Paper

'The assessment needs to go hand-in-hand with the debriefing': The importance of a structured coaching debriefing in understanding and applying a positive psychology strengths assessment

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Objectives: *Despite extensive empirical evidence supporting the use of strengths, minimal research has been conducted on the practical application of strengths tools. The objective of this study was to test the impact of a structured debriefing following completion of Realise2, an online strengths assessment, in relation to strengths application (Linley, Willars & Biswas-Diener, 2010).*

Design: *The study utilised a qualitative design. Semi-structured interviews were employed and thematic analysis was used to identify themes representing the participant's experience (Braun & Clarke, 2006).*

Method: *The 20 participants were a mixture of middle and senior managers from a global travel organisation. All participants completed the Realise2 strengths assessment and a structured debriefing with a qualified coach. Following the debriefing, each participant completed a semi-structured interview to determine how the debriefing impacted their understanding and utilisation of the assessment findings.*

Results: *The results show that the debriefing was associated with engendering action, enhancing self-efficacy and stimulating psychological development.*

Conclusions: *The study found that all 20 participants benefited from having a structured debriefing after completing a strengths assessment. The debriefing led to a greater understanding and utilisation of the strengths assessment. This pairing has practical implications for those involved in strengths-based coaching and development. In addition, limitations of the study are discussed and areas for future research suggested.*

Keywords: *Strengths debriefing; coaching; action; self-efficacy; positive psychology.*

STRENGTHS are defined as *'a pre-existing capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking or feeling that is authentic and energising to the user and enables optimal functioning, development and perform-ance'* (Linley, 2008, p.9). The case for strengths has gained momentum in the past decade, linked heavily to the positive psychology movement (Sheldon & King, 2001). Positive psychology (described as the scientific study of human strengths and virtues) has amassed a large amount of quan-titative data in relation to strengths use, linking it to subjective and psychological

well-being (Govindji & Linley, 2007). For example, Minhas (2010) found that strengths use is associated with higher levels of self-esteem. Other benefits of using strengths include: increased profitability, engagement (Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002), better performance at work (Clifton & Harter, 2003) and various business bene-fits (Corporate Leadership Council, 2002).

Research has found that a strengths focus is a valuable endeavour and yet approxi-mately two thirds of people when asked cannot name their strengths (Hill, 2001; Arnold, 1997). Strengths assessments fill this

void. To date, over four million people have taken one of the three strengths assessments associated with positive psychology, the VIA strengths inventory (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), Clifton StrengthsFinder 2.0 (Rath, 2008) and Realise2. However, there is little data demonstrating the individual's understanding and utilisation of their strengths profiles. This study aims to bridge this gap.

Positive psychology is an applied science and a growing number of coaches and consultants are using a strengths-based approach to their practice (Biswas-Diener, 2009). Coaching, with its positive focus, is an ideal arena for strengths development. Clifton and Harter (2003) describe three stages of strengths-based development. The initial stage is the identification of strengths by completing a strengths assessments. The second stage involves an increase of self-awareness as the individual integrates the results of their profile report into their own self-assessment. The final stage involves behavioural change. The purpose of completing a structured debriefing is to facilitate stages two and three of this process by coaching, supporting and challenging the individual in relation to their strengths.

Govindji and Linley (2007) suggest that strengths knowledge is not a significant independent predictor of well-being but that strengths use is associated with higher levels of subjective well-being. Therefore, using strengths may be more important than just knowing them. Strengths coaching and coaching psychology are complementary partners, as both focus on improvement of performance and well-being. Linley and Harrington (2006) propose that a strengths-based approach adds significant value to coaching psychology and compliments coaching's overall aim of 'enhancing well-being and performance in both personal and professional life using evidence based coaching models' (Palmer & Whybrow, 2005, p.7, as cited in Grant & Palmer, 2002). Executive coaches, who are increasingly called on to show a return on investment, are adopting a strengths-based approach.

