraisals are less than satisfactory, worker reports of performance management and discipline range from negative to outright humiliating. At a time when workers are struggling to perform in a preferred and expected manner, when they are probably feeling less than confident and capable, a strengths perspective would be helpful to provide a more positive experience of themselves and/or their work. However, often when performance

management is initiated, the process and the impacts move in the opposite direction of a strengths approach.

Most approaches to employee discipline are based on the principles of punishment, and the problem-oriented and deficit-focused processes within performance management do little to motivate workers to change their behavior. When reprimands, progressive discipline, and suspensions are utilized as logical consequences and when support and clear direction for change are lost within a disempowering and intimidating process, an employee's capacity to be engaged and positively motivated is seriously limited, if not curtailed altogether. It is my experience that a strengths focus is missing altogether when employees are being reprimanded or disciplined for undesirable and/or poor performance. At a time when a strengths focus should be utilized, it seems that most managers' time and energy are placed into a "tunnel" focus, searching for problems and/or justifications for reprimanding, suspending, and even terminating a worker from their job.

Unfortunately, when workers have a negative experience within the process of performance management and/or discipline, they are less likely to be positively engaged in the process. Approaches to discipline that are deficit focused and punitive often encourage what seems to be compliant behavior, when efforts and energy—instead of being placed in the work—often are geared toward "laying low," dodging responsibility, or just doing what is necessary to get through the shift. This type of engagement with the work does little to bring about preferred performance and outcomes for the clients being served.

❖ A PROBLEM FOCUS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR WORKERS

Optimal employee engagement, motivation, and performance are dependent upon two major factors: (1) the quality of the leader–member relationship and (2) the support and development of the employee's capacity to carry out his role of helping to the best of his abilities. An emphasis on deficits and weaknesses within a problem orientation to supervision and/or management can present a formidable challenge to both of these processes, with a negative result for employee, team, and eventually client outcomes.

Chapter 1 emphasized the reality that many workers across the social service sectors are unsatisfied with their supervisors and/or their experience of supervision overall; they are disillusioned with the quality of leadership. It is my belief that the predominant emphasis on

problems over strengths in the context of supervision and worker development, which continues to persist in social services, is in large part the contributing factor to such a stark and concerning reality.

To put it bluntly, a predominant focus on problems, deficits, and weaknesses just does not feel good. When employees consistently hear what they are not doing well or what needs to be changed in the context of supervision and performance development, it can create feelings of negativity and pessimism and a sense of blame. As a matter of fact, in highly stressful situations, a strict focus on problems can lead workers to feel judged or criticized by their manager and lead to feelings of shame, guilt, and even fear. It is these types of experiences that can be detrimental to the quality of the leader–member relationship, compromising trust, respect, integrity, and empathy. A problem orientation is less than inspiring or motivating for frontline workers.

One of the greatest dilemmas of a work environment predominantly focused on problems at the expense of strengths is that it can engender and perpetuate serious value incongruence. One of the greatest impediments to good practice occurs when workers are expected to operate outside of or out of step with their values. Many workers experience a confusing contradiction when they are encouraged by their organization and supervisor to work from a strengths-based perspective in practice yet experience the opposite in the context of their own support and development. For many workers, this experience can be disconcerting. For others, it may be disillusioning and/or demoralizing altogether. Regardless of individual worker experience, a common consequence of working within a set of incongruent and conflicting value sets is that it is less than motivating or engaging. For many workers, it can be demobilizing.

Problems Limit Worker Potential

The negative impacts resulting from a predominant and persistent focus on problems are immeasurable. As a matter of fact, it is my belief that a problem orientation actually curtails the identification and development of human potential. We know that quality leader–member relationships are essential for accurate discovery of the employee's story and the subsequent development of her capacities.

When workers experience a low level of trust and safety in the context of their professional relationship with their manager and they fear the possibilities of being judged or criticized, there may be a reluctance to be honest about the information they might need to know or the things they may be struggling with. When overall safety is

compromised, honest communication between worker and supervisor begins to break down. When communication breaks down, a supervisor's ability to access the employee's story is seriously compromised. When discovery is compromised, development of the worker's capacities and the delivery of preferred outcomes are subsequently compromised.

When employees withdraw from open and honest dialogue with supervisors in an attempt to keep themselves safe, they hold back not only their limitations but also their potential and their strengths! Yes, this is a major consequence when there exists lack of safety and trust: people hold back. And when workers hold back, they also hold back what they are capable of, including their strengths, talents, and potentialities to perform optimally!

I believe that this dilemma represents one of the greatest pitfalls and perils of a predominant deficit and problem orientation. When trust and safety within a leader–member relationship are compromised and a problem-oriented approach to supervision and performance development are operating, it is not uncommon for workers to hold back; that is, their efforts and energy may be going into refraining from expressing or asking questions in order to avoid making a mistake or asking a question about what they feel they should already know. This becomes problematic because, as stated previously, by holding back, workers are unable to demonstrate what they are capable of, thereby limiting the manager's understanding of the employee's story, in particular his strengths and potential capabilities. This dynamic becomes even more problematic when employees that are struggling with performance are placed on a performance management plan and/or some sort of disciplinary process.

