Strengths- and Values-based Introductions

Communication

Exercise

10 min. / person

Group

No

So many introductions are shallow and boring, in large part because people do not know what to say, how much to say, how to say it, et cetera. Typically, people reveal some basic demographics and details about their job and skills, but rarely does that reveal essential information about who they are. A powerful way to circumvent shallow introductions and allow people to get to know one another deeply in a short amount of time is using the power of storytelling. In this exercise, people are invited to highlight their strengths and values through storytelling. In the process, people develop a deeper understanding of their strengths and values in the context of their personal narratives.

Author

This tool is a modification made by Orin Davis (www.qllab.org) of an exercise described by Martin Seligman (2004) and Nansook Park and Chris Peterson (2009).

Goal

The goal of this exercise is to introduce people to each other in a meaningful way by sharing information about their personal strengths and values. In doing so, a positive introduction of the self is facilitated. In conjunction with others in the group, people will immediately find specific reasons to respect and value the people they are with.

Advice

- This tools works really well in corporate settings. For example, team leaders or managers may use this exercise to start projects with a meeting in which each person gives a meaningful introduction that goes beyond a name, title, and job description by telling a story about being his/her best. This allows each person to feel heard and understood as a participant in the project, and also showcases the interests, talents, and personal motivations of everyone involved. If the story itself does not highlight all three of interests, talents, and personal motivations, take time for each person to demonstrate them so that everyone is able to understand one another, and everyone has demonstrated both good presenting and good active-listening.
- When used in an organizational context, this exercise builds not just honesty and openness, but a shared reality in which people are able to give their best in their work for their own, personal reasons. A certain task may be assigned to a given individual regardless of anything said, but now the assignment can be framed and tailored to fit the employee's interests and motivations. An assignment given with that kind of specificity, care, and fit can be accepted as a trust and a part of the individual's personal mission. This may positively influence the

employee's self-management, engagement and persistence.

■ The biggest pitfall in preparing a serious introduction is a speaker who picks a story in which he/she received some sort of accolade. Often, these are things that others recognize about him/her, but don't actually reflect his/her strengths and values, since those awards tend to say more about the people who gave them than about the people who received them. Therefore, it is important to stress that the speaker should find stories that resonate deeply at a personal level. Moreover, it should be clear that the goal of this exercise is to reveal meaningful information about the self: not to impress others.

Trouble Shooting

Challenge: We don't have time to do this.

Solution: You don't have time not to do this. Consider this: you need to prepare the answers to the fundamental questions only once. Understanding others' motivations, as well as your own, can enhance buy-in to the tasks, drive to complete them superlatively, and willingness to go the extra mile, both for yourself and others. Consider the improvements in the work, the engagement of the people involved, and the extent to which the work will be far more pleasant. That is decidedly worth an hour or two of everyone's time up front, and 5–15 minutes per person for each project/task.

Challenge: We already did this.

Solution: Do it again. People may be familiar with one another, but this gives everyone a chance to become further acquainted, and you will find that these meaningful introductions improve with practice, right along with the buy-in and motivation. Not only that, but continued use of these introductions can change the culture of the workplace to one of engagement, motivation, and shared understanding. People become self-managing because of their buy-in to the mission of the company/projects, and likewise because the shared understanding gets renewed in each round of serious introductions. Thus, don't think of it as "doing it again," but rather "renewing it." For the matter of that, people uncover new depths to themselves by reviewing and renewing their introductions, and may surprise themselves and others by what they find. Promote the evolution by renewing each person's introduction!

Challenge: Employees have to do the assignment whether they want to or not, and I/we have to manage it whether I/we want to or not.

Solution: Ultimately, yes. But, everyone can have a voice in the creation and management of the project, particularly in terms of integrating the task into a person's talents, interests, and motivations. Moreover, having a voice means that people can add or change aspects of the tasks to improve its fit. And, no matter how dull or mundane the task, it can be framed as important. The person who stocks office supplies at Cape Canaveral is still helping to launch a rocket!

Challenge: People may feel shy, and afraid to share.