Aim

The aim of this qualitative research was to analyse the experience of 20 participants on completion of a structured debriefing of their strengths profile report. The research sought to establish whether the debriefing impacted the participants understanding and use of their report. This study aimed to get to the heart of the contributing factors that led to successful strengths development. To achieve this aim, participant's data relating to their experience of the debriefing process was analysed. In particular, this research sought to determine whether the debriefing facilitated the practical application of strengths assessments. This study aims to balance the significant amount of quantitative strengths research by capturing and reporting the qualitative perspective of people's experience of strengths development. Linley (2008) suggests that there is a need to explore the pragmatic application of strengths theory to inform practitioners.

The assessment is a good starting point for strengths exploration; however, the debriefing process allows a more in-depth exploration and development of strengths. It provides an opportunity for participants to ask questions about their profile report and to explore and express their response to their results. The Centre of Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP, 2010) has developed a structured debriefing which encourages stretch goals and action planning. These are important considerations as Latham and Locke (2007) suggest that each are integral to positive change. The goal orientated focus of the debriefing is also important as the desired result of strengths development is behavioural change (Clifton & Harter, 2003). The debriefing process provides knowledge, challenge, feedback, an objective sounding board and a supportive environment to facilitate this change. In essence, it is a structured coaching conversation focusing on strengths. To maximise this process, the skills profile of the person leading the debriefing is important. Ideally, a strengths coach will have successfully

completed a relevant strengths practitioner programme and have demonstrated a level of skill and competence in the use of the strengths in a coaching context.

Method
Methodological paradigm
Thematic analysis was used for this study as this method does not require linking to specific theoretical frameworks. This method was adopted to identify themes embedded throughout the interviews. An inductive 'bottom up' approach was used for identification of themes (e.g. Frith & Gleeson, 2004, as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006). This flexible approach allowed themes to emerge that were strongly data-driven and assumed the position of the participants being the expert of their experience. The process of qualitative analysis is subjective and thus different researchers will reach different conclusions (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2006). The researcher's here acknowledge that themes are not selected in an epistemological vacuum and reflexivity is considered in the analysis. Therefore, the researcher's framework relevant to this research is stated as a pragmatic and constructivist one. In this study, the researcher's interpretative framework was influenced by training and practice in counselling, executive coaching and applied positive psychology. The first author was also the strengths coach for the debriefing process of this study having trained and practiced as a strengths practitioner. In this context, the coach worked from a person-centred, integrative approach, assuming that the client is the expert in their own life. A solution-focused approach, ensuring solutions were gleaned from the participant not the researcher and an emphasis on the participant's strengths and resources complimented this theoretical stance.

Participants
The research was conducted in a large multi-national travel company which provides various hospitality products and services.

The participant sample was a mixed gender, multicultural group from nine different countries including: 10 from Ireland, three from England and one each from Australia, Belgium, Argentina, Spain, Hungary, South Africa and Italy. All participants spoke English fluently. The six men and 14 women comprised of two company directors, eight managers, 10 team leaders and one personal assistant. The age range was from 30 to 42 years.

Ethical issues
Provision was made as per University of East London and British Psychological Society ethical guidelines. Participants were allocated pseudonyms and these were used throughout this study to protect anonymity.

Procedure
Realise2 was deemed to be the most appropriate fit of the three strengths assessments for this study as its dynamic model fits well with the dynamic nature of coaching. Realise2 is an integrated model of 60 strengths which are rated according to energy, performance and use. This model distinguishes between strengths you use and don't use; realised and unrealised strengths and the strengths that you do well but find draining (learned behaviours). This model, unlike the other two, also addresses weaknesses which need to be overcome in the workplace when they are performance critical. Together the four characteristics of realised strengths, unrealised strengths, learned behaviours and weaknesses make up the four quadrants of the Realise2, 4M model. The 4 'Ms' refer to the advice that follows from the model output. Realised strengths are characterised by high energy, performance and use and the model suggests marshalling these by using them appropriately for the situation or context. Learned behaviours refer to activities that we are good at; however, they are generally draining, posing a risk to our psychological health and well-being. The model advises moderating their use. Weaknesses are dealt with head on

Table 1: Participant characteristics.