Unfortunately, what can unintentionally be created is a reciprocally determining self-fulfilling prophecy. What I mean by this is that because most performance management approaches are problem-focused, often punitive in nature and altogether lacking a focus on strengths, there is a tendency for workers to feel criticized, judged, incompetent, and even blamed for their poor or undesirable performance, representing a less-than-positive experience. It is at this juncture that the potential for difficulties between the supervisor and the worker can be exacerbated. The more a supervisor "puts on the pressure" through a traditionally punitive and problem-oriented approach to performance management, the more likely a worker will alter her behaviors in response to that pressure. And because the supervisor is missing the meaning of the employee's story, there is all sorts of room to misinterpret the meaning of the particular attitude and/or behaviors.

Two great examples of this operating dilemma can be found in the scenario of Barb and Brandon in Chapter 3 and in the scenario of

James, which was initiated in Chapter 4. In both cases, when the manager was asked to comment on the strengths of the worker or on what is going well, they came up short. As a matter of fact, both managers stated that there was "nothing good" at all going on with the worker in the situation. However, we know from Brandon's experience that his story contains a plethora of strengths and, as we will see from James's situation, offered in Chapter 7, things are not nearly as bad as they seem there either. As a matter of fact, they are not bad at all!

As stated before, the impacts and consequences that arise when a strengths approach is limited or missing altogether in the context of supervision and worker development are multifarious and immeasurable. A predominant focus on problems and limitations is linked to jeopardizing the quality of the leader–member relationship as well as curtailing the development of worker potential. We can also surmise that negative implications affect a worker's sense of well-being, job satisfaction, motivation, development, engagement, and ability to perform optimally. Such experiences have a tendency to impact the whole team and create a contagion that contributes to the perception of the overall work environment as negative, thereby adding stress and contributing to intent to leave and eventually burnout. And because we know that a worker's perception of the work and experience of self and the work are inextricably linked to practice decisions and client outcomes, we know that a management approach limited and/or void of a strengths perspective can actually be hazardous for both employees and their clients.

❖ USING A STRENGTHS APPROACH TO ENHANCE QUALITY LEADERSHIP

A strengths-based approach within leadership can have a profound and positive impact on how employees perceive the work, themselves in the work, and their experience of the overall work environment. Prior to reviewing the multifarious advantages of operationalizing a strengths focus in the practice of supervision and management, I will attempt to define and illustrate what I mean when I refer to a strengths-based approach in leadership.

What Is a Strengths-Based Approach?

In my travels, I have come to learn that many social service employees, including supervisors and managers, have a limited understanding of what a strengths approach might be. When I used to interview people for a variety of positions in social services, it was commonplace for me

to ask interviewees, "What do you understand as a strengths perspective or strengths-based approach?" Responses revolved around a similar theme: being positive, focusing on the positive, or when the negative is outweighed by the positive. Some responses would go a little further to articulate and reflect that a strengths approach, in addition to focusing on the positive, is also about reframing negative situations in a positive light. For instance, an employee who might be identified as argumentative can be described as assertive and independent thinking. A strengths approach within supervision and performance development is much more than being positive.

The Responsive Leadership Approach, which I refer to as a relationally and strengths-focused approach to supervision, maintains five important steps. These five steps are so important that I refer to them as *musts*, and when operationalized, they represent the strengths-based component of Responsive Leadership. The five *musts* are

- prioritize a strengths focus,

- define strengths,

- search for strengths,

- build on strengths, and

- leverage strengths in the pursuit of individual and shared goals.

Prioritize a Strengths Focus

The positive and profound implications for employees and clients alike can only be fully realized when a strengths focus is prioritized as an integral component of quality and effective leadership. Prioritization of a strengths approach to supervision and management moves beyond technique and is built on several key foundational principles.

- All people are resilient, have strengths, and posses the capacity for change and growth.

- Reality can be constructed as negative or positive, simply by one's focus of inquiry and attention.

- Purposeful operationalization of strengths can enhance efficiencies for approximating and attaining important objectives and preferred outcomes.

When a strengths approach is made a priority within supervision, the positive benefits for employees and clients are immeasurable.

Define Strengths

Before we can search for strengths, we must be able to know what exactly it is that we are looking for. I assumed for a long time, even into my career as a strengths-focused practitioner and trainer, that people knew what strengths were. I think this was one of the challenges workers and supervisors struggled with in adopting and utilizing a strengths approach in practice.

So in order to embark upon the operationalization of a strengths approach, it is important to know what these things we call strengths are. I like to use a fairly broad definition of strengths. I define strengths as basically anything that can be identified, used, or leveraged to assist, support, and/or enhance the development of individual, team, community, organization, or system potential and overall capacity to achieve important goals. Strength is a noun and strengthen is a verb; it is important to remember that even our strengths can be strengthened.

Let me explain. All people have internal and external strengths. Internal strengths are all of the things that we contain within us and our beings, things like values, beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, skills, experiences, opinions, ideas, interests, culture, dreams, aspirations, languages, talents, abilities, uniqueness, potential, and so on. External strengths are those things that exist outside of us, such as people (family, friends, acquaintances, coworkers), places, successes, actions, interactions, school, sports, hobbies, church, groups, community, work, extracurricular activities, and so on. While this list of strengths may seem very general and quite broad, it is purposeful as it provides the largest pool of resource possibilities to draw on when developing our own or others' capacities.

There are a variety of ways to understand and approach the operationalization of a strengths focus in the context of supervision. However, regardless of variance and differences within strengths practice, it is critical that we understand what we mean by strengths and what it is they look like, an essential element necessary for carrying out the following "must."

Search for Strengths

There is a great deal of truth to the proverb, "Seek and ye shall find." The message is both simple and profound. If we search for strengths, so too will we find them, and as a matter of fact, they are everywhere. One of the main problems in our current social services system is that most supervisors and managers have been predominantly taught to

search for, focus on, and fix problems, not to search for, build on, and leverage strengths. If we are going to find strengths, we must make it an essential part of our role as leaders—to look for strengths.

