

Strengths into Action:
Alumni Strengths-Based Leadership Memo Exercise
Nancy J. Evans and Brenda Bailey-Hughes
Indiana University

Abstract

A strengths-based memo assignment is successfully used in a leadership skills development course and would work well in all types of class deliveries/sizes. Student teams interview School alumni and a direct report or peer to identify alumni leadership strengths. Teams then write a memo to the alumni connecting strengths to course theory and leadership research. A scaffolding approach to the assignment allows students to first interview another teammate, receive feedback from their professor, and strengthen their process and deliverable for the final assignment. Identifying leaders' strengths helps students identify how to put their own strengths into immediate and future action.

Keywords: strengths, leadership, alumni

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Students who learn a strengths-based approach to leadership will become positive change agents most immediately in their academic and collegiate teams or clubs and internships, and eventually, in the global workforce. Yet students are far more familiar with an improvement model of development and tend to focus on their own and others' weaknesses. They rarely comprehend the impact that understanding their own character strengths and positivity can have on leadership endeavors. This assignment introduces students to strengths-based leadership, grows their self-awareness, encourages them to connect leadership theory learned in the course, and reinforces alumni relations with the School. The alumni and students appreciate the networking opportunity provided by this assignment, and students see real-world leaders' behaviors/strengths thereby facilitating application of their own strengths to immediate and future opportunities. The exercise works well with late undergraduates in an online course but could be adapted successfully to graduate students or face-to-face/hybrid classes of any size. Faculty teaching any topic can use the iterative process of the exercise design to enhance learning in their classrooms.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

Theory Related to Content

This strengths-based assignment evolved from literature in the fields of positive organizational scholarship and positive psychology. Some of the key findings students are exposed to include:

- Managers with greater positivity are more accurate in making decisions, more effective interpersonally, and they infect positivity into their entire team (Fredrickson, 2009, 2011).
- Positivity helps individuals be more creative. When people are asked to imagine an optimistic future, more areas of the brain light up during MRIs than when people focus on a negative or neutral future (Sherot, Riccardi, Raaij, & Phelps (2007). Furthermore, over 40 studies illustrate consistent and convincing evidence that positive practices produce health benefits (Cameron, 2012).
- Attention to successes/strengths enhances performance more so than a focus on mistakes/errors. Athletes who review successful recordings of themselves improve their performance at a significantly higher level than athletes who review unsuccessful attempts (Kirchenbaum, 1984).
- The mood of the leader, for better or worse, affects the people around them (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2001).

Theory Related to Pedagogy

In addition to being grounded in the positive psychology literature, the assignment also draws on the best practice/learning theory of scaffolding¹ (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) as modernly presented (and applied to the college level) in *Make it Stick: The Science of Successful Learning* (Brown, Roediger, & McDaniel, 2014) and *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* (Lang, 2016). From our study of these books we concluded that assignments need to (1) be iterative, (2) require effortful retrieval, (3) require

¹ The concept of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1990) evolved from Vygotsky's learning theory of the zone of proximal development (1978).

elaboration, and (4) leverage interleaving practices. Due to widely disparate deliverables from students in our first semester using this assignment, we realized that we needed to help students learn how to make better connections between course content, strengths, and observed data. The four concepts described below provide a pedagogical basis for scaffolding. Ultimately this major assignment requires “students to draw—at least a little bit—on information or concepts or skills they have learned in previous units” (Lang, 2016, p.75).

Iteration. Students study leadership theory and take a low-stakes, formative quiz. They “revisit” the theory by writing a low-stakes practice memo. Revisiting requires them to “update” their understanding and “connect it with new knowledge” several times throughout the semester (Brown, Roediger, & McDaniel, 2014, p. 21-22). When they repeat the memo writing process for their final deliverable, their connections to course content are mature and well-written.

Effortful retrieval. Frequent quizzing helps students “consolidate learning and interrupt the process of forgetting” (Brown, Roediger, & McDaniel, 2014, p. 226). Short answer quizzing on prior content throughout the semester requires mental effort and provides scaffolding for content connections students need to make in the final deliverable.

Elaboration. “Elaboration is the process of giving new material meaning by expressing it in your own words and connecting it with what you already know” (Brown, Roediger, & McDaniel, 2014, p. 5). In the assignment, students express in their own words how a behavioral example shared in an interview is connected to or aligns with leadership theory or best practices discussed in the course literature.

Interleaving. The authors of *Make it Stick: The Science of Successful Learning* present interleaving, but perhaps the best depiction of it comes from Lang (2016):

Interleaving refers to the practice of spending some time learning one thing and then pausing to concentrate on learning a second thing before having quite mastered the first thing, and then returning to the first thing, and then moving onto a third thing, and then returning to the second thing, and so forth (p. 68).

Our course is laid out with this “spiraling” (p. 69) in mind. Spiraling results in reconnecting to the content/material at a higher level each time a student goes back to prior content leading to deeper appreciation, understanding, and mastery of content.

Learning Objectives

This strengths-based memo assignment **helps students identify their character strengths and put them into action**, and the following learning objectives demonstrate how this assignment is a **teaching agent for positive change**:

- Analyze character strengths in relation to leadership style
- Articulate your character strengths in relation to your leadership style
- **Identify character strengths in yourself** and others
- Apply leadership models and theories to observable behaviors
- Practice your strengths-based leadership style in team setting (students **put their character strengths into action**)

These learning objectives are met throughout various stages of the assignment. Students begin the course with a rudimentary articulation of their leadership style and develop a sophisticated version based on their study of character strengths and interviews with alumni leaders. Not only do students change their knowledge of and attitude about leadership, but they also change their knowledge of and attitude about themselves, all while having a chance to practice their new-found skills/strengths. The aforementioned learning objectives are all relevant

to our conference session, and in the session we will briefly demonstrate how the objectives apply to the assignment.