Name	Sex	Age	Nationality	Position
Fred	M	38	Irish	Director
Diane	F	40	Irish	Director
Damien	M	35	Australian	Manager
Alex	M	30	British	Team Leader
Margaret	F	40	Irish	Manager
Yvette	F	36	Irish	Manager
Olwen	F	40	Irish	Manager
Mariene	F	36	Irish	Team Leader
Sarah	F	34	Irish	Manager
Christine	F	39	Italian	Team Leader
Niamh	F	33	Irish	Manager
Sandra	F	42	Irish	Manager
Allison	F	37	Hungarian	Team leader
Rachel	F	38	British	Personal assistant
Gabriella	F	37	British	Team leader
Dennis	M	34	Belgium	Team Leader
Martina	F	35	Argentinean	Team Leader
Martin	M	33	Irish	Team leader
Molly	F	36	Spanish	Manager
Kevin	M	38	South African	Team Leader

in this model through frank discussion, open acceptance and ownership (Linley, Woolston & Biswas-Diener, 2009). According to the model, their use needs to be minimised. Finally, unrealised strengths are our strengths that energise us but are underused. The model advocates maximising these by finding more opportunities for their use (Linley, Willars & Biswas-Diener, 2010). This study determines people's experience of being debriefed through this model and provides valuable information for best practice for coaches working with strengths.

Participants were invited to enrol in the study by the Director of Operations within their organisation. Each participant received an email from the first author containing details of the study, an attached consent form and an information sheet outlining the aim of the study, confidentiality and general information regarding the research. The right to withdraw at any time without explanation was clearly documented. Once all signed consent forms were returned, participants were requested to complete the online Realise2 assessment. Their profile report was available immediately on completion of the assessment. Within a timeframe of one week to one month, each participant had a one hour long debriefing of their profile report with the main researcher. The debriefing followed a structured format including: highlighting confidentiality, establishing aims and context, explanation of the 4M model, debriefing of strengths, establishing priorities and agreeing goals and actions.

Data collection

Inductive semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face with each participant to get to the heart of their experience of the assessment and debriefing process. Specific open questions were asked to determine the participants' experience of the assessment and the debriefing and their understanding of their profiles after completing each one. They were asked if they had set any goals or taken any action after the assessment or after the debriefing. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

Data analysis

Each transcript was read several times and significant features of the data were noted. Prevalence and significance of the data was recorded during this process. These notes were then coded in a systemic fashion. As this was an under-researched area, the researchers looked for the predominant and important themes that captured the participant's views. Prevalence across the transcripts was considered when selecting themes to accurately reflect the content of the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Emerging themes were listed and sub-themes recorded. The data was then collated for each emerging theme. The data set was independently audited to check the credibility of the codes and themes. The frequency of each of the themes discussed is mapped in Table 2. These were then ordered and a table of themes and sub-themes was produced (see Table 3).

Reflexivity

The debriefing conversation appeared to be more in depth and detailed than would be normally found in an initial coaching session. As participants gave examples of their strengths at play, they provided rich information relevant to their life. There was also a noticeable surge in positive emotions and energy and as a result this increased the level of engagement and narrative. This is an important finding for coaching, as coaching is often time limited, so a strengths-based focus potentially increases the amount of useful information gleaned in one session. The positive focus of these potential-guided debriefings seemed to generate ideas and creativity within the session.

The first author also observed that trust and rapport was established quickly with participants which is an important determinant for effective semi-structured interviews (Willig, 2001). There may be a number of reasons for this. For example, whilst the coach had not met with any of the participants previously, she had worked in the organisation on a number of occasions as a coach and trainer and had established a trusting relationship with the Operations Director who invited participants to enrol for the research. Also confidentiality was established at the outset. Furthermore, the fact that the coach was external to the organisation meant that she provided an objective sounding board free from any organisational agenda. The first author completed both the debriefing and the semi-structured interview. As a result there was potential for interviewees to be reticent to share negative views. That said, the first author found the participants to be frank and relaxed during the process and did not get a sense of any discomfort during the interview.

Results

The overarching finding was that the debriefing conversation was instrumental in instigating the participants to act. Another significant finding was that the debriefing increased the participants understanding of their strengths and how to harness them. The themes and sub-themes that emerged from the process are outlined in Table 3.

1. Engendering action

Analysis of the data showed that there was dissociation between completing a strengths assessment and taking action. The participants related that the debriefing engendered action in a number of ways which are captured under the sub themes of: setting the stage, understanding the profile and

Table 2: Frequency of themes across participants.