Just as was stated above, I encourage all supervisors and managers to consider making strengths inquiry a priority focus in supervision and performance development. In doing so, I like to use the analogy of looking for loose change to illustrate the benefits to making a paradigm shift from not looking to actively searching for strengths.

If you made it your mission starting today to look for loose change all of the time and everywhere you traveled, there is no doubt that you would find more than you ever have. The interesting thing about loose change is that it was and is always there. However, when you don't look for it, you will not see it. As a matter of fact, you may even walk by it all of the time and not notice it at all. Furthermore, by not seeing it, you may accidentally step all over it and even bury it further down, and if and when someone encourages you to go back and find the loose change, it may be harder than ever to find!

Strengths are like loose change. And like loose change, if we aren't looking for it, we won't find it. In high-pressure situations, where there is stress and conflict, like in the scenarios of Brandon and James, strengths can be more difficult to see and/or experience, so much that even when the managers are encouraged to seek the positives and strengths in the situation, they cannot. Again, it's not that the strengths aren't there; they have been eclipsed by the negative or buried altogether.

When we make it a priority and our mission to search for employee strengths, we see strengths everywhere; not only do workers have more strength than they realized themselves, we find that they have more strengths than we could have imagined. However, in a problem-oriented and deficit-focused system, it can be difficult if not impossible to see and experience our own and others' strengths. We must actively search for strengths if we are going to find them.

A Necessary Paradigm Shift

I have to admit that when I began my journey two decades ago to make a strengths focus a priority in my work with other people, it wasn't easy. I, like many of my social services counterparts, was trained to interpret situations and manage them with a variety of problem-solving tools and strategies that often started with focus and intervention geared toward what wasn't working and what needed to be fixed.

Early in my career, I was responsible for providing clinical and performance supervision to approximately 175 youth-care workers,

through 22 program managers and supervisors. It was almost impossible to keep up with regular supervision sessions, never mind keeping up while trying out a new and awkward strengths approach to supervision. I remember feeling that it was going to be impossible to speak to strengths—that we didn't have enough time to get to that "fluffy" stuff. It was around this time that a good friend and colleague suggested in a joking manner, "Why don't you just start with what you can't fit in and see what happens?" This idea got me thinking about making strengths more of a priority. So in order to counter the crisis-oriented pull to talk about problems, I placed a sign above the chair where my team members would sit for supervision sessions. It read in bold capital letters, **"WHAT'S GOING WELL?"** No matter how busy, chaotic, or ambitious our case-conference agenda would get, I started with that question. Yes, I was going to fake it until I could make it! It is my position that faking it until you make it is not a bad thing if our goal is to make it. Yes, I needed a prompt. Yes, it didn't feel smooth or genuine for some time. But the benefits, which I will speak to throughout the discussion, began to outweigh my discomfort. And after awhile, I made it. I did not need the sign anymore as the question, "What's going well?" was imprinted on my brain, and the question began to permeate all aspects of the work, including team meetings and performance development sessions.

Start With Strengths

A search for strengths starts with a positive and appreciative inquiry into what is working or what is going well. While at first not an easy paradigm shift from focusing on problems, I was able to rewire my brain to remember the three words, *start with strengths*, when I am considering individual attitudes, behaviors, and or complex situations. I learned very fast that this simple shift in perspective felt better; buffered stress, especially in challenging situations; and illuminated some positive dynamics and important elements that were operating outside of my awareness. Another great discovery I made was that almost all situations are not as "bad" as they may at first seem; if we look for strengths, we can actually find them.

Another very important discovery I made early on in my use of strengths-based explorations was that not only was I unaware of many of my employees' strengths, many of them lacked awareness of their own assets also. In addition to this, I learned that most workers seemed to have an easier time listing their weaknesses and/or areas for development than identifying their own strengths. One of the most difficult

questions for my team members to answer was, "What are your strengths?" Although this presented a barrier to strengths exploration, it encouraged me further to make a declaration to two strengths-oriented priorities within my supervision process and approach to employee performance development.

The first priority was to make my active search for members' strengths a purposeful and perpetual aspect of most engagements. It was important for me to increase my understanding and knowledge of team member strengths. In addition (and this brings me to my second priority), I made a commitment that once I made important strengths discoveries, I would do what I could to bring those strengths to the team member's attention also. I made what I refer to as the three *A*s a regular aspect of my individual and team member interactions. I did what I could to *acknowledge, admire,* and/or *appreciate* strengths. Furthermore, I began to use a set of very helpful strengths-oriented questions to assist with the cultivation and identification of strengths.

Strengths-Oriented Statements and
Questions for Surfacing Resource Possibilities

Searching for strengths is the most important aspect of a strengths orientation to supervision and performance development. I refer to the term *resource possibilities* as strengths are resources in and of themselves, and they also help illuminate additional strengths as resource possibilities that can also be built on and leveraged to support enhanced worker motivation and engagement and optimal performance. I will demonstrate how *meaning making questions*, offered in Chapter 4, can be useful in exploring the meaning of strengths in a manner that illuminates additional strengths and other potential resources.

I like to use a set of strengths-focused statements and questions as a regular component in my practice and interactions with all workers and team members. It is not uncommon for workers and colleagues to hear me make *acknowledgment* and *appreciative statements* in almost every interpersonal exchange. I also utilize *appreciative questions, exception questions,* and *better questions* as strategies for exploring strengths within a multitude of interactions and a variety of situations.

