

Strengths-Based Coaching:

A Human-Centric Approach to Positive Organizational Outcomes



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Introduction

Coaching is widely accepted as a method for delivering meaningful, individualized professional development. Organizations are willing to invest in coaching for their leaders and employees at various levels because there is a well-documented relationship between coaching and positive organizational outcomes such as improved performance and increased productivity. Individuals are often eager to engage in opportunities for coaching, anticipating positive outcomes for their own professional growth and development while also appreciating the investment their organization is making in them.

This brief is not intended to convince you that coaching is valuable, or that it is good, or that it is worth your organization's investment. This is all common knowledge among HR practitioners and organizational leaders. Instead, the purpose of this brief is to formally introduce the concept of **strengths-based coaching**, describe the mechanisms through which it works, and discuss a summary of what we have learned about the positive impact of strengths-based coaching on the persons who experience it. The experience and impact of strengths-based coaching is represented by eight guiding principles:

1. Psychological Safety Opens Doors.
2. Coaches Create Conditions, Not Solutions.
3. Strengths Create a Cognitive Scaffold.
4. Cognition First, Behavior Second.
5. External Challenges become Internal Capabilities.
6. Experimentation Facilitates Behavior Change.
7. Multiple Sessions Matter.
8. Strengths-Based Coaching Adaptive.

What is strengths-based coaching?

Strengths-based coaching is the delivery of **coaching through the lens of strengths**. We define *strengths* as the activities or tasks that someone is good at doing (high aptitude) and that they love to do (high appetite).

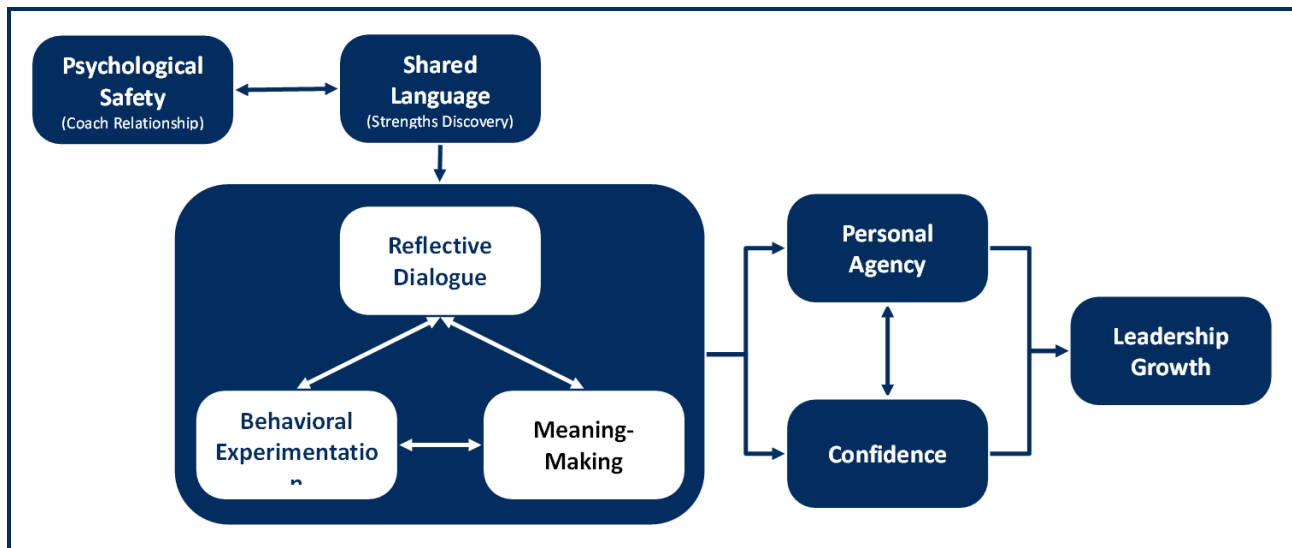
Historically, strengths-based coaching has been connected to StandOut. Not because it belongs to StandOut or because it is only applicable to StandOut clients, but because StandOut is the philosophy and platform through which strengths are actively and explicitly encouraged within the ADP ecosystem. At its core, strengths-based coaching is valuable for and applicable to all leaders (and future leaders and employees who want to be better prepared to do their best). The reason the connection to StandOut matters in the context of this brief is simple: research.

Just as every part of the StandOut product lines are grounded in research, we have been methodically collecting empirical data about strengths-based coaching for several years. The findings presented herein – from the mechanisms through which strengths-based coaching works to the outcomes for individual coaching participants – are derived from a four-years long mixed-methods investigation integrating coach interviews, client motivations, goals, coaching tools, reflections, and quantitative outcomes.

How does strengths-based coaching work?

Strengths-based coaching works through an iterative process not unlike other approaches to coaching: a positive rapport must be established between the coach and their client (the person participating in coaching, not the organization) in which the client feels psychologically safe; the pair establish a common vocabulary for discussing capability; and coaching sessions consist of facilitated reflective dialogue, encouraged meaning-making, and supported behavioral experimentation. Over time, this cycle (illustrated in the figure below) strengthens the agency of the client and ultimately contributes to leadership growth.

The Iterative Process of Strengths-Based Coaching



The uniqueness of the strengths-based approach is that the initial elements of psychological safety and the discovery of a shared vocabulary are facilitated by a strengths assessment – the StandOut Assessment. The client completes the assessment and then experiences a debrief with their coach, followed by reflection and discovery of strengths. It is important to note that the StandOut Assessment is not intended to identify strengths; it is a tool that helps reveal the rank order of the nine Strength Roles. From this understanding of one's self, a natural discovery conversation about strengths emerges. And it is with the client's Strength Roles, strengths, and goals for coaching in mind that strengths-based coaching is experienced over a series of sessions.

