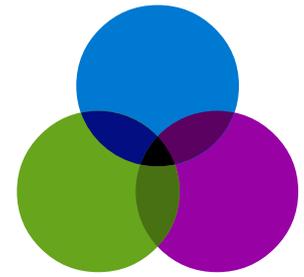




# Understanding strengths and career goals

QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE FOR MANAGERS



## UNDERSTANDING & USING STRENGTHS

A key insight from research in the field of positive psychology has been the importance of utilising someone's personal strengths in order to bring out their best performance. This is a positive approach to the management of people and their potential, leading to higher levels of employee engagement and discretionary effort. Previous approaches to performance management have focused more on identifying weaknesses and dedicating efforts towards fixing these. It is still important that we are aware of our weaknesses and don't let them hold us back from performing well, but focusing on strengths shifts the conversation into how to maximise performance rather than just avoid poor performance.

### KEY BENEFITS OF WORKING WITH STRENGTHS

- Investing in building on existing strengths tends to produce faster and greater returns in learning and performance improvement, with mutual benefit for individual employees and the public sector as their employer
- Utilising strengths tends to bring out more energy and positive emotions in people, they become happier, more resilient and experience less stress
- Harnessing the collective strengths of individuals allows you to build a complimentary team that is more flexible and agile in responding to work demands
- Employees feel more valued and when you have shown individual consideration of their personal strengths, increasing their motivation to perform and give extra effort



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## WHEN TO CONSIDER STRENGTHS

- When trying to find the right job-person fit for a role in your team
- When delegating specific tasks to individuals
- When you are having planning conversations and setting goals or objectives as part of performance management and development
- When discussing relevant development activities for an individual employee
- When setting career goals and plans for the future

## HOW TO IDENTIFY STRENGTHS

A key skill for managers is learning how to identify and label strengths. You can't necessarily tell what someone's strengths are from your first impressions, particularly if they have not had the opportunity to demonstrate them in their current role. Sometimes people may refer to others as having a particular flair, a talent or a knack for doing something well. These may all be different words for describing someone's strengths. What to look for is an ability to do something which appears to come naturally to the person, that they can do consistently time after time, and that they gravitate towards.

### **Some techniques for learning more about someone's strengths include:**

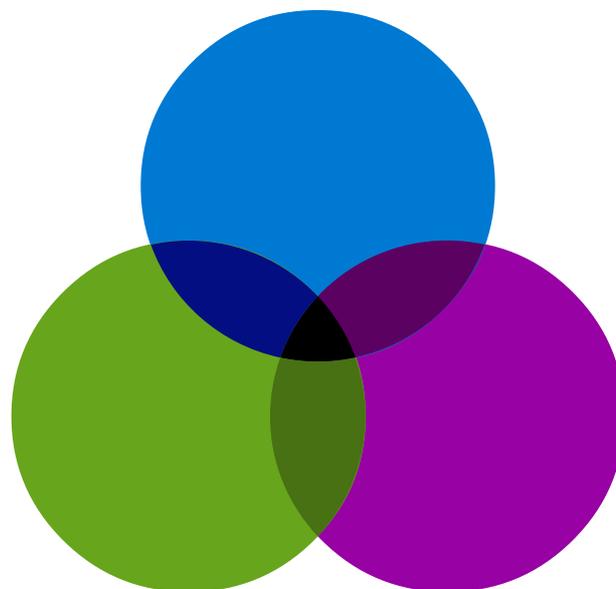
- Reviewing their track record - Spend some time with the employee to discuss the person's work history. You will need to have already invested time up-front to establish rapport and a respectful working relationship with the person before you start trying to uncover potential strengths. Some initial questions to ask might include:
  - "What are some of your achievements that you feel most proud of?"
  - "What are some situations when you have been at your best?"
  - "When have you felt like you have been in 'flow', were really energised by what you were doing and so absorbed that you lost track of time? This could be at work, or in other parts of your life."
- Gathering feedback from others – Speak to other managers or colleagues that the person has worked with in the past and ask for their feedback and observations regarding where the person has demonstrated particular strengths.

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- Psychometric assessment – You can use psychometric assessments to identify underlying strengths in someone’s abilities or personal style. There are a wide range of profiling tools available that can assist someone in pin-pointing some of their personal strengths. It is important that you work with someone who has the right qualifications and skills to help you in selecting the right tool for you.