Acknowledgment and Appreciative Statements

It is important for the supervisor/manager to make these types of statements. Other team members can also be encouraged to make acknowledgment and appreciative statements as they help bring a

worker's attention to positive and affirming strengths that have been noticed by others. These types of statements acknowledge, admire, and/or appreciate the important strengths of team members. Sometimes the strengths that are being identified are operating outside of the employee's awareness.

Acknowledgment and *appreciative statements* can look like this:

- I like the way you interact positively with clients.

- I appreciate that you talk less and listen more with your clients.

- You have a great sense of humor, which is helpful for keeping some of our meetings light.

- Thanks for being on time to our sessions. It helps me stay on track.

- I like that you value collaboration and empowerment. I can see it in your meetings with clients and team members.

- You are great at keeping your case files in order. That is indeed a skill I am trying to get better at.

Appreciative questions, like the preceding statements, are helpful for encouraging individual workers and teams to explore and consider the things that they appreciate and/or admire about the work, the team, and/or themselves. Appreciative statements and questions are great for cultivating and identifying individual and team strengths that can be built upon and leveraged in the pursuit of important individual, team, and/or organizational goals. As stated before, it is not uncommon for *appreciative questions* to illuminate strengths and additional resources that were just outside of our awareness.

Appreciative questions can look like this:

- What's going well?
- What do you appreciate about your work this week?
- Are there positive aspects to working here? What might those be?
- Can you tell me something you did that is in line with your values?
- What are you most proud of?
- If you could acknowledge one or two things about yourself, what would they be?
- If you could acknowledge one or two things about your team, what would they be?

Appreciative questions are great for illuminating a variety of strengths and resource possibilities. However, they are also key to providing insight into the employee's story, and they are great for surfacing important needs, values, and goals. This is exceptionally true when *acknowledgment* and *appreciative statements and questions* are combined with *discovery questions* offered in the previous chapter.

Supervisor: *It's great to see you today, George* (Acknowledgment and Appreciative Statement)*. That was a great meeting this morning* (Appreciative Statement)*. You did a great job as the chairperson, moving the meeting along and staying on track* (Appreciative Statement)*. What do you think you did well?* (Appreciative Question).

Worker: *I guess I kept things on track. I think I did a good job sticking to the agenda but also giving people an opportunity to speak on issues and important items.*

Supervisor: *Ya, I thought you did well at that also. Can you tell me more about giving people an opportunity to speak?* (Discovery Question as a Paraphrase)

Worker: *It's important to stay on topic, but I think it is more important to give our team a voice on the recent changes to standards of practice.*

Supervisor: *What difference does that make? How do you think that might be helpful?* (Million-Dollar Questions)

Worker: *For starters, it's important that we assess whether the team has an understanding of the changes and that our program promotes collaboration and empowerment. I like to do what I can to make those values work. They're important to me.*

The above scenario demonstrates that when *appreciative statements and questions* are combined with *discovery questions*, important information regarding worker needs, values, goals, and strengths can also be surfaced.

Exceptions and Exception Questions

I was introduced to the idea of *exceptions* through solution-oriented interviewing earlier in my career. *Exception questions* are based on the idea that no matter how difficult and/or challenging a problem is,

there are often exceptions to the problem. Accordingly, this idea of exceptions means that there are times and/or situations when the problem wasn't so much of a problem. It is up to us to look for the exceptions in difficult or challenging situations so that we may discover the strengths and resources available in the exceptional times. When we can discover what was happening in the exceptional times, we are able to uncover and illuminate resource possibilities that have been ignored, minimized, and/or overlooked.

Exception questions can look like this:

- When is the problem not so much a problem?

- Can you tell me about a time when you were able to get your work in on time? How did you do that?

- Can you tell me about a time when you felt anger toward a client and did something other than yelling at him?

- During your probationary period, you had excellent attendance at work. How were able to do that? What was happening for you that helped you get here regularly and on time?

- Can you tell me about a time that you felt team members were not on your back? What were you doing to make that happen?

When we are successful at uncovering real strengths and we gather the details around those times, we are better able to develop a plan geared toward overcoming the problem and developing possibilities for enhanced and sustained success.

Better Questions

I have always struggled with the terms *perfect* and *best* as these terms are difficult to define. In addition to this, I often wondered if perfect and best were even attainable, especially given that both terms connote a fairly ambitious end point. Two other issues I had with these lofty terms were that they were exceptionally subjective and that different people had very different ideas about what best and perfect were— what they looked like. The biggest problem I have with perfect and best is that when they are used as benchmarks to set goals, they can turn up a great deal of pressure to reach a target that may be unreachable. For many people, this has a less-than-positive or demotivating effect and can lead to a sense of helplessness and/or disillusionment.

I prefer using the word *better* and the term *getting to better*. It is my belief that everyone can define what better is for themselves, even just a little bit. I believe this because most people can understand for themselves which things they would like to get better at and/or with. Maybe it's better in a specific performance area. Maybe it's a better attitude. Maybe it's to have better relationships with colleagues or clients. Maybe it's to feel better at work. Most people can consider what better looks like for them. The great thing about the concept of better, much unlike best, is that it is often definable and attainable. Better can also be set and reached in small or larger increments of gain. Better is a temporary destination on the journey to individual and or team development. Once we arrive at better, we can then define and move to the next destination of better.