Participant	Importance of debrief	Engendering action	Setting the stage	Understanding profile	Goal clarity	Positive emotions	Strengths acknowledged	Self-awareness and insight	Strength development and use	Coaching relationship	Coaching context
Fred	x	x	x		x			x			x
Diane	x	x		x	x		x		x		x
Dave	x	x	x		x	x	x			x	x
Alex	x	x		x	x	x	x	x		x	
Margaret	x	x		x	x			x	x		x
Yvette	x	x		x	x	x		x	x		x
Olwen	x	x	x		x		x			x	
Marlene	x		x			x	x		x		
Sara	x	x		x	x				x		x
Christine	x	x	x	x		x				x	
Niamh	x	x	x	x		x					
Sandra	x		x		x			x	x		x
Alison	x	x		x	x						
Rachel	x	x	x	x	x			x			
Gabriella	x	x		x	x		x	x	x		x
Denis	x	x	x		x	x		x		x	x
Martina	x	x	x			x	x		x		
Martin	X		x	x		x					x
Molly	x	x		x	x		x	x		x	
Kevin	x	x			x			x	x		x

Table 3: Main themes and sub-themes.

Main theme	Sub-theme
1. Engendering action	1.1. Setting the stage
	1.2. Understanding the profile
	1.3. Goal clarity
2. Enhancing self-efficacy	2.1. Positive emotions
	2.2. Strengths acknowledgement
3. Stimulating psychological development	3.1. Self-awareness and insight
	3.2. Strengths development and use
4. The coaching component	4.1. Coaching relationship
	4.2. Coaching context

goal clarity. While the majority of partici-pants found the assessment very accurate and interesting, only three participants took specific action. The remaining simply read and reflected on their results. One might suggest that they were waiting for the debriefing to act, however, this did not seem to be the reason for inaction. Prior to the debriefing, the majority of participants reported that once the assessment was completed, it was put to one side in place of other priorities.

> *'Having the opportunity to discuss the results makes a huge difference. I think that without the debriefing afterwards, it would lose a lot of its usefulness.'* (Dave)

The specific action that participants took in relation to the debriefing ranged from setting specific goals, committing to discussing their profile report with their manger or significant other and committing to completing the online development plan that accompanies Realise2.

1.1. Setting the stage
Feedback from the participants suggested that the debriefing 'set the stage' by providing time and space for reflection and focus. Furthermore, it allowed participants to explore in more depth the finer detail of their profile report.

> *'It would probably go as another little exercise I did on myself. I think the debrief is important because you can sit down and you give yourself the time to go through it properly.'* (Sarah)

Without the debriefing, participants reported that their profile report may not have received sufficient attention to engender action. It seems that the discussion ignited their interest and engagement. Setting time aside for a discussion with the coach transformed the assessment from an interesting exercise to an opportunity for development. One typical example of this was Margaret who left the debriefing with enthusiasm and a clear written plan of action.

> *'I didn't take any action when I completed the assessment. I stapled it, put it in the back of my*

> *agenda, and had a quick look at it again.'* (Margaret)

Overall, the debriefing generated energy and interest. One-hundred per cent of the participants reported that the debriefing was a positive experience and used words like 'energised, enthusiastic, excited, focused and confident' to describe how they felt after completing it. One referred to it as a poten-tially life changing experience:

> *'It addressed both business and personal goals. I think there is life changing stuff in here broader than just business. There are very specific things to work with.'* (Olwen)

The debriefing's positive focus on strengths was novel for many who are used to a deficit approach more commonly found in the workplace.

> *'I loved it, loved it, yeah really enjoyed this. It's like a breath of fresh air honestly.'* (Niamh)

This encouraged further open and engaging dialogue with participants, who were inspired to explore and share stories and examples of strengths use.

1.2 Understanding the profile report
The data showed that one significant reason for inaction following the assessment may be the lack of understanding of some of the strengths terminology detailed in the report. Eighty per cent of participants asked ques-tions seeking clarification of at least one strengths label or how to apply the 4M model.

