

# Strengths-Based Coaching

A SAGE Approach

July 14, 2022 by  
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## **Strengths-Based Coaching**

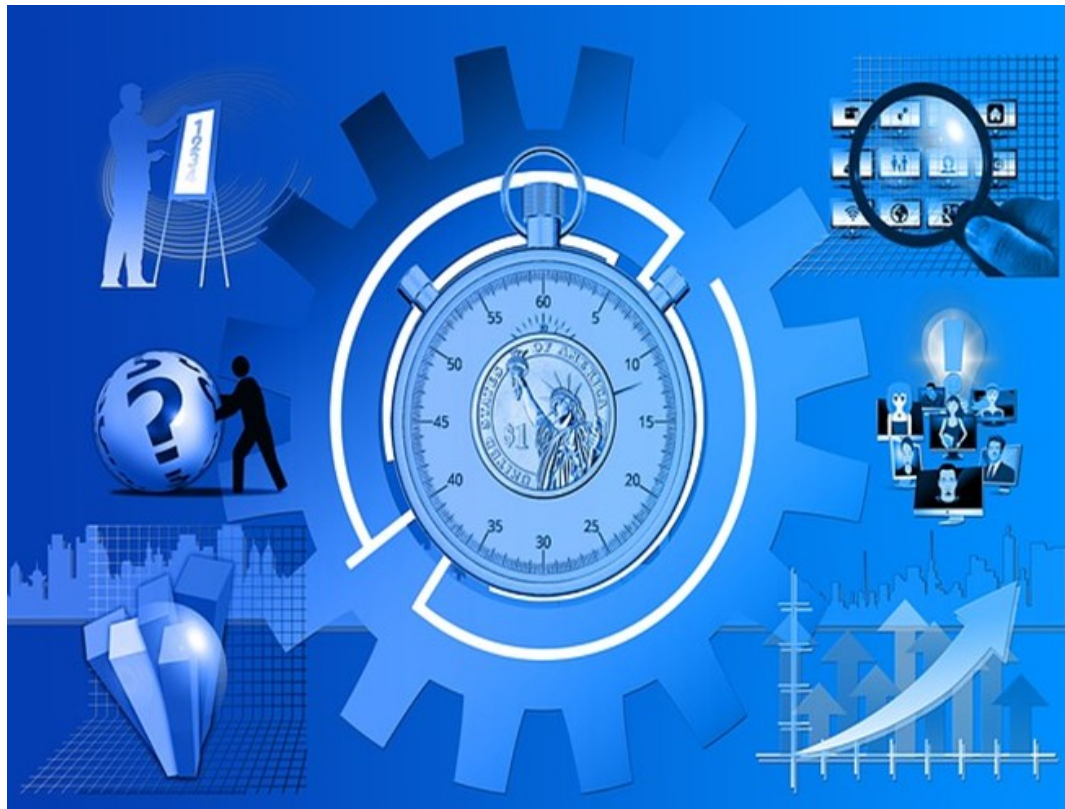
An unwavering and genuine partnership of support and belief that focuses on identifying and using coachees' authentic strengths to help them build confidence and competence, heighten intrinsic motivation, achieve success and acquire growth in reaching their fullest potential". ~ Cherry-Anne Gildharry

# Introduction

*Coaching is a form of development in which an experienced person, called a coach, supports a learner or client in achieving a specific personal or professional goal by providing training and guidance” ~ Wikipedia.*

Britannica dictionary defines strength as “a quality or feature that makes someone or something effective or useful.” The entire focus of coaching in education is to provide educators with personalized support needed to use their talents and strengths to achieve their goals to powerfully impact teaching and learning. As coaches, it is our duty and role to help adults reach their fullest potential while simultaneously impacting theirs and our growth. While coaching is defined as support provided by an experienced person, keep in mind that the coach is not the only person who brings experience to this partnership; coachees also bring a wealth of experience.

