

# Invest in Strengths or Weaknesses ?

Which investment will get my  
organization where it wants to go ?



**If you spend your life trying to be good at everything,  
you will never be exceptional.**

**(But that's exactly what we try to do in our organizations!)**

### **It seems obvious, and yet...**

In a study of 8000 teams published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Jim Harter and Frank Schmidt conclude that although there are many levers that increase commitment and performance (talents, well-defined roles, a clear definition of the team's mission, etc...), the greatest lever is allowing people to work on their strengths.

**The greatest lever of performance: allowing people to work on their strengths**

It seems obvious - who would actually disagree with this concept? And yet, very few leaders and companies help their employees to detect, develop and capitalize on their strengths. In fact, they would rather focus on their weaknesses...

After 15 years as an HR Director in the industrial sector, I discovered resources and strengths-based approaches (such as

Appreciative Inquiry, Solution Focus and Positive Psychology). I became aware of the fact that although it was our conviction to build on the talents of our coworkers, our culture and tools inevitably led us to analyze their weaknesses. I am convinced today that our personal and professional development starts with examining our qualities and not our weaknesses. High-level athletes can testify to this: a decathlete once told me he was very good at three out of the ten sports and that he worked specifically to excel in those three; he simply tried his best in the other seven. This is a first lesson to note: we develop excellence when we base that development on our strengths, and we can manage the problems generated by our weaknesses.

Therefore, the invitation is to work on our strengths and weaknesses in a different way - by first using our energy to detect our strengths and then in intelligently bypassing and containing our weaknesses.

## Our culture, way of thinking and tools point us towards our weaknesses

If you had to invest your money somewhere, what would you look at first? Most people would say the return on investment - and finding the highest possible return! It's a logical way of thinking. When it comes to investing money in the development of human capital in a company, where do we invest our financial efforts? Surprisingly, it's usually the lowest return on investment! **Our development plans have in effect become corrective action plans.**

I had the opportunity to work with employees on their development by using many individual and collective processes: development centers, personal development plans, training plans, coaching sessions, people reviews, etc. We analyzed our managers' strengths and axes of development, as well as their potential for evolution within the organization. We would refer to their flaws/weaknesses with the mild euphemisms "development points" or "progress points." Upon reflection, why disguise one term with another? Because it would seem more acceptable? Probably because we already felt that people were reluctant to work on what they lacked the most. And rightly so! Working on our weak

points allow us, at best, to go from "mediocre" to "a little less mediocre," despite a significant amount of energy and financial investment!

## A reflex that starts very early on...

The fact that we first focus on our weaknesses in France is nothing new. This approach begins very early on in our culture. In the French school system, we have already been conditioned from our childhood to focus primarily on poor grades and our weakest points, as evidenced by this survey of school parents conducted by Gallup. France is not alone, but for once is the "best" in its category!

Country	% of parents focusing on good grades	% of parents focusing on bad grades
England	22	52
Japan	18	43
China	8	56
France	7	87
USA	7	77

This type of thinking continues in the business world with disastrous effects on employee engagement, as shown by these Gallup statistics:



Where is your focus?





# How can we refocus our vision and actions on our strengths?

## 1/ Start by defining what a strength is

Recent studies have shown that only one third of people can define what their strengths are. Even then, they often think that these are the “activities” in which they perform well.

« Only 1/3 of all people know their strengths »

This is only one of the aspects of a strength, which can be characterized by three key elements:

### Natural :

It's in your DNA, you are completely yourself when you use it. Whatever the context, you develop these strengths authentically.

### Energy :

When you use a strength, it gives you a boost of energy (and is non-dependent on the situation in which you find yourself).

### Excellence :

You deliver performance and excellence in an activity when you manifest that strength.

## 2/ Develop a more precise vocabulary in order to detect your strengths

It's important to be able to use language and vocabulary that describes your strengths in order to develop and share them with others. Our vocabulary has been largely overused to evoke our weaknesses or flaws, and we shouldn't be surprised if we find it difficult to be precise about strengths. When asked the question "what are your strengths, your qualities?", only 1/3 of British people surveyed were able to give a concrete answer. What would your answer to this question be?

