

October 2013

Harnessing the Power of Passion in Optimizing Business Performance

Randy Ross

Enthusiasm Inc., randy@teamenthusiasm.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jee>

 Part of the [Business Commons](#), and the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ross, Randy (2013) "Harnessing the Power of Passion in Optimizing Business Performance," *Journal of Executive Education*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jee/vol7/iss1/6>

This Corporate Perspectives is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Executive Education by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

Harnessing the Power of Passion in Optimizing Business Performance

Dr. Randy Ross, *Founder and CEO of Enthusiasm, Inc.*

Passion and excellence are intricately interwoven. Where enthusiasm exists, there is often a desire to perform at an elevated level, leading to greater productivity and personal satisfaction. This type of performance is fueled by an awareness of personal strengths and the ability to posture and leverage those strengths to create exponential returns. Organizations which effectively embrace this philosophy of personal performance through applied strengths have found their talent pools to be both empowered and fulfilled.

The Strengths Movement was a ripple effect of Positive Psychology, which found its genesis in 1998 when Dr. Martin Seligman set a new course as the President of the American Psychological Association. At that time, he observed that the methodology of identifying and classifying mental health disorders may have been incomplete in bringing the greatest value to the discipline. Rather than addressing the "illness side of mental health, he suggested that a loftier course would be to study the "sanities," looking for those elements which lead to happiness and fulfillment. This ignited a firestorm of research and writing, including the compilation of the manual of *Character Strengths and Virtues*, which has greatly impacted the discipline of IO Psychology. In essence, Positive Psychology postulates that people who are optimistic or happy have better performance in work, school and sports, are less depressed, have fewer physical health problems, and have better relationships with other people. A vital component of happiness is the ability to regularly employ innate gifts and talents (or "strengths"), in the fulfillment of a goal.

Our Infatuation with Competencies

When discussing the idea of maximizing the potential of our people, and intervening (e.g., with mid-career training and educational programs) to bring this potential to fruition, there is often little differentiation made between strengths, skills sets and knowledge. In corporate America, all three are often lumped together and categorized simply as competencies. Failure, however, to distinguish between the three will lead to flawed approaches to talent development. Knowledge can and should be added and skills sets may be taught and acquired. Programs aimed at identifying gaps and addressing such shortages may be effective with exposure to the correct content, coaching and accountability. However, innate strengths are predominantly psychologically predisposed and are altered minimally through exposure to materials or mentoring. That is to say that someone's strengths and personality or basic constitution will vary little over the course of that person's lifetime.

One of the great myths of management is that “everyone can be taught to be equally competent in every aspect of a job with enough training and coaching.” This simply is not true. Some things cannot be taught. While someone can be groomed, for example, in the art of active listening, empathy is innate. Some people connect emotionally at a deeper level than others. While someone can be taught techniques of conflict management, whether someone flourishes or falters in such an arena is a matter of how that person is uniquely “gifted.” The stress levels may be temporarily mitigated with additional training, but constant exposure will deplete those who are not naturally “wired” for such interpersonal intensity.

What this ultimately means is that jobs should be assessed for the qualities and capacities (strengths) which are deemed necessary to be successful. Hiring should be done to match this “strengths profile.” Skill sets and knowledge can then be added in order to enhance that which is naturally present. In other words, hire for talent, develop skills and add knowledge. Choose mid-career educational investments wisely and surgically.

Defining and Emphasizing Strengths

Jungian psychology is the basis for many of the most respected personality assessment inventories. According to Carl Jung, personal development emanates from self-understanding of our attitudes and behavioral preferences as well as an understanding of how we relate to others. These “preferences” and “ways of relating to others” are what we call strengths. Strength can be defined as that which is done naturally and consistently to near perfect performance. Strengths, when applied, will invigorate those who possess them. It is what they are “wired to do well.” Identifying and emphasizing these innate abilities will serve to empower any team or work force. It can and will drive results to the top and bottom lines as individuals are liberated to pursue courses of action that are more creative than “business as usual.”