Exercise Overview

Student teams are paired with an alumnus/alumnae leader. The teams interview the leader and a colleague or direct report, analyze the data, then write a three-page memo to the leader synthesizing his/her leadership strengths. The purpose of the strengths-based memo assignment is for students to explore leadership theory in a “real-life” context. Students build their professional network, the course builds alumni relations, and students continually learn about their strengths receiving feedback from faculty, peers, and alumni.

Timing/Flow of the Assignment

Early in the semester, the assignment is presented and alumni pairings are made. Students then spend the majority of the semester learning various leadership theories (situational leadership, emotionally intelligent leadership, strengths-based/positive leadership, etc). Once the content modules are completed (two-thirds through the semester) students interview one another using supplied appreciative inquiry questions. They write a strengths-based memo for their partner and professors provide formative feedback on this memo. This scaffolding approach provides students with a practice opportunity before interviewing and writing to an industry professional, and perhaps more importantly, students **receive** a strength-based memo about themselves. Finally, student teams interview their alumnus/alumnae leader (with the same questions from the peer interview) and synthesize his/her strengths in a memo that is emailed to the leader and professor. Instructions to students for the written memo are as follows:

Provide your alumnus/alumnae leader a clear understanding of 3-4 of his/her leadership strengths. Connect the behaviors/strengths you identified to evidence

from the leadership literature. Use information/stories from interviews to support your claimed strengths. Stories and anecdotes should include concrete details and vivid language. Include and reference excerpts from each interview and formally cite relevant course content.

Class type/size. We have successfully conducted the assignment in online class sizes of 360 students (approximately 60 six-person student teams). A large class size is not a benefit nor hindrance; the exercise would work equally well in any size of class. Further, course delivery does not affect this assignment. We have used this exercise in undergraduate settings but if the paired leaders were C-suite executives, graduate students would likely find value in the experience as well.

Resources. We use a Keirsey Leadership Report as a component of strengths exploration for students and [CliftonStrengths](#) and [VIA Character Strengths](#) are additional sources of strengths information. The Keirsey report is **not** a necessary requirement of the assignment. The primary challenge for this assignment is identifying enough alumni leaders to have a leader for each team. Moreover, if you try to match industry-specific leaders to teams created around common interests, the pairing task becomes even more daunting.

Variations

To manage the challenge of sourcing potentially many leaders to participate, student teams en masse could interview one leader but still write memos (as individual teams) synthesizing the leader's strengths. Alternatively, students could source their own leaders for the interviews. If time permits, instruction could include teaching how to craft appreciative inquiry questions, and students could write their own interview questions rather than using a supplied list. In large classes, teams could submit only the "best" peer strengths-based memo. The process

of determining the “best” memo would encourage students to reference the rubric and to think critically about the work submitted. The final memo would arguably be improved after this process and the grading load on the instructor would be reduced. In small classes, the assignment could be an individual rather than team assignment.

Debriefing

Students receive feedback from multiple sources in this design: faculty, peers, and alumni leaders. Professors grade memos with a rubric and provide detailed formative comments on the peer memos. Students write a memo to a teammate which serves as peer feedback about one’s strengths. Additionally, the alumni leaders respond to a short survey (shared with students) asking them to evaluate their student team. Students often consider the assignment a valuable highlight of the course depicted by the following student quotes:

- Probably the most beneficial assignment was the alumni interviews. Great opportunity to learn about leadership from actual leaders directly instead of just from materials. Really enjoyed speaking with ours.
- The alumni interviews and memo were beneficial to improving my networking skills. It was good practice to reach out to and follow up with alumni, as networking is a large component of careers in business. As a team liaison, I became better at time management by having to coordinate seven people's schedules.

Alumni who participate enjoy the experience and appreciate interacting directly with current students. The activity uniquely builds meaningful alumni relations. Below are some sample responses from alumni when asked to share their thoughts/suggestions with student teams following the interviews and delivery of the reports:

- Thank you for the opportunity to participate in your project; we enjoyed ourselves. Good luck.
- They were a great bunch of students. I thought they had planned out their strategy and it showed.
- It was so nice to get to know everyone! I really appreciated the great questions throughout the interview. My suggestion would be to relax, and share a bit about yourself, so we can warm up and get to know each other before diving in. Best wishes to all of you in the future and please don't hesitate to reach out if you need advice or help with your resume!

Session Description

In our **interactive** session, we will (1) provide access to an online strengths-based content module to participants so they can **engage** throughout the session with the content on their personal devices, (2) explain the memo assignment, (3) **conduct** strengths-based interviews with a partner in the session, (4) **brainstorm** strengths from the partner interviews as they relate to module content, (5) and provide sample student work and **discuss** evidence of learning. See the following table for the session timeline.

Time	Session Activity
10 minutes	Introduce ourselves, context of the course, provide access to an online strengths-based module, and answer some of the quiz questions as a group (to “prime the pump” for the session)
5 minutes	Provide the strength-based interview and memo assignment sheet and highlight the key aspects and stages of student work
20 minutes	Interview a partner in the session using the supplied strengths-based questions
10 minutes	Brainstorm strengths from the interview and share out what your “memo” would include
10 minutes	Receive sample student work on the memos and discuss the evidence of learning by first asking participants to share where they see evidence of student learning
5 minutes	Q&A
60 minutes total	

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