Solution: The leader must lead, and likewise encourage people. By pointing out the role of the

employee, and the importance of the work, the leader/manager can help the employee to accept that the work he/she does matters, that he/she can have a voice in the work and its purpose, and that he/she has some room to shape the task to create fit. Also, some may not know how to start (see below for a recommendation), but there are ways to prepare ahead of time. Practice in front of a mirror, if necessary, as this exercise is worth it even for an individual working alone. Most people who have tried this in earnest have been incredibly surprised by the results, even when they just tell the story to a mirror!

Challenge: No one is going to take this seriously.

Solution: If not, start by recognizing that this is a function of the company's culture! Then, remember that the leader must lead, and provide an overview of the new methods while giving a sincere and believable set of reasons for the change. This may involve even giving an honest critique of past procedures, and indicating why they needed to change.

Challenge: This is bragging, and people shouldn't do that.

Solution: Bragging is meant to enhance your pride and your standing relative to others, which is not what meaningful introductions are about. This is not about showing off: it's about showing yourself. It's about highlighting your interests, motivations, and talents. When everyone is doing this, everyone remains on the same footing!

Suggested Readings

Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2009). Character strengths: Research and practice. *Journal of College and Character, 10(4),* 1–10.

Seligman, M.E.P. (2004). Can happiness be taught? *Daedalus, 133(2),* 80–87.

Tool Description

Instructions

Remember that the goal is to find a story you can tell that describes you at your best. The questions below are guides for how you can find a number of different stories to tell. There are no right or wrong answers, and you don't need to answer all of the questions.

1. For a start, just read through each of them and see if one of them seems to jump out as being readily answered or as wanting some additional thought and focus. Go through until you have found one or two that have substantive answers. Do any of them remind of experiences you have had? What is the story behind them? (Don't worry if you haven't found a story yet.)
2. Take a second pass through the questions to see if any other questions resonate with you. Again, ask yourself if any of them remind of experiences you have had and what the story is behind them. (Again, don't worry if you haven't found a story yet.)
3. Look for patterns in your answers to the questions. Do any themes emerge? What do those themes tell you? Do these themes remind you of any experiences or stories in your life? Is there a time when you acted out one of these themes.
4. Repeat steps 1-3 until you have a story you like. If you find yourself having trouble, ask a close friend to try answering these questions about you, record the feedback, and try going through steps 1-3 again on your own with those ideas in mind.

You at Your Best

What is the moment/event of which you are most proud? Why?
- What is your greatest achievement to date? Why?
- What are your top talents?
- What do you do best?
- What are you like when you are at your best?
- If your spouse or best friend were asked to describe you at your best, what would he/she say?

Your Motivations

- Why did you choose your line of work?
- Why did you choose your company?
- How does your line of work, and the company's mission, fit in with your overarching life goals?

Your Interests

- What do you enjoy doing?
- Which tasks do you do well, and why?
- In which work tasks can you get so involved that you wonder where the time went when you finish them?
- Which work tasks are invigorating challenges that you like tackling? (If your answer to this is "none," then determine which work tasks/assignments you would like to take on as an invigorating challenge—consider suggesting to a decision-maker that you actually take these on!)

■   If you could design your own job and task list at this company, what would it be? (If you need to, start with an unrealistic answer, and then work back into reality from there, but DARE TO DREAM!)

Your Task(s)/Project(s)

As you move into a specific project, have everyone consider the following:
■   What can you contribute to this project?
■   Which tasks do you hope to do?
■   How does this project fit into your job?
■   In which ways is this project an invigorating challenge? If it isn't yet, how can you make it so?
■   How does this project and task list fit into your motivations, life aims, and career goals? If it doesn't, what can you add or change that will make this task more than just an assignment?

Evaluation (optional)

After using this tool, reflect on the following:
■   How did it feel giving your introduction? What made it more easy/difficult?
■   Did you learn anything new about yourself in this process? (If so, what?)
■   Did you create a clearer self-definition in this process? (If so, what did you find and how did you find it?)
■   If you came up with multiple stories, how did you select the one you told?

Do the strengths and values present in the story you told show up in many areas of your life? How can you make them more prominent in your everyday living?