

Positive Psychology Approaches to Public Services Leadership: An Introduction to Strengths-based Leadership

P Alex Linley

Centre for Applied Positive Psychology

Reena Govindji

Centre for Applied Positive Psychology and Aston Business School

Michael A West

Aston Business School

Abstract

To readers of the popular press, the words ‘positive psychology’ may conjure up images of happiness gurus and people having their feet massaged, their heads resting peacefully on pink, fluffy clouds. But in this article, our aim is to demonstrate how the new science of positive psychology speaks powerfully to – and has much to contribute to – the development of leadership and the practices and processes of organisations, whether in the public or private sectors. Much of our work is concerned with the applications of this new field, and particularly with building strengths-based organisations. A key pillar of this work is around enabling strengths-based leadership, and provides our focus for this article.

Key words

Leadership; public services; positive psychology; strengths-based leadership

What is positive psychology?

Simply defined, positive psychology is the science of optimal human functioning. It is about studying people at their best, about understanding what is right, what is working, what is strong, and how we can build on that to make things even better. For much of its century of history, psychology was predisposed to focus on ameliorating the negative side of life, rather than enhancing the positive side. In contrast, when elected President of the American Psychological Association in 1998, Martin Seligman (paradoxically,

a world authority on what could be wrong with people: depression, learned helplessness, pessimism), announced that psychology’s mission should be broadened to include a more explicit focus on the positive sides of human experience, so positive psychology was born (see Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

In the decade or so since, positive psychology has found a broad church of advocates, across both the academic and applied domains. Research has grown substantially in the study of what is right

with people, particularly within the topics of happiness and human strengths, and applications have often outpaced the research insights that led to them. In our own work, we have been focused specifically on the applications of strengths within organisations, across topics including recruitment, engagement, talent management, and leadership development – applied holistically to building strengths-based organisations.

Strengths approaches have been around for a long time – at least 60 years ago, one can trace the work of Bernard Haldane (1947) through his Harvard Business Review article in this area, and 40 years ago management guru Peter Drucker famously wrote ‘...one cannot build on weakness. To achieve results, one has to use all the available strengths...These strengths are the true opportunities’ (Drucker, 1967, p60). To the modern organisation, though, strengths were first introduced significantly through the work of Donald Clifton and Marcus Buckingham, and particularly their bestselling book *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001), while the Clifton StrengthsFinder™ has now been completed by over a million people worldwide. Within positive psychology, Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman developed the VIA Classification of Strengths, a framework of 24 universal character strengths organised under six higher order virtues, which has been completed by over 500,000 people around the world. Subsequent empirical work has shown that having these 24 character strengths to a greater degree is associated with higher levels of well-being, particularly for strengths of hope, zest, gratitude, love and curiosity (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and that the strengths are consistently and universally endorsed across many different cultures around the world (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2006), including the UK, where strengths tend to be broadly consistently endorsed across age

and gender (Linley *et al*, 2007). In our own work, we have found that using strengths more – irrespective of what those strengths are – is associated with higher levels of authenticity, happiness and fulfilment, even when controlling for self-efficacy and self-esteem (Govindji & Linley, 2007).

Our work in applications at the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology seeks to go beyond these classifications, working from the basis that the pre-judged classifications are unhelpfully constraining for real world organisational applications, and more appropriate is an approach that is based more specifically on the individual–organisation interface, where strengths meet the situation that calls for them. In this way, we have defined strengths 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 performance*’ (Linley, 2008: 9) and continue the development of a classification of strengths that to date includes over 100 entries. Our work on strengths in this way has supported highly successful programmes of strengths-based recruitment with Norwich Union (see Stefanyszyn, 2007) and – the focus of our current article – strengths-based leadership development (see Smedley, 2007). Before we turn to exploring how strengths-based leadership development – and strengths-based organisation generally – is relevant to public services leadership, we first turn our attention to some of the operating contexts in which public services leaders may now find themselves.

The changing context for public services leadership

Leaders in public service settings are facing a much higher degree of complexity in the environments in which they have to lead than many of their predecessors arguably ever did. The culture of

customer service has spread across economies and into public institutions, leading to higher demands from service users. People expect much more from service providers in health, transport, local public services and education. Moreover, there is huge competition between the private and public sectors. In almost every area of public life, the encroachment of private sector activity has created new threats for public service leaders. They must match private sector organisations in terms of quality and costs to maintain customer satisfaction with their provisions. These challenges require an ever-increasing agility and flexibility on the part of staff, in turn presenting increased challenges for the leadership of public service organisations.