> *'I didn't do any development planning after the assessment. I thought that I would need some explanation. It was the terminology. I needed this to know what some of the terms meant.'* (Allison)

> *'I definitely think the debriefing is what really made it for me. I think without the debriefing it's a whole lot of words that don't necessarily point to anything.'* (Martin)

Participants found that the debriefing facili-tated their understanding of the profile report in the context of their own situation, thus identifying how strengths impact their life.

'*I definitely didn't have the greater understanding until we discussed this. Particularly the incubator I did not understand that at all and it makes huge, huge sense to me now.*' (Marlene)

They also became aware of the dynamics of their strengths and how they complement each other. Some recognised how they overplayed some of their strengths and explored the consequences of this, as in Molly's case:

'*I see how my strong connecting skills and my empathy can sometimes work against me and take the energy out.*' (Molly)

'*Having a chance to talk with you, that was different. And I found by describing how I felt and coming up with examples, I found connections that I wouldn't have if I was only reading it myself.*' (Christine)

As the participant provided examples of their strengths at play, they began to understand and appreciate which activities energised and de-energised them. Many of the participants reported shifts in energy during the debriefing just talking about their strengths

'*I would get quite scared by looking at the words as to what they mean but having gone into it and trying to put them into context with the situation has been really energising.*' (Gabriella)

The majority stated that they also found the energy aspect of Realise2 interesting and beneficial for deciding future goals.

The debriefing helped the participants understand and address any negative responses to their profile report. Three of the participants were disappointed with a number of their strengths as listed in their profile. Another four participants reported being more concerned with their weaknesses than strengths when they read their profile report. The debriefing provided a holistic, integrated perspective and helped to balance the tendency to pay attention to the negative aspects of life (Baumeister et al., 2001).

'*My first reaction is that I think it paints a very tough picture of me but now that we've spoken about this and we've put it into context*

I realised that it isn't such a tough picture but more of a realistic picture of a very real situation I've had.' (Rachel)

According to the data, the debriefing also allowed participants to take ownership of their report. Four participants used the debriefing as an opportunity to add additional strengths to their profile or deselect strengths they did not agree with. The researcher took care not to judge strengths so as not to influence this process.

1.3 Goal clarity

According to feedback, the debriefing also provided goal clarification. Participants reported that the debriefing acted as a platform for exploration of goals. This clarity was evident in goal identification and planning. Participants reported that having a structured debriefing helped to simplify the application of the profile by prioritising important areas and strengths to work on. This study found that there was a relationship between the debriefing and goal choice. The debriefing influenced the goal choice by enabling participants to choose goals they may not have thought of prior to examining their strengths.

'*When I saw persistence, I joked that that's what I do when I want something done, my husband would say. I wouldn't have realised that I can do it at work too. It's a useful tool to rebuild my confidence.*' (Yvette)

The debriefing was structured in such a way that goals and actions were identified and agreed during the session. Participants were encouraged to choose the most important and meaningful areas to work on, therefore prompting the selection of intrinsic goals.

'*That can actually give me better life balance, better success at work and better success in general so I wouldn't have realised the importance of my unrealised strengths. I can see how they fit into the entire model now.*' (Margaret)

Finally, participants either chose to write their goals at the session or elected to complete a development plan immediately afterwards. Writing down goals increases the

likelihood that they will be attained (Locke & Latham, 2007). Here, the strengths coach enabled the participants to set specific and challenging goals.

> *'There are very specific things to work with. I always struggle to complete a development plan but I think this is very structured.'* (Olwen)

> *'I think it is definitely prompted me to do so. I give you a 99.9 per cent chance of me going in and doing the development plan.'* (Dave)

The data also highlighted that debriefing provided the impetus for taking the first step towards action. Participants were encouraged to break down goals into manageable pieces.

> *'I think what I learned was to take it one step at a time and if it starts off slow don't be hard on yourself and let the creativity come out. That's the biggest thing for me.'* (Martin)

Participants reported an increase in motivation to act as a result of the debriefing. Eighty-five per cent of the participants when asked 'what action if any they had taken after the assessment' stated that they had not taken any action other than reading their profile report. After the debriefing, 100 per cent of the participants had set specific goals.