The problem, however, comes in a shift of paradigm. Many current assessment and management tools are designed to find the flaws, gaps and weaknesses in performance. Once identified, these weaknesses then become the basis for the development of a “personal growth plan” to maximize these “areas of opportunity.” The fallacy with this logic is that no matter how much time and energy one is encouraged to spend on marginalizing these weaknesses through consolidated effort, the end result is often unintentional condemnation to mediocrity. Natural psychological propensities don’t easily morph. Attempting to transform an innate weakness into an area of strength would be akin to trying to teach a horse to climb a tree. You may be successful in doing it, but someone may be badly injured in the process. Why would you want to do that anyway?

Great managers understand that their direct reports are uniquely gifted with talents and strengths that make each like no other. Thus, the secret to great performance lies in accurately identifying and deploying these strengths. Exceptional managers grasp the fact that their responsibility is not to eradicate this uniqueness, but rather to arrange roles and responsibilities in such a way as to capitalize on what each team member most effectively brings to the equation. The more managers grow in their ability to identify and release these strengths, rather than stifle them through uniformity, the more effectively they will be able to turn talent into performance.

While good leadership intuitively knows this to be true, one of the challenges for organizations is creating a common language which clearly communicates these

concepts. Being able to identify and explain these strengths and how they interrelate is critical if we are to help people maximize them. Many attempts have been made to classify and communicate the various components of personality, with their underlying strengths. Most, however, fall somewhat short in conveying the essence of these elements in a simple, comprehensive and manageable language. The key is to capture the key components of these strengths in clear, self-evident language which makes sense on both sides of the management table. With a common language of strengths, coaching and mentoring – and re-tooling via educational programs – becomes far more robust, targeted and effective.

Enthusiasm Ignited and Deployed

The correlation between passion and high performance is direct and natural. Passion is the by-product of purposeful, productive activity in which the individual feels fulfilled. This personal fulfillment fuels confidence and commitment, resulting in even higher productivity. In fact, one of the common complaints of a disengaged work force is that there is little or inconsistent opportunity to utilize their strengths on a consistent basis. As a result, energy wanes, frustration with management increases and productivity diminishes. Empowerment is about fully releasing talent in order to fulfill specific goals and objectives.

One of the primary responsibilities of management is that of setting expectations. Once these goals and objectives have been clearly established, then strategies can be created as a means of realizing them. It is in this strategic arena where latitude can be afforded to tap into individual strengths and the collective potential of teams. Ownership and passion result when individual contributors feel that they are bringing the very best of who they are to the table and that such participation results in better performance.

This is not to suggest that personal expression of strengths trumps outcomes. On the contrary, if utilizing one's strengths does not result in greater productivity, then roles and responsibilities should be re-addressed. The desired result is always performance, not merely expression of self. However, if roles have been clearly defined and evaluated, hiring processes are designed to match true talent with positions (and are *not* merely based upon past accomplishments and first impressions), and organizations target serious investments in continuing education of their workforce, the powerful linkage between talent and performance will be optimized. And, in the true spirit of creating and sustaining competitive advantage, the organization will indeed have a better chance of discovering the power of personal passion.

Dr. Randy Ross is the founder and CEO (Chief Enthusiasm Officer) of Enthusiasm, Inc., a consulting group which specializes in leadership and talent development. Randy is a graduate of Baylor University and holds two advanced degrees from Southwestern. A pastor at heart, Randy understands both the opportunities and challenges of corporate America. He has traveled throughout the United States and internationally, as a speaker, consultant and coach, building teams and developing leaders. After serving churches in Texas and Florida as pastor, he became the VP of Recruiting for HomeBanc Mortgage Corporation and later assumed the responsibilities of Chief People Officer at North American Automotive Group, before founding Enthusiasm, Inc. He and his wife, LuAnne, live in Roswell, Georgia, with their three children.