One of the greatest outcomes of focusing on better is that most people who are struggling with learning and/or developing capacity have actually experienced better at some point in time. An exploration of better can lead to the positive exceptions to challenges and difficulties as well as illuminate a variety of strengths and resources that were operating at that time. In addition to this, *better question*s are quite versatile in that they can be used not only to focus on the past but also to consider *better* in the future. *Better questions* can encourage individuals to consider and envision a preferred future where things are better. Such an exploration often reveals important and meaningful information about what better would look like and how it may be approximated and/or attained. I refer to the two types of *better questions* as *better past* and *better future*.

Here are some examples of *better-past questions*:

- Can you tell me about a time when things have been better for you?

- Based on your experience, when has a program or team been better?

- Can you tell me about a time in your career when you experienced better supervision and/or management?

- Can you tell me when you had a supervisor or team leader that made things better?

- Have there been times in your career when you were feeling and/or doing better?

When *better-past questions* are combined with *meaning-making questions*, they can reveal important employee needs, values, goals, and strengths. Here is an example:

Supervisor: *Can you tell me about a time when things were better for you at work?*

Worker: *It was when I was working with my old team in the southern office.*

Supervisor: *Really, your team at the other office? Can you tell me about what made it better?*

Worker: *That team really knew how to have fun* (value)*, and I like that because it's important for me to have a positive working environment* (need/value/goal)*.*

Supervisor: *So having fun and working in a positive work environment are important to you?*

Worker: *Yes, absolutely. Don't get me wrong, I also like to be focused and productive* (value/goal) *because we are an essential service and families depend on us* (value)*. It's really important for me to have balance at work* (value)*. However, I also strive to get everything done so I don't have to come in on the weekend* (goal)*.*

Supervisor: *How is not coming in on the weekends better for you?*

Worker: *It's the only time I get to see my family* (value/goal)*. My children are growing up fast, and it's important for me to see them as much as possible* (value/goal)*.*

One can see that, even from this brief engagement, the use of *better questions* and *meaning-making questions* has surfaced important needs, values, and goals, including some potential areas of strength.

Here is an example of the use of *better-future questions*:

- What are the first things you would notice if things were a little better at work?

- Imagine I meet you in six months and everything is better. What is happening for you? Where are you? Who are you working with? How are you feeling?

- If things were just a little better for you, what would work look like?

- How will you know when things are better? What will be happening?

- When your team is doing better, what will that look like for you?

As with *better-past questions*, *better-future questions* can be combined with *meaning-making questions*, to reveal the details of what *better* can look like while surfacing important employee needs, values, goals, and strengths.

Example:

Supervisor: *So can you tell me what would be happening in one month that would indicate that things were better for you at work?*

Worker: *I would be the director of the agency.*

Supervisor: *Really. And what difference would that make for you? How would that be helpful?* (Million-Dollar Questions)

Worker: *I would have some control over the communications that come through to our unit.*

Supervisor: *So you would have control of the communications?*

Worker: *Well, maybe not control, but I would do a better job of minimizing all of the information, and I would definitely take out some of the higher level system points. As a matter of fact, I would probably cut the number of communications in half.*

Supervisor: *How would that be helpful? How would that make things better for you?* (Million-Dollar Question and Better Question)

Worker: *It's not just for me. It's for the whole team! People are overwhelmed as it is just with the work and the caseloads. We do not need all of the extra e-mails and information about big systemic issues that we really can't do anything about.*

Supervisor: *So what has that been like for you?* (Discovery Question)

Worker: *It adds more stress. It adds more confusion. It takes up time and energy. On top of that, because I'm the team leader, I have people lined up at my door asking me for clarifications on the communication or just venting about the possible changes to mandates and standards of practice. It's overwhelming.*

Supervisor:	*Can you tell me what you mean when you say overwhelming?* (Discovery Question)
Worker:	*I get frustrated and a little angry at the director. I feel helpless that my team gets more stressed and confused than they have to be. I spend so much time taking care of them that I have difficulty getting to my own work. I've got people on my caseloads that really need me. Because the team is so important to me, I feel like I can't let them down. If there were more of a balance in the communications, there would be more balance in the unit.*
Supervisor:	*So you are hoping for more of a balance in the communications?* (Paraphrase)
Worker:	*Well, at least a balance . . . ya, just having information in the communications that is necessary and directly relevant to the work. We need a filter or something.*
Supervisor:	*So you think a filter of some sort might be helpful. Can you tell me about that?* (Discovery Question)
Worker:	*When I worked with the Inkster Team, our team leader was responsible for reviewing executive communications so that only the relevant information went through to the team. The higher level stuff was still important and was communicated at the larger unit meetings.*

In this scenario, the supervisor is able to get a clearer picture of what better might look like for this particular employee. With the use of *better questions* and *meaning-making questions*, the supervisor is able to cultivate and surface the important needs, values, and goals of the worker that will be helpful in moving toward an understanding of options that may or may not be available.

When we keep in mind the broad definition of strengths that was provided earlier, we can see that there are strengths embedded in needs, values, and goals that can be identified in this particular conversation. The worker needs a balance to be able to support the team and get work done. This worker values getting the work done, teamwork, efficiency, relevant communications, and commitment. This worker hopes to lower the stress, confusion, and extra workload for the team and for himself. In addition to this, he has indeed experienced a time when things were better. Although the scenario above was ended, the conversation could have continued to demonstrate

additional details pertaining to the *what, when*, and *how* aspects of the worker's story as they pertain to strengths. There are many strengths surfaced in the worker's story that, if and when the supervisor requires, can be built on and leveraged in the pursuit of important individual and shared objectives.

