

# Character strengths: the backbone of wellbeing

*“It takes far more energy and work to improve from incompetence to mediocrity than it takes to improve from first-rate performance to excellence”*

*Peter Drucker*

Legend has it that, many years ago, in ancient India, a thief escaping from the royal guard hid a priceless jewel he had stolen from the king in the pocket of a sleeping beggar on the floor of an alley. The thief was caught and never reclaimed his treasure. And the beggar, who never looked in his pockets, died of hunger.

Traditionally, we have focused on identifying our weaknesses and trying to remedy them only to achieve mediocrity. However, we are all born with qualities and virtues that set us apart from the rest and are our “hidden treasure”.

About 20 years ago, a research group led by Dr Martin Seligman and Dr Christopher Peterson began an investigation to describe the best qualities of human beings. They identified 24 character strengths. Studies have shown that people who know and use their character strengths experience

a higher level of self-esteem and self-efficacy and are more efficient in achieving their goals. Moreover, they are connected to the development of resilience, i.e. they are an investment in overcoming difficult situations better and faster.

Strengths are characterised by the fact that, once discovered, we are happy to put them into practice. We want to find a thousand ways to use them, they fill us with energy and joy every time we use them, they encourage us to grow and change. They give us the confidence to accept criticism without becoming defensive.

I suggest you take the online test designed by Peterson, used by more than a million people around the world:

[Character strengths](#)

Once you have taken the test, do you identify with the strengths you found in the first 5 positions? Reflect on it with a person you trust.

Have you been surprised by any of your strengths? Can you tell a story about how you have used one of these five strengths in the past? Can you think of new ways to put your strengths into practice this week? For example, if your strength is creativity, you might choose to make up your daughters' bedtime story instead of reading it, every night this month. If it's a love of learning, you could include a longer course or training in one of your areas of interest in your yearly schedule...

To do this second part of the exercise, it might help to set clear, specific, measurable, achievable and time-bound objectives. This is a technique known as SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound) objectives. As you have seen in the examples above, the goal is not just: "Ah, my main strength is creativity. I'm going to use it more these days." What was established was specific and achievable (the story), a period of time (every night for a month) and measurable (if I write down the nights I have proposed to do it and what I discover).

Finally, how could you use one of these strengths to address a challenge you face in the near future? Do you think your strengths might have any disadvantages? And if so, how could you minimise their effects?

As Dr Martin Seligman says "You don't have to spend too much effort correcting your weaknesses. Rather, I believe that the greatest success in life, and the deepest emotional satisfaction, comes from building and using our special personal strengths."

Even those strengths that come last are still strengths that you have not cultivated very much. They are not weaknesses or areas to be corrected.

Using character strengths at work provides greater satisfaction, well-being and performance. It lets you connect different dimensions of your life. For Dr Seligman, character strengths are the backbone of his wellbeing model, the PERMA model. Knowing our strengths is knowing the space from which we can lead ourselves and others.

Identifying strengths in other people is, according to economist and thinker, Peter Drucker, the most important quality in leadership. And its main task is "to create an alignment of strengths so strong that it makes the system's weaknesses irrelevant."