In his 1966 book *The Effective Leader* Peter Drucker writes, "the effective leader builds on strengths - his own, those of his manager, his colleagues and his collaborators." David Cooperrider, creator of Appreciative Inquiry, wrote an article in 1987 that launched this discipline and explained its first basic principle, "In any organization there is something that works well, and development happens by doing more or improving on what works because that's what constitutes the DNA of the organization."

Martin Seligman, in his 1999 keynote address as the new president of the American Psychology Association, noted the plethora of studies that explained the reasons for human dysfunction, and the relatively few studies that explained optimal functioning. He

launched what would become Positive Psychology.

Nowadays, there are questionnaires built on these theories which allow you to highlight what constitutes your excellence.

### 3/ Recognize *what is* or *what isn't* a strength, and build an effective development strategy

Depending on the frequency of use and the energy it gives us, we can begin to discern to a greater extent what a strength is and how to best invest in its development.

#### Discerning our strengths

##### “Activated strengths”

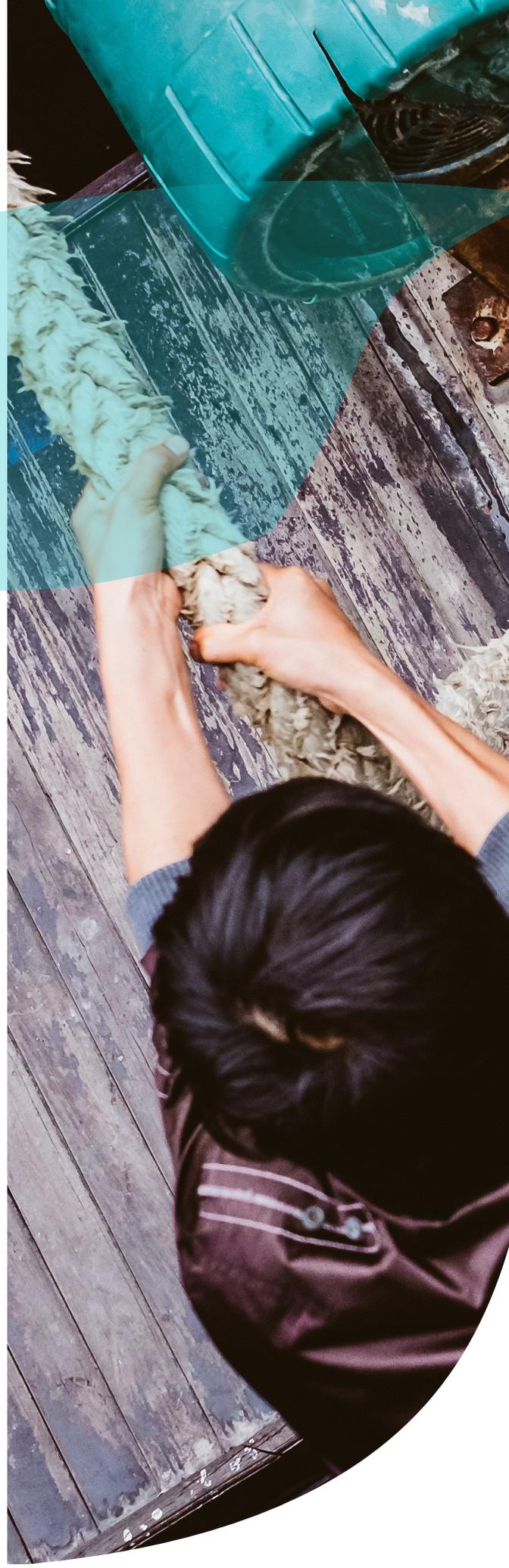
These are the ones we use regularly, that give us energy and results. They are stronger than us, they are within us, they are part of our DNA.