Build on Strengths

Once strengths are identified, they become more concrete and tangible, making it increasingly possible to build on them. Building on strengths in the simplest terms means to construct or to develop them further. Strengths can be developed further so that they can have increased substance and more fortitude and integrity. What I mean by this is that even our strengths can be strengthened. For instance, an employee who is great at connecting with and building relationships with clients can continue to improve upon and/or develop this area further. This is mostly true because there are so many different skills and behaviors that exist within connecting with and building relationships with clients. For instance, here are just some of the skills required: making appropriate eye contact, listening effectively, empathic responding, balancing listening with verbal responses, and commenting on something that is important and meaningful to the client. When we look at values, knowledge, skills, and talents within strengths, we can begin to see the possibilities for building on them and developing them further.

Building on strengths becomes increasingly important in situations where workers are only just beginning to acknowledge and learn about their own strengths. Given that "What are your strengths?" is one of the most difficult questions to answer for employees, it is not uncommon for many workers to be learning about their talent capacities when they are engaged in a strengths-based exploration in the context of supervision and/or performance development. In addition to fortifying existing strengths, building on strengths can be accomplished when strengths are built into a worker's performance plan and/or to balance out or support specific areas noted for worker development.

Building on worker strengths is possible only when those strengths are made concrete and tangible. This can be accomplished when they are documented in specific and behaviorally measurable ways. This is one of those moments that might seem like common sense; however, I am astounded by how many times managers do engage in strengths-based inquiries, yet nothing is written down. Sometimes the difference

between strengths perceived and strengths achieved is the written word. Simply put, strengths have less value when they are not noted or made tangible and accessible.

This is the reason why strengths must be captured in a specific and descriptive manner, in as many places as possible, as often as possible. Managers can begin to identify, capture, and even begin building on strengths right from the first contact and/or in the interview process. I encourage the programs I work with to incorporate strengths-based questions within the employee interview/screening process. The following are some examples:

- What is it that you appreciate about our program?

- What would you say are your greatest strengths?

- What organizations have you worked for in the past that you would say did things better?

- Can you tell us what you appreciated most about the last team you worked on?

- Please tell us about a time when you encountered a value conflict in your work? What was that like for you? And what did you do to work with it or through it?

The answers to these questions can surface important needs, values, goals, and, specifically, strengths of the person prior to him becoming an employee. I encourage supervisors and managers to consider utilizing some of the questions offered in the Preferred Leadership Profile (PLP) in the interview process. In addition to this, when important strengths are written down, they can be passed on to the supervisor who will be assigned the worker when hired.

Documenting strengths is key to a strength-building capacity. Unfortunately, in the current social services systems, supervisors and managers are not encouraged to capture strengths as much as they are encouraged to document problems. "Document, Document, Document" is practically a guiding axiom that represents a mantra for supervisors in most environments I've worked in. Supervisors and managers are commonly encouraged to document when there may be a foreseeable problem with worker attitude or behavior and/or a situation. I often find that supervisors and managers are encouraged to document under not-so-positive circumstances and often in situations where a case is being built for one of several reasons: to hold someone accountable, to begin building a performance management plan, or to begin forming a

case that will justify terminating a worker for poor performance. Interestingly, I have never heard about a situation where managers are encouraged to "Document, Document, Document" around strengths or success or when someone has held a positive attitude or behaved and/or performed optimally.

A major problem I have with the encouragement of documentation primarily around not-so-good situations is to consider what reality is created in a personnel file when the thousands of successes are omitted and only the problematic behaviors or situations are recorded.

Because it is critical for leaders to build the capacities of their members, capturing strengths so that they can be developed further is critical. Strengths can be cultivated and captured in *any* interaction. In addition to the job interview, key opportunities for capturing strengths are during one-to-one supervision meetings, team meetings, and in the process of performance development sessions. I encourage all supervisors to look for areas in the current process and structure of supervision to build in mechanisms wherein strengths can be captured in detail.

The Preferred Leadership Profile has a strengths section built right in and encourages workers to identify any strengths that they would like to build on and/or develop further. I have found that room can be made for strengths on most forms of documentation that pertain to workers. In addition to encouraging leaders to document strengths in any and all situations, I suggest that they develop a running and ongoing list of employee strengths. I refer to this as an employee's *strengths index*. A strengths index does not have to be complicated at all. You can find two examples of an employee strengths index in Appendices C and D. The first index exists in the simplest form and represents a running list. The second example is a little more organized as it deals with specific skill/role categories that pertain to the particular worker in a particular role. I encourage supervisors to "Document, Document, Document!" strengths as often as possible. As a matter of fact, this list should grow as the supervisor and employee continue to collaborate on the cultivation, identification, and operationalization of strengths in practice. When strengths are captured in all employee-relevant documentation, they can be consistently reviewed, developed further, and leveraged in the pursuit of important goals.

Leverage Strengths in the Pursuit of Important Objectives

Supervisors and workers are consistently collaborating on a variety of organizational, professional, program, and client goals. In order to carry out value-focused and purpose-critical tasks optimally, supervisors

work to support the enhancement of worker capacity to attain the most preferred outcomes for clients. Worker practice decisions and the subsequent outcomes that result from those decisions are a direct result of the competence, confidence, and engagement levels of the employee. It is this inextricable link between worker practice and client outcomes that makes employee performance development critical!