> *'I've got some very clear objectives. I will use a lot of this stuff for the New Year and I feel a lot of energy actually. It's a very useful process.'* (Rachel)

The motivation in relation to goals was self-concordant and this may have been facilitated by the debriefing. Burke and Linley (2007) found that coaching leads to changes in self-concordance and goal commitment.

The general consensus was that the debriefing simplified the report by focusing on the strengths and goals that were most important to the individual rather than giving attention to the less relevant ones.

Strengths were applied to goals in three ways during the debriefing. Firstly, many chose a goal which focused on developing a particular strength, especially an unrealised one. For example, one participant, when examining her strength of creativity, decided to harness this creativity in future team planning. Others identified and chose to work on strengths that would assist in goal attainment. A third way strengths were applied to goals was by identification of new ways to use a strength. Seligman (2002) suggests that strengths are malleable and with concentrated effort they can be developed. The research findings concurred with this.

> *'After the debriefing, I understood better the whole thing about emotional awareness and how to apply it into practice but also starting with myself.'* (Christine)

2. Enhancing self-efficacy

The second theme of enhancing self-efficacy emerged as a result of participants reporting that the debriefing helped them to increase their belief in their capabilities and strengths. They reported that the process did this in two ways: by increasing their positive emotions and by enabling strengths acknowledgement.

2.1. Positive emotions

Participants were engaged in talking about themselves 'at their best' for part of the debriefing and this seemed to generate positive emotions and ideas. Seligman et al. (2005) found that the exercise envisioning 'you at your best' led to a transient increase in happiness. All participants reported that the debriefing was a positive experience and bolstered positive emotion and energy. Common words used by participants that captured this affect included: 'happy, stimulating, interesting, beneficial and exciting'. This increase in energy and positive emotion increased the participant's ideas for future action. This is in keeping with Fredrickson's (2001) finding on positive emotions, showing that they serve to broaden our thought-action repertoires and build our personal resources.

> *'I've known about a lot of these things for a long time but now I feel I've got the tools to actually be able to do something about it. Like I say, it was a eureka moment I think. I feel energised and I'm keen to try it out.'* (Alex)

2.2. Strengths acknowledgement

According to the feedback from the interviews, the debriefing process was instrumental in participants acknowledging their strengths. The structured debriefing created a safe environment where participants were able to explore their strengths in detail. Bandura (1997) contended that 'people's level of motivation, affective states and actions are based more on what they believe than on what is objectively true' (p.2).

> *'I definitely feel more confident now about the report and the assessment, that it's actually accurate for me.'* (Allison)

Thus people's accomplishments are generally better predicted by their self-efficacy beliefs than by their previous attainments, knowledge, or skills. People do not tackle challenging tasks if they harbour self-doubts, even if they have made a good action plan (Luszcznska et al., 2010).

> *'It's almost like you're acknowledging it, admitting it to yourself. You know you can do this so why don't you give it a go. When you say it to somebody else it makes it more real.'* (Sandra)

Planning is a powerful strategy when individuals feel confident that they can take action (Luszcynska et al., 2010). Self-efficacy beliefs influence the choices individuals make and the courses of action they pursue. Graham and Weiner (1996) conclude that, particularly in psychology and education, self-efficacy has proven to be a more consistent predictor of behavioural outcomes than any other motivational constructs. Clearly, it is not simply a matter of how capable one is, but of how capable one believes oneself to be.

> *'I need to realise that actually people appreciate what I do and I need to build on that.'* (Gabriella)

Popper and Lipshitz (1992) claim that enhancement of self-efficacy is a central component in coaching. The participants reported that exploring and acknowledging their strengths during the debriefing enhanced their belief that their goals were achievable. This finding suggests that a strengths assessment accompanied by a debriefing may give coaches a valuable tool to enhance the self-efficacy of their clients.

> *'I plan to push myself to areas that I wouldn't have been comfortable in before but clearly they are things that give me energy.'* (Rachel)

3. Stimulating psychological development

Participants made frequent reference in the interviews to the fact that the debriefing increased their insight and understanding of themselves. They also reported an understanding of how to develop and use their strengths. A theme of psychological development emerged from the data with two sub-themes consisting of self-awareness and insight, and strengths development and use.