Public service leaders must also battle with difficult people management issues. There is huge competition for skills and talent, both within and across countries, and of course between the public and private sectors. As a result, the quality of people management must be high, with public sector leaders being urged to make their organisations highly attractive to work for. Maintaining employee morale is always difficult, particularly given the propensity of the media to attack public sector organisations over their performance. If public sector organisations are to respond to the changes, challenges, threats and competitors around them, they must place their trust in employees at the frontline to respond appropriately to the needs of the organisation. This requires leaders to ensure that employees are clear about the objectives of the organisation and that they have the resources, flexibility and motivation to make the changes that are needed to ensure their organisations are successful.

In this context, the old hierarchies that characterised public sector organisations have been swept away. Team-based working is more and more the norm

and the challenges of implementing effective team-based working are enormous. Leaders can no longer rely on hierarchical authority but must be influential and respected in order to achieve their aims. Their staff also expect to be respected, valued and supported and want to see their leaders as models of integrity. At the same time, leaders have to make tough decisions, which sometimes go against the views and values of their employees.

This rich cocktail of demands upon leaders in the public sector therefore requires extraordinary leadership skills and learning. It is our contention that the strengths-based leadership approach, developed from work in positive psychology as well as drawing from the extant leadership literature more broadly, enables public services leaders with the core elements of what public services are looking for in their leaders in the brave new world of today. It is to an explanation and exploration of strengths-based leadership development, and its key principles, that we turn next.

Strengths-based leadership in public services

Leadership theories generally have evolved over the last decades, shifting from the idea of a single great person as a great leader, to recognising the demands of context, situation and contingency, to long lists of leadership competencies that all leaders apparently needed to possess, but never did. There is now, however, a growing consensus that while all of these theories of leadership have merit, they equally all share some fairly fundamental limitations – the most foremost of which is that they tend to ignore the fact that different leaders lead differently, and yet a wide array of leaders are still successful, thereby seemingly debunking the idea that there is a core set of leadership skills, or personality traits, or situational requirements, that

define leaders for all time and all circumstances. In contrast, modern views of leadership are more squarely premised around the idea of *authenticity* – that leaders lead most effectively when they are being themselves, and being true to themselves. As so aptly described by Goffee and Jones, authentic leadership is about *‘being yourself – more – with skill’* (Goffee & Jones, 2006). This modern focus on authentic leadership fits well with the positive psychology movement and indeed has in part been shaped through it (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). In the sections that follow, we present the key elements of our model of strengths-based leadership.

1. Know your strengths and weaknesses

The starting point for considering strengths-based leadership is the fundamental premise that leaders operate most effectively when they are being authentic. As such, authentic leadership may be considered to provide the bedrock leadership theory on which strengths-based leadership can be built. And the first element of strengths-based leadership development, in keeping with this common thread of authenticity, is to know yourself – and especially to know your strengths and weaknesses.

There are several psychometric tools that might be helpful in identifying your strengths, including the commercial Clifton StrengthsFinder™ (www.strengthsfinder.com), and the freely available Inspirational Leadership Tool (www.inspiredleadership.org.uk) and VIA Inventory of Strengths (www.viastrengths.org). The Clifton StrengthsFinder™ assesses 34 themes of occupational talent, the Inspired Leadership Tool assesses 18 leadership strengths, and the VIA Inventory of Strengths, 24 character strengths. Each tool provides a feedback report detailing your top five strengths, and the ILT provides a full report detailing your standing on all the 18 leadership strengths.

As noted, though, pre-judging strengths can be problematic and less accurate than identifying them in people in context. Ways of doing this include identifying the activities that energise and inspire you, the things that you look forward to, the things you feel naturally drawn to do, and that never make it on to your ‘to do’ list – because they get done before they need to! If you can identify these activities in yourself, and identify the themes that run through them, you are well-placed to be identifying your natural and prevalent strengths – the ways of thinking, feeling, or behaving that are natural, energising and authentic to you.

In terms of identifying weaknesses, look for the opposite: what are the activities that you avoid, that you never quite seem to get round to doing, that are always on your ‘to do’ list until you cross them off because you decide you are never actually going to do it, or the time has passed when it was needed. These are all the hallmark signs of a weakness at play – and perennially the same issues coming up in your annual appraisal or development review can be another gold standard indicator.