Performance goals that are meaningful and valuable for employees operate as motivators in and of themselves. However, for a variety of reasons, sometimes performance goals that require skill development and behavioral change can be difficult for some employees to approximate and/or attain. A strengths approach to supervision and performance development offers both supervisors and employees a great mechanism for enhancing employee competence, confidence, and engagement.

Strengths have been identified as one of the four major pillars of the Responsive Leadership Approach because they operate as key performance motivators for most people and they offer a plethora of resource possibilities for engaging employees in optimal development and quality performance. Because leadership is about inspiring people to work toward shared objectives, a strengths focus when combined with meaningful performance development goals can offer supervisors and managers a potent source for employee motivation, reinforcement, and expedited goal approximation and attainment.

As stated earlier, for a strengths approach to be truly realized, strengths must be prioritized, defined, searched for, built on, and then leveraged in the pursuit of important goals. Strengths are leveraged when they are utilized purposefully to encourage workers to set, strive for, and/or stretch toward important performance objectives. Supervisors can support workers to set goals by using the strengths identification process as a means to assess and/or surface important areas for desired growth and achievement. For instance, when workers gain an accurate understanding of their strengths as opposed to their limitations, they are provided with a broader set of possibilities for goals and growth. Strengths illuminate potential and possibilities, thereby creating a greater pool of professional development options that are meaningful and valuable. For instance, some team members have never considered being a team leader or supervisor until their own manager brought attention to the real potential and specified possibilities for such a goal. This is accomplished when supervisors list the concrete, tangible, and operating worker values, knowledge, experiences, and skills that are relevant to that particular role. When a

strengths approach is utilized, possibilities and potential for worker growth and development are broadened. When workers can identify their own potential, they will be more motivated to set goals that are now in sight and within reach.

Once strengths are identified and developed further, they can be leveraged not only to set important goals for worker development but also to assist workers in striving for and/or stretching themselves toward those goals. Confidence, competence, and level of engagement arise from feelings of success. Let's continue considering a worker who has decided to set the goal of working toward a team-leader position. When relevant strengths, such as effective time-management and delegation skills and quality relationship-building capacities, are identified and elaborated upon, the team-leader position that once may have never been considered by an employee can now seem like a real possibility. Real possibilities are great for motivating workers to strive for meaningful and/or valuable goals. Identified strengths are leveraged when they are built into a worker's professional performance plan in a manner that assists and supports goal approximation. For instance, worker strengths can be leveraged by placing the worker into situations such as mentor and/or unit meeting chair as a means to utilize identified skills in order to develop additional skills necessary for accommodating team-leader capacity. Additional skills such as problem solving and mediating team differences on decisions can be identified and worked on by the member on the journey to team-leader status.

Finally, leveraging strengths can also mean utilizing identified needs, values, and skills to stretch worker efforts toward important goals. Consider for a moment the proverbial "carrot" as a reinforcement and/or incentive to shape behavior/performance. However, instead of a "carrot" or some sort of token reward, identified strengths are utilized as motivators and reinforcements. When a worker has needs to belong to a team, have some control in decision-making, and see results aligned with her values of collaboration, empowerment, and accountability, the goal of team leader can actually accommodate and reinforce this worker's needs and values. If and when a worker struggles in the process of working toward the goal of team leader, her supervisor can remind her that the end goal is worth the extra effort and work as it is in line with her own needs, values, and capabilities. It is this type of strength leveraging that can provide both supervisor and worker with potent sources of motivation and reinforcement simultaneously. In addition to this, because real strengths are being leveraged, worker confidence, competence, and level of

engagement can be enhanced with important messages from the supervisor, such as, "You can do this," and, "You have accomplished similar tasks before, and you will be able to do it again."

❖ THE PROFOUND IMPLICATIONS OF A STRENGTHS APPROACH

It is my belief that quality leadership and a strengths approach are inextricably linked; a manager cannot create a quality leadership experience for members without operationalizing a strengths approach in practice. Practicing in this manner can have profound implications for workers, their teams, and the clients they are serving. As a matter of fact, the effects of a strengths-based approach in leadership can minimize the perceptions and experiences of workers that commonly lead to intent to leave and burnout.

Previous chapters have made mention of the many impediments to preferred practice that also impact a worker's perception of quality leadership experiences. Without reviewing all of the challenges again, there are several that are worth mentioning within in the context of the positive consequences of a strengths-based approach in leadership.

It Feels Good

Invariably, the first thing most people say following an exercise that compares a problem-focused interview with a strengths interview is that the strengths interview feels positive, refreshing, and uplifting—just good overall. Imagine if this was the only benefit. Even if nothing else changed in the work environment, we as helpers just feel better. That alone is a pretty good outcome, given that usually when we feel better as helpers, we do better. And usually the people we are helping do better also. Feeling good is great, but a strengths approach goes well beyond the positive experience.

A positive experience among workers in supervision with performance development and within team meetings can lead to what's known as a *positivity contagion*. Positivity is contagious. In addition to this, given that many workers in the social services perceive their work environment as poor or negative, a strengths-based approach may have positive implications for changing workers' perceptions of the organizational climate overall. It has been my experience that a strengths approach to leadership will inevitably lead to improved job satisfaction and team morale.

Affirming and Validating

A problem-centric environment leaves little room for understanding, knowing, and/or hearing about what we do well or do right. It is extremely affirming and validating to hear that we are saying and doing a lot of things right. Most people, to some degree, like to hear about their strengths as much as possible, especially in the tough times, when things may not be going well or when we feel like we are moving away from better. Being affirmed and validated around what we are doing well can act as a buffer, making us able to hear about or face with strength and courage the things we need to improve or develop further. Simply put, it's easier to hear the not-so-good stuff and know that we aren't all bad, especially if we hear about the good stuff first and hear that that we are actually doing good-to-great things also.