3.1 Self-awareness and insight

Firstly, there was consensus that participants became more self aware and gained insight as a result of the debriefing. They also reported becoming more aware of their individual strengths and how to use them.

> *'It was great to get out of one's comfort zone. My role is very numerically, financially based, so it's great to talk about the softer side of your skill set. I like the whole, becoming more self-aware.'* (Fred)

Self-awareness and insight was prompted by a number of factors according to feedback, such as: getting out of their comfort zone, putting things in perspective, becoming aware of own thoughts and actions and identifying areas for further growth. A number of participants choose growth goals to work on in the future. Understanding how strengths can be applied and seeing them in the specific context of their work and personal life facilitated personal insight. According to Sedikides and Skowronski (1995) insight is important in facilitating goal attainment and behavioural change.

> *'After the debriefing, I understood better the whole thing about emotional awareness and how to apply it into practice but also starting with myself'.* (Christine: 75)

Spending time self-reflecting after the assessment did not necessarily lead to developing insight, but this did occur after the

debriefing process. Grant (2003) suggests that self-reflection and insight are two separate processes and, therefore, self-reflection will not necessarily lead to insight.

> *'Without the debriefing session, I don't think I would've got that level of insight.'* (Alex)

Forty per cent of participants reported that the debriefing gave them insight to the draining effects of their learnt behaviours.

> *'Clearly there are things that give me energy but also at the same time checking things that I am good at but they are draining me and understanding why they are.'* (Rachel)

The data also found that the debriefing was a forum for addressing weaknesses when they were performance critical. Discussing weaknesses in a direct, non-judgemental coaching context helped many participants to acknowledge, accept and plan to deal with them.

> *'In reality I do need to work on that particular weakness and by doing that it will improve things and make my performance better.'* (Sandra)

3.2. Strengths development and use

One of the key findings reported in the semi-structured interviews was that the debriefing enhanced the participant's ability to develop and use strengths. The participant was seen as an expert in their own life and was encouraged to use the right strength, in the right way, and at the right time in accordance to their situation and values (Linley, 2008). They reported an understanding of how to use the 4M model for their future strengths development after completing the debriefing.

The fact that this assessment considers energy in relation to strengths seemed to resonate with participants. As well as describing the debriefing process itself as energising, participants began to explore their strengths and activities in relation to energy. While the profile report outlines energy in relation to strengths many of the participants had not paid it any attention before the debriefing. Not one participant mentioned energy when asked about their experience of completing the assessment.

However, energy was mentioned by 50 per cent of participants during the semi-structured interview as being important to them. The conversation proved to be a good forum to explore this in more detail and feedback was given around shifts in energy in terms of voice and body language when discussing strengths.

> *'I realise my unrealised strengths are things that give me energy, they are good things. There are things that I can do to try and use them more. Where as I wouldn't have picked that up just from doing the assessment in my opinion.'* (Rachel)

4. The coaching component

The debriefing was conducted in a coaching context and this impacted the participant's experience. Eighty per cent of the participants mentioned the coaching as being an important part of their understanding and utilisation of their strengths. Two sub-themes emerged from the data relating to coaching, namely: the coaching relationship and the coaching context.

4.1. Coaching relationship

One significant finding in this study was that the coaching relationship was an important factor in the success of the debriefing process.

> *'You can delve in more deeply with the facilitator then you can reading through what each of them mean.'* (Fred)

Key skills used by the strengths coach were perceived by participants to have a favourable impact on their experience. These included goal setting, helping development of alternative perspectives, stimulating problem solving and by challenging and supporting. Research findings show that the relationship and the client's own inner resources are the most important variants contributing to successful therapeutic outcomes (Norcross, 2001). Furthermore, a coach's personal attributes have been found to have a favourable impact on coachees (Passmore, 2010).

'Everything about this has been really good and talking to yourself, not judging or anything and taking on the feedback and asking a lot of questions affirming and recognising some of the things I'm saying, I'm feeling encouraged and saying let's do more here.' (Kevin)

4.2. Coaching context

The data reflected the benefits of having the debriefing as a coaching style of conversation with open and powerful questioning. Participants reported that they found the coaching debriefing session beneficial by increasing self-reflection, motivation and facilitating decision making. These are similar to the benefits of coaching described by Passmore (2006) which include: enhanced personal performance, optimised decision making, better self-reflection and higher levels of motivation.