2. Know the strengths and weaknesses of others

Having identified your own strengths and weaknesses, the next stage of developing strengths-based leadership is to do the same for the people around you. The same parameters and the same indicators apply, but you may find it easier to see the hallmark signs in others than it was to see them in yourself. For a number of reasons, we may be resistant to recognising and acknowledging the positives about ourselves, as we discuss further below.

What are the telltale signs for recognising strengths in others? Very often, the person using a strength will have an instinctive preference for using it – they

will seem naturally drawn to do so, almost as if they can't avoid it – and in some cases, they really can't! They will look forward to situations and opportunities where they can use the strength, and they will try to seek out and create those opportunities if they are not forthcoming. The telltale signs of a strength include the following (taken from Linley, in press):

- a real sense of energy and engagement when using the strength
- losing a sense of time because you are so engrossed and engaged in the activity
- very rapidly learning new information, activities, or approaches that are associated with the strength
- a repeated pattern of successful performance when using the strength
- exemplary levels of performance when using the strength, especially performance that evokes the respect and admiration of others
- always seeming to get the tasks done that require using the strength
- prioritising tasks that require using the strength over tasks that do not
- feeling a yearning to use the strength, while also feeling drained if you have not had the opportunity to use it for a time
- being irrevocably drawn to do things that play to the strength – even when you feel tired, stressed, or disengaged.

In contrast, when we are asking someone to operate from a place of weakness for them, we are

likely to see the opposite. These are the tasks that never seem to get done unless you are stood over them, micro-managing every move – a situation that is not tenable or sustainable for anybody. When people are operating from this place of weakness – when indeed they either agree to or are compelled to do so – the result is likely far from their best performance, and something that drains them of energy, so impacting more widely on their performance and possibility for contribution.

As leaders and managers, our role should not be automatically to submit the person to performance management, but instead should be to understand the dynamics and to work on creating an environment where we can have mature and meaningful conversations about what the person may be best placed to do, and what they may not. This is not to say that sometimes we all need to do things that aren't playing to our strengths – this is simply a reality, and one we need to accept – but it does mean that we can start to adjust the amount of time, focus and energy that is spent working from a position of weakness, rather than from a position of strength.

3. *Kratisto*: building strong teams

The fundamental principle of team working is that the team can collectively achieve more than they could as a group of individuals. Through the lens of the strengths approach, this is about allocating tasks, roles and responsibilities according to strengths: who has the strengths most appropriate for delivering the goals we are striving to achieve in this area? As such, allocation should follow the ancient Greek principle of *kratisto* – meaning to the strongest, to the best, or to the most able. The basis for this is an understanding of who has what strengths, and how those strengths can be aligned against organisational objectives. This may – but does not always – mean being prepared to shape

roles and responsibilities fluidly, according to the changing strengths dynamics of the team and the requirements of the situation.

In one example, working with the board of the Air Support Business Unit of BAE Systems, we allocated a number of business-critical projects not according to lines of functional responsibility, as may have been done traditionally, but instead according to areas of strength across the board – with excellent results. The business objectives – which were in addition to the day to day operations of the business – all showed significant progress within one month, whereas this progress had not been in evidence previously (see Smedley, 2007).

What had changed? Board members still had wide-ranging remits and heavy workloads, but the single thing to make a difference was that we were now asking them to do more of the things that they wanted to do – naturally. Because of this, they were able to find the time and draw down the energy that was needed to deliver. Using strengths is a powerful way of accessing and harnessing discretionary effort – simply because by playing to people's strengths, we are asking them to do more of what they enjoy and do best. And as our research has shown, using strengths more is associated with significantly higher levels of happiness, well-being and fulfilment, as well as a greater degree of authenticity and personal integration (Govindji & Linley, 2007). Thus, using strengths again meets both the organisational and the individual needs of the situation – a powerful double win.

Creating the team environment that can make *kratisto* a reality does require an understanding of what the strengths approach is about – and equally, what it is not about. We have sometimes heard the complaint that adopting this approach leads to the excuse of 'I'm not doing that because

it doesn't play to my strengths' – which, in our experience, is a reflection of the organisational culture lacking engagement and accountability, far more than it is a reflection of the strengths way of working. As we touched on above, working from the strengths perspective is about doing more – and doing it wherever possible – that plays to and harnesses what people naturally want to do and do best – but it does not provide the excuse for inaction when that is not the case. In contrast, it assumes a level of basic maturity that is able to accept that not everything will be allowing us to use our strengths, and so sometimes we simply need to buckle down and get on with it – with CAPP as an explicitly strengths-based organisation, together with our organisational work, these are issues with which we are very familiar.