### KEY POINTS

- Everyone is different it is important not to assume they have the same strengths as us
- It is easier to build on existing strengths than try to get weaknesses up to the same level
- Strengths are not obvious and may require some probing to get below the surface to uncover what they are
- We can’t be strong at everything, so finding the right fit between strengths and specific job requirements is key to getting the best performance





## Understanding strengths and career goals

### CAREER GOALS

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Performance management and development conversations are a prime opportunity to discuss someone's career goals and plans for the future. The nature of career development has changed significantly over time from being a very linear and structured with one employer to becoming far more dynamic and multi-dimensional. The South Australian Public Sector is committed to the learning and development of our people to create a mutual benefit: supporting career resilience and the realisation of employee potential, while ensuring sustainable public sector performance through an engaged and skilled workforce.

#### KEY BENEFITS OF CAREER PLANNING

- Makes performance and development plans relevant to the employee's broader personal goals and personal situation/ commitments outside of work
- Promotes personal and professional growth over time by identifying opportunities to stretch people and give them exposure to different responsibilities
- Enables workforce planning and succession planning, allowing you to manage capacity in your team and continuity of service delivery
- Assists in retaining key skills and experience within the public sector, helping to get the best value from investment into developing the workforce

### WHEN TO LOOK AT CAREER GOALS

It is worthwhile checking in with each employee at least twice a year, either through one of their formal performance management and development reviews or other conversations, to discuss their career goals. Someone's personal situation can change from time to time, and this can influence their appetite for career development. For example, if someone has recently started a family or is a carer for another family member, this may be more important for them than their career at that point in time.

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## EXPLORING DIFFERENT OPTIONS

The nature of career planning conversations is to step back and ask some broader questions about how work fits into someone's personal goals. As a manager, you can support employees in thinking through their career goals, but they will need to decide for themselves what they wish to do next. While everyone has different interests and personal values which impact on what they want to do in their career, there are some general questions that can be useful to help explore what they might want to do next.

- **Autonomy** – Some employees will aspire to take on jobs with more responsibility, where they have more latitude to make decisions about how to go about work or solve problems. Others might want to scale back their responsibility for a while so they can concentrate on other commitments outside of work. Asking questions about how much responsibility they want in their role can help facilitate their thinking.
- **Mastery** – Some employees may want to explore jobs where they can specialise more, building on specific technical or professional expertise in a particular field. Some might want to explore opportunities to gain a broader experiences and exposure to new responsibilities and activities, using more of their generalist skills and knowledge. Others might want to focus on mastering the job they currently hold, getting better through practise and experience. Asking questions about what kinds of skills they want to master can help identify relevant options for their next career step.
- **Purpose** – Some employees are more driven by their values and passion a particular cause more than the nature of the work they are doing in a particular job. They might feel a strong connection to the purpose of a given organisation and the opportunity make a difference in that area. Asking questions about what the person feels they stand for or what kind of organisations they identify with can be useful to draw out where they might want to go next.
- **Strengths** - Knowing what someone's strengths are is a key piece of information to help inform their career goals and plans. It helps to identify different jobs or types of work that they are most likely to succeed in the future and could provide the right person-job fit.



# Understanding strengths and career goals

## PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Not everyone necessarily wants the same things from a job. It is important not to assume that everyone is planning to take on a larger job or a management position as the next step in their career. For some employees, their job may be the main focus of their time and energy. For others a job may be a relatively small part of their priorities in life. Other responsibilities or interests outside of work that might be important at a particular point in time – e.g. caring responsibilities, being involved in the community, or pursuing a personal passion.

Performance management and development conversations about career goals can be a good opportunity to discuss whether an employee wants to change something about their job. This could be their working hours (e.g. from full-time to part-time or a different shift pattern) their work location (e.g. to closer to where they may be living) or maybe their working basis (e.g. from casual to ongoing).

One of the benefits of working in the South Australian Public Sector is the range of flexible working options available, and this can be a factor in attracting and retaining people to work in government.

### KEY POINTS

- Understanding someone's career goals helps put their motivation for performance and development into context
- We need to learn about the employee's situation and what they want/ need from their job rather than make assumptions about someone's career goals
- As a manager, your role is to facilitate and support someone in identifying their career goals but they need to take ownership for making any decisions about what they want to do
- It is better to know if someone wants to move to another job so you can assist them and put the right plans in place to backfill
- There are a wide range of ways that people can develop their career in the South Australian Public Sector