> *'It was great to explain here, to be able to talk about it. Whereas if was just there in front of me, I am reading but I don't remember as much. Whereas in conversation, it makes way more sense to me.'* (Marlene)
>
> *'You have a different perception. You are going to ask the why's and it's good to dig down deeper. It's good to thrash it out with somebody.'* (Niamh)

The confidential, non-judgemental and strengths-guided approach of the debriefing resulted in participants divulging rich information during the process.

Having a structured debriefing was a beneficial context for strengths work. The debriefing was structured to enable the participants to capitalise on their strengths and focus on what works well. This was apparent when participants focused on deficits and were coached to find strengths-based solutions.

> *'We don't often talk about her strengths do we? I do tend to ask for feedback from my manager is. Is there things that I can improve on but I never usually ask for feedback on strengths only weaknesses.'* (Niamh)

Another example of this was Martin who had a deficit focus but responded really well to this strengths-based approach.

'You helped me to relate to something else which was great. The conversation turned out much more than just talking about skills, lack of skills or talents. It turned out to be the first step in a new project, the more creative me.' (Martin)

This suggests that coaching is an ideal context for strengths development.

Discussion

Implications for coaching psychology

There is evidence to suggest that completing an assessment may in itself be beneficial by leading to a more positive self-assessment (Seligman et al., 2005) and that in the hands of a skilled coach, even more benefits might occur. This study certainly provides preliminary evidence of this and is relevant to coaches as strengths debriefings add value to coaching conversations. This research suggests that a debriefing done in a coaching style provides an ideal change methodology for strengths-based development by increasing utilisation and understanding of a strengths profile report.

Seligman (2007) suggests that 'coaching is a practice without limits on its scope, lacking theoretical foundations and meaningful accreditation' (p.266). Others have found little uniformity in executive coaching approaches (Bono et al., 2009). The results of this study show that the combination of a strengths assessment followed by a structured debriefing could potentially give coaching some of its much needed credibility by providing a consistent and evidence based framework. This study has implications for coaching psychologists as it suggests a framework which can engender action and enhance the self-efficacy and psychological development of their clients. The increase in positive emotions, insight and self-awareness as a result of the debriefings would also be a useful aid to coaches.

This study also leads to a question of whether there is benefit to completing strengths assessments without adequate follow-up. This is an important point for consideration for those working in the

strengths arena. This study highlights the importance of a structured follow-up when strengths are completed in the workplace and suggests that a coach with in-depth strengths knowledge would be ideally placed to provide this debriefing and subsequent follow-up.

Study limitations
There are a number of limitations to this current study which should be considered when interpreting the findings. Further research is needed to investigate how the application of strengths may be integrated into the coaching arena. Follow-up coaching sessions after the structured debriefing may further enhance the utilisation and understanding of strengths. The majority of participants, when asked what follow-up they would like, recommended another coaching session to check progress and reassess status.

The design of the study may have being influenced by a demand effect where participants may have reported positive experiences to please the researcher who conducted both the debriefing and the semi-structured interview (Grant, 2003). Elston and Boniwell (2011) suggested strategies to minimise the risk of this demand effect by discussing any possible power dynamics and minimising the researcher's voice within the interview by using short open questions specific to the experience of the participants. This study encompassed these considerations.

The debriefing was completed by a qualified coach and strengths practitioner with many years experience in this field. The debriefing completed by a less experienced individual may not produce the same results. Another limitation of the current study is the fact that there was no follow-up to determine whether the goals agreed within the debriefing session were attained. A longitudinal study would address this issue. Nevertheless, this study adds valuable information to the growing evidence on strengths development and coaching practice.

Conclusions
This study has illuminated the benefits of completing a structured debriefing following a strengths assessment. As the title suggests, the debriefing needs to go hand in hand with assessment completion to maximise the understanding and application of the profile report. This study has shown that the debriefing is an effective coaching tool to create positive change by facilitating goal attainment, self-efficacy and psychological development and provides a useful framework for coaches seeking to integrate strengths into their work.

Acknowledgements

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