The remainder of this section of the brief is organized by concepts as they relate to strengths-based coaching. **Each concept represents one or more findings uncovered during this mixed-methods project.**

1. **Psychological Safety Opens Doors.** By establishing a rapport and developing a trusting relationship that breeds psychological safety for the client by focusing on how they show up when they are at their best and what they already do well, strengths-based coaching is conceptually relational before it becomes instructional. This is important because it increases the confidence the client has in their coach and lowers their defenses, so they are more likely to be open, honest, engaged in the coaching process, and willing to take the risk of trying new behaviors or techniques.
2. **Coaches Create Conditions, Not Solutions.** The role and perspective of the coach is not to provide instructions or advice. Instead, the coach has the responsibility of being a partner who creates a safe environment free of judgment in which the client can explore and own their development. The coaching process is slowed when clients expect advice or an instant solution; it is part of the coach's role to provide consistent space, not solutions.
3. **Strengths Create a Cognitive Scaffold.** The incorporation and focus on strengths early in the coaching engagement provides a lens through which to solve problems. This lens, then, acts as a cognitive scaffold. It is through the shared language and intentional consideration of strengths that clients develop a concrete vocabulary for recognizing their existing patterns of contribution. This allows reflection to feel more personally meaningful rather than just an exercise, as the client learns to reinterpret challenges, weaknesses, role expectations, and self-limiting beliefs without denying reality.
4. **Cognition First, Behavior Second.** Coaches are not cheerleaders. The role of a coach is not to tell the client they are always correct. In fact, coaches ask questions that help their clients identify evidence of their existing capabilities and imagine ways to apply those capabilities to current situations. In this way, coaches become experts in crafting questions in such a way as to not imply correct or incorrect, nor to "lead" the client to a specific discovery or conclusion. Part of what enables coaches to do this is the relationship they create with each client, understanding how they think and how they approach work.

Often underestimated, this approach to thought partnership encourages clients to become more self-aware, grow their self-understanding, evolve their mindset, increase in confidence, and learn new ways to interpret the problems they seek to solve. And they aren't doing these things at the direction of a coach or according to a prescription handed to them by a coach, but instead are learning to do these things independently with the support of a coach.

5. **External Challenges become Internal Capabilities.** Clients often begin a coaching engagement – or even a session – with specific external tasks ranging from developing an ability to manage or influence up, communicating effectively with stakeholders, developing and delivering an important presentation, a role transition, or a team issue. At the core of these external challenges lie internal developmental needs (e.g., confidence, judgment, presence, self-awareness, prioritization, intentionality). Coaches rely on their unique style of questioning (described above) as well as other resources and tools to support clients in addressing the internal gaps to enable conquering the external challenge. Clients are not blind to these efforts and can typically name several tools their coach shared with them even after the engagement has ended.
6. **Experimentation Facilitates Behavior Change.** The coaching process is most valuable long-term when clients translate insights into leadership behavior. Coaching sessions (supported by the coaching relationship itself) provide a low-risk setting in which clients can experiment with different approaches and practice applying different techniques (often through role playing exercises), reflect on the experience, and then practice again to help embed a new schema for how to approach a specific situation. Clients then translate their practice experiences to their work settings and return to the coach setting to debrief, reflect, and continue experimentation if desired. It is through this type of experimentation and practice that clients hone their skills and gain the confidence they need to do something (differently) at work.
7. **Multiple Sessions Matter.** Coaching engagements work as a series of sessions but are not likely to be effective if consumed as a single session. The reason is that repeated sessions allow the relationship to develop, which supports the cognitive change that must happen before behavioral change can be effective and sustained over time. Thus, change compounds. As with the formation of any new habits, changing the mental models and behaviors on which people rely requires repeated action-reflection cycles. A one-time debrief may create an insight, but it is extremely unlikely to produce integrated, sustained behavioral change.
8. **Strengths-Based Coaching is Adaptive.** Strengths-based coaching is not a one-size-fits-all approach, nor is it a strictly positive intervention. Coaches have the responsibility of adapting language, acknowledging weaknesses, and overcoming resistance and a lack of readiness to engage in the coaching process. True competency gaps, refusal to acknowledge weaknesses, punitive organizational framing of the coaching opportunity, etc. can limit or distort the process. Often, coaches are able to overcome these obstacles, but only when their initially-resistant clients continue to show up.

Why choose strengths-based coaching?

Strengths are a powerful focal lens because they shift the conversation *from* “*What competencies do I lack that might be impeding my ability to overcome this obstacle?*” to “*What strengths can I leverage to overcome this hurdle while just being more... me?*” In this way, the strengths lens naturally organizes developmental conversations through which leaders reinterpret experiences, recognize their existing capabilities, experiment with new behaviors, and integrate those experiences into sustained leadership practice. Clients consistently attribute greater clarity, confidence, ownership, stronger workplace relationships, and intentional action-taking to their strengths-based coaching experience; all of these themes converged with positive movement across quantitative measures.

For HR practitioners, the evidence suggests that strengths-based coaching should be viewed as a structured developmental process rather than an assessment debrief or a series of coaching conversations. Its value lies in creating sustained changes in how leaders understand themselves and intentionally apply their capabilities – a positive evolution that will impact individual, team, and organizational outcomes.