When employees are validated and affirmed as having strengths and capacities to succeed, it can be exceptionally motivating and rewarding. This is a critical point for two important reasons, especially when it comes to engaging and motivating employees to perform optimally. First, one of the major factors that leads social service workers to intent to leave and even burnout is lack of recognition by their supervisors and/or organization. A strengths-based approach is exceptionally rewarding as the recognition and reinforcements are imbedded as an inherent part of the process. Second, one of the most effective ways to shape and improve upon human attitudes and behaviors is through positive reinforcement. There is very little contrary evidence on the fact that from a behavior-modification perspective, positive reinforcement is one of the most powerful mechanisms for shaping employee behaviors. When we consider the strengths-based questions and responses offered above, we see that a strengths approach is, in and of itself, perpetually positive and reinforcing.

Sense of Real Competence and Confidence

One of the great things about a strengths approach is that it is more than just being positive. It is specific and tangible. It points in the direction of successes and concrete results from efforts and accomplishments of both the past and the present. Real success from real strengths results in real competency. A strengths approach provides the valuable message that people are capable; they have done it, they can do it, and they will do it again! A strong sense of competence and confidence are invaluable assets for workers who are carrying out the important role of helping others. Increased competence and confidence is directly linked to increased job satisfaction, motivation, engagement, and performance.

Hope and Optimism

A problem-saturated mode of inquiry in a deficit-focused environment that is perceived by employees as negative can be overwhelming and less than inspiring to say the least. Sometimes workers can feel so overwhelmed with negativity that they can become less mobilized and even incapacitated. When this occurs, it can actually block hope and lead to an overwhelming sense of helplessness. Identifying, building on, and leveraging strengths, among other things, is an exercise in *hope* building. A strengths approach provides a great deal of hope and optimism by illuminating the fact that there is more to us or a situation than just deficits, weaknesses or problems. Even if hope is all we have, it can be everything. Hope can sometimes mean the difference between giving up and getting up—giving in or giving it one more try. Hope and optimism can provide formidable injections of motivation, contributing to increased individual job satisfaction and providing a boost to team morale.

Additional Resources

One of the greatest things about a diligent and focused strengths inquiry is that it can turn identified strengths into additional resource possibilities that were previously unnoticed and/or operating outside of awareness. Just as a focus on dysfunction can illuminate all sorts of problems, conversely, a focus on strengths begets more strengths and successes. It increases the pool of possibilities—potential and available raw materials necessary for making the journey to *better*. Additional strengths will broaden the pool of possibilities for goal variety and performance development pathways. In addition, when identified strengths are built on and leveraged, approximation to goals becomes more rapid and efficient, and the attainment of preferred performance outcomes is much more likely.

Value Alignment

One of the greatest dilemmas facing workers across social services, which is also a major contributor leading to intent to leave and eventual burnout, is when workers operate for prolonged periods of time in a manner that is out of step with their personal and/or professional value sets. When supervisors operationalize a strengths focus in supervision and performance development, workers will experience greater

alignment between their personal and professional values and the ways in which they are encouraged and expected to operate in their work. Given that values and working in line with these values are key sources of motivation for most social service workers, a strengths-based approach in supervision performance development will inevitably lead to increased worker motivation and engagement and optimal performance.

Positive Working Environment

It may be challenging, if not impossible, to change the political, fiscal, bureaucratic, and legislative challenges that translate into real impediments to preferred practice and quality supervision. However, we should consider the important question raised by Patti (2009), "How do we create organizational conditions that will lead to positive worker perceptions, attitudes, and behavior in order to bring about the highest quality and the most effective service?" (p. 117). I believe we may have an important part of the solution in the operationalization of a strengths approach in leadership. Strengths-focused approaches that operate in the context of supervision and performance development may in fact be one of the most potent forces available to leaders to inspire maximum worker engagement and optimal performance.

❖ SUMMARY OF IMPORTANT POINTS

- Social service systems can present real barriers and countercurrents to a strengths approach within supervision.

- Many current approaches to supervision and performance development do not operationalize a strengths approach.

- Performance management and employee discipline are often antithetical to a strengths approach.

- A strengths-based approach within supervision will enhance the quality of the leader–member relationship and quality leadership overall.

- A strengths focus in leadership is critical for enhancing worker job satisfaction, motivation, engagement, and overall performance.

- A strengths based approach in leadership maintains five priorities, which are to prioritize, define, search, build, and leverage strengths.

- A strengths-based approach in leadership has many positive implications for workers, teams, and clients.

- A strengths approach is a potent source of motivation and reinforcement that can lead to positive employee perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors.

❖ PERSONAL LEADER REFLECTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

- How does your understanding of a strengths-based approach to supervision and performance development compare to what was presented in this chapter? Similarities? Differences?

- In your practice as a leader, where are you operationalizing a strengths-based approach?

- Are there areas where you could do something different to more closely approximate a strengths-based approach to leadership in your practice?

- Does your organization and/or program support the operationalization of a strengths-based approach in leadership?

- Are there areas with respect to employee interviewing, documentation, supervision sessions, and performance development that can be enhanced or developed further to promote and/or endorse a strengths-based approach?

❖ REFERENCES

Patti, J. R. (2009). *The handbook of human services management* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.