With this shared understanding in place, one is able to begin to create a culture of strengths-based organisation that is committed to enabling people to use and deliver through their strengths wherever that is possible, but still fully recognising that we don't live in an idealist or utopian world. From that basis, here are some typical questions that a leader or manager may ask to establish how best to deploy *kratisto* in practice.

- What can I count on you for the most?
- In what roles or activities can I expect to see your best performance?
- Given our organisational objectives, where do you think you could make your greatest contribution?
- What should I try and avoid asking you to do?

4. Giving and receiving positive feedback

It may seem like the easiest thing in the world, but almost all of us struggle – to a greater or lesser

extent – with giving and receiving positive feedback. There are some key reasons why this may be the case, and they bear deeper consideration. As leaders and managers we may be disinclined to give positive feedback to people for at least four reasons.

1. We have an implicit belief that people want feedback that gives them something to work on, and we assume (wrongly) that positive feedback doesn't do that (this is part of the charade of 'strengths' and 'areas for development' in performance appraisals – implying that there is nothing we need to do to work on or develop our strengths).
2. We may believe that praise and positive feedback is only used as a tool to make people feel good, and so we don't need to be overly concerned with it.
3. We may think that praise and positive feedback are simply part of the 'feedback sandwich' that we use to fortify people ready for the negative feedback that is to follow. As such, positive feedback is simply a buffer, rather than having any intrinsic merit – and if there isn't negative feedback to deliver, we don't need to bother with the positive.
4. And the most damaging reason of all, we may believe that giving people positive feedback allows them to slack off on future performance – when, in fact, the opposite is so often true: praise provides the encouragement that people need to deliver even better in the future.

Combined with these reasons why leaders and managers may not *give* positive feedback, as individuals we may be resistant to *receiving* positive feedback because:

- we fear becoming complacent and 'taking our foot off the gas'
- we are concerned about becoming arrogant or big-headed
- we risk the pressure of ever-higher expectations – if we accept the praise this time round, then the expectations next time will be even higher
- as we raise the bar of expectation, we increase the risk of failure – and so we try to avoid raising the bar by avoiding the positive feedback
- and most fundamental of all, because we simply don't see the positives ourselves – as such, we find it difficult to relate to them, and not least to integrate them into our self-concept.

These powerful reasons mean that positive feedback often may not happen – and certainly not as often as may be appropriate – and that, even when it does, it may not stick with people. To give positive feedback the best chance of sticking with someone, we need it to be *specific*, *targeted* and *evidenced*. When it is, we have more chance of it becoming Velcro feedback that sticks, rather than Teflon feedback that slides off us. And getting that positive feedback to stick is important if we want to create high-performing individuals and teams: research now emerging from positive psychology shows that people need to experience at least three positive emotions for every one negative emotion if they are to flourish – but importantly, not more than 11 positive emotions for every negative one, or situations literally do end up going round in circles, with no challenge or inquiry (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005) – just the situation that would arise if the culture of 'I'm not doing that because it doesn't play to my strengths' were allowed to take root. And when they meet these ratios,

organisational teams perform much more effectively as a result (Losada & Heaphy, 2004).

5. Revealing weaknesses – authentically

Strengths-based leadership is not about ignoring weaknesses – far from it. But it is about, wherever possible, making them irrelevant. As management guru Peter Drucker so presciently described it 40 years ago:

‘The effective executive makes strength productive. He knows that one cannot build on weakness... strengths are the true opportunities. To make strength productive is the unique purpose of organization. It cannot, of course, overcome the weaknesses with which each of us is abundantly endowed. But it can make them irrelevant’ (Drucker, 1967, p60).

To make weaknesses irrelevant, though, we first need an accurate sense of what they are. This accurate sense is not achieved through the ‘weakness gloss’ that is the legend of job interviews: ‘Yes, I do have weaknesses, people tell me that I am a perfectionist, that I work too hard, and that I am overly focused on getting the job done.’ In contrast, it is about understanding both weaknesses and strengths in context and in relation to each other. We are far more likely to be able to talk authentically about our weaknesses if we have also been able to talk authentically about our strengths: From a self-esteem perspective, this is simply about enabling people to feel good about themselves (recognising their strengths), which then allows them to admit to what they are not so good at (acknowledging their weaknesses).