##### “Available strengths”

They are also within us, but do not manifest themselves regularly enough. Why? Because most of the time, we have not identified them, we are not aware of them, and we don't think about creating the conditions to implement them more regularly.

##### Learned behaviors

These are often confused with strengths: we know how to use certain behaviors like a well-oiled machine that delivers a good result, but it doesn't give us any particular energy, AND it might actually consume it. We were able to verify this with an operational leader who was functioning solely on his learned behaviors, to the point that he eventually had a burnout. He did not realize it because he delivered good results, but without any pleasure or satisfaction.



## Weaknesses

These are the things we don't like to do or the situations in which we don't want to find ourselves. They consume our time and our energy, are unenjoyable and are often source of procrastination.

## Invest in developing strengths and bypassing weaknesses

After having discerned these different categories, what strategies can be implemented to truly experience the development of your strengths?

### "Activated strengths"

As these are completely "you," and you manifest them in a rather systematic way, it is interesting to look at ways in which they can be manifested wisely - at the right level and adapted to a specific context. Pushing them to the extreme or letting them run wild could also become a weakness. The idea here is tame them as you would a wild horse.

### "Available strengths"

You are good at them, they give you energy, but you don't use them often enough. Once you have identified them, you can create the conditions and opportunities to implement them as often as possible. This is where you have the **highest potential for progress**.

### Learned behaviors

Remember et that they are not strengths, despite appearances, and that they can consume a great deal of energy. Use them only when they are essential to your activities. The difference between these and your weaknesses is that you perform well when you apply them. Look for what you can stop doing, delegate, etc...

## Weaknesses

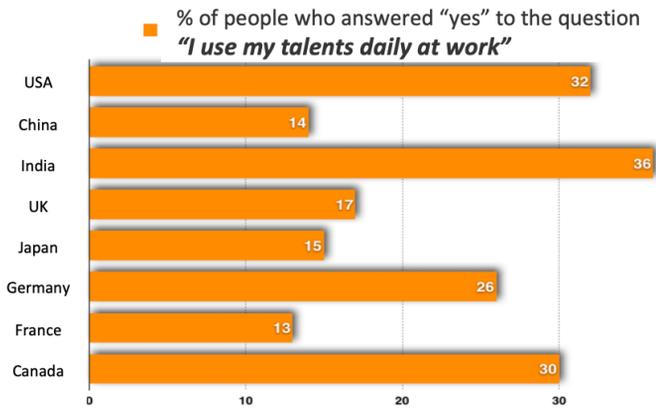
It's important to analyze how they can hurt your performance. It will be more of a corrective action plan. You can also see how the strengths you have can counteract your weaknesses. For instance, how can your creativity help overcome your lack of organization? It's important to acknowledge them, but without concentrating all your resources on remedying them.

### How does this take shape in companies?

There is still a huge amount of work to be done within our organizations and particularly in France, as evidenced by survey conducted by Gallup in 2007 (see next page). It shows how much France is behind on this topic, in a landscape of international companies that also shows considerable room for improvement.

What gives you energy?  
How will you activate it?





A maximum return on investment will only be earned as part of development plans and training plans that invest in the employees' activated and available strengths.

#### 4/ How and where do I begin as a leader?

##### Focus on your strengths and those of your coworkers

Be careful not to confuse their learned behaviors with their activated and available strengths. Measure their performance, but also the pleasure they take in carrying out the projects and activities entrusted to them. If you want their performance to be sustainable and if you want to create a motivated team, it's important to do the work of finding your employees' strengths and helping to develop them using the aforementioned strategies.

##### Stop investing heavily in weaknesses

Stop spending your organization's money, your employees' energy and your own time trying to turn the weaknesses of your employees into strengths. Spend more time thinking about how to make their weaknesses obsolete by using all the appropriate means, but above all, stop believing and making them believe that they can become brilliant at their weak points! It won't happen and you risk doing a lot of damage trying to do so.