Revealing weakness is a key part of what it takes to be an authentic leader (Goffee & Jones, 2006).

Revealing weakness authentically and appropriately is not about telling everyone about everything you are no good at, but it is about acknowledging the things that they are likely to see, and which are likely to get in the way of you delivering your best performances. Through doing so, one can achieve three very positive outcomes.

First, it reduces the burden of impossible expectation, where as leaders we expect ourselves (and are sometimes expected) to be good at everything. In contrast, acknowledging our weaknesses – appropriately and authentically – allows us to debunk that myth.

Second, it enables us to deal with the reality of the situation as it is, rather than how we would like it to be. If, as a leader, I am not good with long range strategic planning, and I don’t admit that, then I am left to struggle under the burden of impossible expectation as well as failing to deliver what the organisation needs – as well as getting in the way of others who may be able to help.

Third, acknowledging the reality of the situation as it is allows others to contribute. By stating that, as a leader, we struggle with a particular aspect of our role, we are inviting others to contribute and collectively, to help us all to make a better contribution. A corollary is that we convey the message that we are all human, with human failings and limitations – a message that lifts the pressure of unsustainable expectations from those around us, as well as from our own. In combination, these actions of acknowledging our weaknesses and inviting others to contribute serve the overriding operational requirement where weaknesses are concerned, and as Drucker recognised so many years ago – to make weaknesses irrelevant.

When weaknesses are identified to exist – as inevitably they will be – what can we do about them? The first and fundamental question about weaknesses from the strengths-based leader is simply: ‘Does it matter?’ Does the weakness really matter in terms of what the organisation is trying to achieve, or is it already irrelevant? If irrelevant, our objective has been achieved. If it isn’t irrelevant yet, can we make it irrelevant? Role shaping, role fluidity and role re-design are all about redefining the boundaries and parameters of any given role so that the weakness-inducing task is defined out of the person’s responsibilities, and so made irrelevant.

If, for whatever reason, the weakness-inducing requirement cannot be made irrelevant – it is simply a core and fundamental part of the role – then can the sharp edge be taken off it? Can we render it less-damaging, and achieve an acceptable level of competence, whether through skills training, behavioural intervention, coaching or sustained feedback and attention? If not, can we work with somebody else who can compensate for us in that area? Complementary partnering is about two people working together who bring a complementary strength set to the mix, achieving together what neither one of them could have done individually. Going beyond the pair of people, strengths-based teamworking is at the next level, working across the team in a way that is complementary according to the strengths of the individuals and the strengths of the collective.

6. Calibrating strengths

Many of us will be familiar with the idea that strengths can be overplayed and turn into weaknesses. Semantically, this simply isn’t the case – strengths are always strengths, and they don’t become weaknesses beyond any given point. What can happen, however, is that a strength

taken too far can undermine the performance and outcomes that it was intended to deliver. This is where the calibration of strengths comes into play, a theme first identified by Aristotle (1998) in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, with his idea of the golden mean: doing the right thing, to the right amount, in the right way and at the right time. In leadership development, this idea has been subsequently developed by Bob Kaplan and Rob Kaiser (2006) in their book *The Versatile Leader*.

Strengths can be overdone – taken too far – because it worked before, and yet the context has changed, but we haven’t. Or it may be because we believe – implicitly – that it is the only thing we know, and even though the context has changed, we don’t feel that we have anything else in our toolkit to be able to respond more accordingly. When strengths are taken too far – especially in a broad leadership sense – it can lead to lopsidedness, since focusing too much on one side almost always means that the other side is being neglected. In order to avoid this, we should all strive to demonstrate versatility – the ability to do more or do less, to turn the volume on a particular strength up or down as the situation requires.

This concept of a volume control for strengths, rather than an on-off switch, has transformed the understanding of many of our clients. Recognising their ability to do something less, or to do it only in certain circumstances, rather than feeling the need to stop doing it entirely (especially when, quite rightly, they consider it has been a key enabler of their success to date) is an understanding that is central to the successful application of the strengths approach. Being able to do more or do less, according to the demands of the situation and what is most appropriate, is a hallmark of wise strengths application – and indeed, the hallmark of great leadership, whether explicitly strengths-

based leadership or otherwise. Leadership is very much about context and situation, and the concept of the volume control shows how strengths can enable that understanding and practice extremely effectively.

Strengths can also be underdone, just as they can be overdone. We may have particular strengths but not even realise it, or we may have strengths that we simply take for granted, and so do not capitalise on them to the fullest extent. This may be because of our traditional weakness focus in organisations, or indeed our inherent negativity bias as human beings (Baumeister *et al*, 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Whatever the reason for it, a strength underdone can be as much of a performance-inhibitor as a strength overdone. We may avoid doing things because we assume – wrongly – that we are no good at them. And through doing so, we miss the opportunity to give our best performances and greatest contributions, thereby underutilising our capability because we have latent talents that have not yet been realised.

This being so, what can strengths-based leadership do about it? The first step is always to identify and acknowledge strengths, as we have discussed above. But recognising people's reticence to take these messages on board, what can be done? Again, the solution is as we discussed in relation to positive feedback generally. The identification and acknowledgement of strengths needs to be specific, targeted and with evidence. When positive feedback is specific to an event, targeted to a particular behaviour, and evidenced with examples, it is far more difficult for the recipient to brush off or ignore. And with this immediate and natural reaction thwarted, it renders it more likely that the person will actually take the positive feedback on board, internalise it, and expand their self-concept as a result.

7. Leaders as climate engineers: celebrating success and rectifying failure

Another cultural paradigm of strengths-based leadership is to do with making sure that the celebration of success actually happens, while equally attending to the rectification and amendment of failure. Too often in organisations, our focus is drawn irresistibly to what went wrong, and the autopsy and inquiry into why things failed. Understanding failure is important, but not at the cost of understanding success – indeed, the consistent strategy of the most successful organisations in the world is that they also focus on what went well and what can be learned from it (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005). Leaders have an immense responsibility – and opportunity – in doing so, since they are the climate engineers of their organisation (Naumann & Bennett, 2000), setting the tone for the 'way in which we do things round here.'

Celebrating success means just that: recognising, acknowledging, appreciating and celebrating what has gone well. It is not an excuse for glossing over things that are failing and need to be addressed, or paying attention only to the good things while the bad are left to rot. But it is about redressing the imbalance so often prevalent that we only focus on what is wrong, what is broken, and what is not working. As we touched on above, positive emotions are a key driver of well-being and organisational performance, and celebrating success, as well as building on strengths, are key ways in which as leaders we can create climates of more positive emotion and greater well-being within our organisations (Linley & Carter, 2007).

When we are celebrating this success, we may be asking questions like 'What worked well, and why? How can we build on that for next time?' or 'Who played the key roles that helped us to achieve our targets this time round? Have we acknowledged

them and fully understood what they did to make that happen? What lessons are there for us in this going forward?' And to ensure that these rituals of celebrating success are not lost in the pressures of day-to-day organisational life, we recommend instituting them as standing agenda items for performance appraisals at an individual level, team meetings at the group level, and annual reports and presentations at the organisational level. The powerful effects that follow from this appreciation and celebration are key levers in the leader's control as they seek to build a cultural climate of high performance across the organisation.

Conclusion

The context for leadership in the public services is becoming more challenging than it ever has been. These challenges require of public service leaders new approaches and solutions to old problems with which organisations have grappled for many years – but with increasing responsibility to deliver more with less, and to answer to more demanding stakeholders across an increasing array of parameters. To do so, public services leaders need to draw on all of the strengths of all of their people. In this article, we have sketched the key principles of strengths-based leadership and strengths-based organisation to show how this can happen. As Gordon Brown (2007) declared upon his accession to Downing Street as Prime Minister: *'if we can fulfil the potential and realise the talents of all our people, then I am absolutely sure that Britain can be the great global success story of this century'*. Public service leaders shoulder a heavy responsibility on behalf of all of us as they leverage their strengths, together with the strengths of their organisations, to underpin the welfare of our nation. It is incumbent upon us all to do what we can each do to support them. We hope that in this article we have taken some steps toward doing so.

Address for correspondence

P Alex Linley PhD
Centre for Applied Positive Psychology
The Venture Centre
University of Warwick Science Park
Coventry CV4 7EZ
UK

Email: alex@cappeu.org

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