##### Recognize that no one person has every single strength possible

It's a myth to believe or to let someone believe that he or she can be talented at everything. This might go against what you've been told but believing that everyone must progress on all levels is to create a *race to the bottom* (on skills and talents that everyone must have). Instead, try empowering your employees to achieve their best skill level based on their best talents. We might be tempted to do the former in companies that require everyone to be at the same level on all skills.





### **Become a “strengths explorer!”**

You don't have to have everyone fill out a questionnaire or take a strengths test. You can simply ask your coworkers about the moments in their professional life when they felt deeply engaged or energized by what they were doing, then look with them at what talents they applied in that situation. You will not only create more performance, but also a work environment that is conducive to a high level of commitment and motivation. Having done this legwork in advance, you will also be better equipped when it comes to assigning projects and activities to your employees.

**When you take a look at what you do in your organization and for yourself, what is the focus of your attention, energy and resources?**

# Go further with Positive Transformation !



A 50-page document on the Positive Transformation that maps out the gateways to transformation (contact us for the full document)

[What is Positive Transformation](#) and how can it impact the future of work?

L'histoire d'une **Transformation Positive** menée au **Centre Pompidou**



The Positive Transformation [approach in action](#) at the Centre Pompidou in Paris



AI Power 5, How to unleash the full power of Appreciative Inquiry, [available here!](#).

For more articles on Positive Transformation visit our websites :

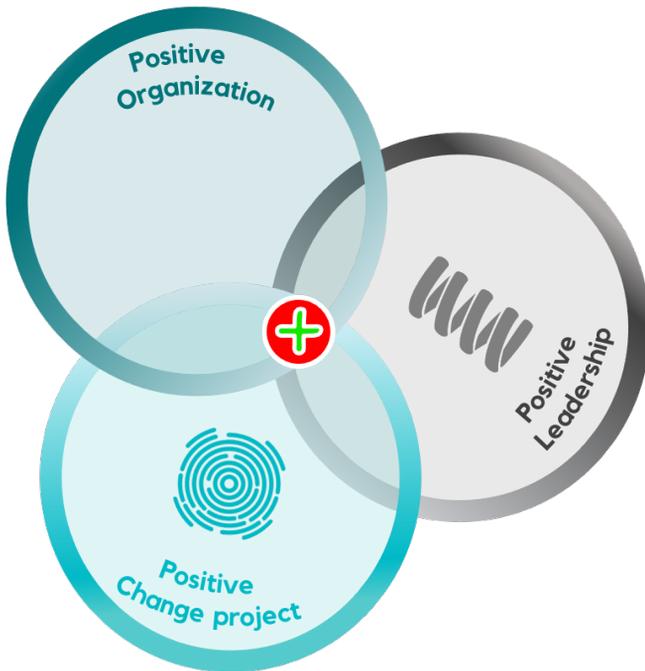
[www.transfo-positive.com](http://www.transfo-positive.com)  
[www.appreciative-inquiry.fr](http://www.appreciative-inquiry.fr)



## About the author



Bernard Tollec is one of the European specialists in strengths-based and resource-based approaches such as Appreciative Inquiry and Solution Focus. As an Executive Coach and expert in Organizational Development, he works with organizations that want to drive a rapid and sustainable transformation. He also coaches, trains and supervises leaders, executive coaches, and internal change agents in these new methods of collective intelligence. Bernard is the author of *AI Power 5 : how to unleash the full power of Appreciative Inquiry* and of *Positive Transformation*.



Positive Transformation is a systemic approach to organizational transformations. It is an unexpected and disruptive take on transformation and leadership development and targets the following three areas :

- Positive Leadership
- Positive Transformation Project
- Positive Organization

**Bernard Tollec**, Directeur Transformation Positive –  
Strengths Based Organizational Development Executive Coach  
23 rue Brochant – 75017 Paris

[bernard.tollec@transfo-positive.com](mailto:bernard.tollec@transfo-positive.com) +33 (0)6 18 45 67 13