So, how do we genuinely and authentically coach and support educators in achieving their goals and helping them become even better than they were yesterday, while focusing on their talents? How do we inspire educators to grow into their most talented selves? How do we encourage buy-in to profound strategies while still honoring the coachee’s experience and uniqueness? How do we fuel educators with a passion that is undeniable? How do we heighten intrinsic motivation in educators? How do we inspire educators to let their talents shine? The answer is simple; through strengths-based coaching.



We must start with and focus on coachees’ strengths if we want to impact change and be genuine change agents. We must start with what our educators are passionate about and do best. “According to Gallup's *State of the American Workplace* report, only four in 10 U.S employees strongly agree that when they are at work, they have the opportunity to do what they do best every day.” In adopting strengths-based coaching, we can most definitely change this statistic and profoundly impact teaching and learning to provide enduring, meaningful, and in-depth knowledge. This is not to say that we do not focus on areas for growth, but when we take a genuine and SAGE approach to strengths-based coaching, we naturally empower our coachees to focus on areas for growth. Therefore, I define strengths-based coaching as, “an unwavering and genuine partnership of support and belief that focuses on identifying and using coachees’ authentic strengths to help them build confidence and competence, heighten intrinsic motivation, achieve success and acquire growth in reaching their fullest potential.”

To engage in authentic strengths-based coaching, the coach must fully believe in

## The Traits of a Strengths-Based Coach

the powerful and profound impact that individuals' strengths have on achieving meaningful and high-quality results in teaching and learning. Your belief, motivation and dedication in highlighting and leveraging your coachees' strengths must be at the core of your being and should be reflected in everything you do and say, even when there are constraints. As a coach, you form the strengths-based culture that should exist. Part of this culture is being a sincere person and the kind of coach who values differences. You must also be okay with a coachee telling you "no" or "that's not how I want it done", when they don't believe the strategy aligns with their strengths. Another part of the strengths-based coaching culture is to always be aware that coaching is not about you; it is about your coachee. So, whenever you are tempted to say, "this is how it works for me," or "this is how I would do it," step back and ask your coachee how it would work for them. Of course, as a coach, you bring great ideas and products aligned to your ideas as exemplars for your coachees, which you should share. However, you must have the talent to know how to stay focused on the ideas your coachees bring, and find ways to blend yours and their ideas to impact results. To do this, you must give your coachees the autonomy to implement ideas aligned to their strengths even when you are tempted to say, "do it differently." This does not mean that you should not provide constructive feedback when

you see the need. Absolutely! However, feedback is an overused term and when not implemented meaningfully, can suffocate strengths, so be careful that you do not give too much or useless feedback. Also, feedback can be nit-picky and driven by personal insecurities, so before giving feedback, engage in extensive inner reflection to make sure your feedback is genuine, inspirational and impactful. Other very important traits of a coach are having genuine self-confidence and competence, and being an active listener who is adaptable, aware, and grounded. Note here, being an active listener is not listening to respond based on how you will do things but on how things should be done based on the coachees' strengths. Having immense self-confidence is one of the most important traits of a coach as it ensures that you do not feel threatened by the strengths and ideas of your coachees, as we all have unique talents. You also know and exude the philosophy that allowing others' strengths to shine is a win-win situation for everyone. Very importantly, as a strengths-based coach, you must have the skill to refrain from judging others and to work with various personalities and people, especially those who are deemed difficult to work with. Oftentimes, people who are considered "difficult to work with" have strengths that have been veiled by others that are waiting to be unveiled by you, their strengths-based coach. Other extremely important strengths-based coaching skills are communication, adaptability, critical thinking, collaboration and additional 21st century skills with the innate trait of knowing how to develop sincere relationships with your coachees, because without these, the entire strengths-based coaching structure will collapse.





There are many ways to identify and get to know your coachees' strengths, but before we get into the methods for identifying strengths, make sure that this process is going to be meaningful, and the information is not just being collected to check off items on a list or to say you had your scheduled meeting and you know your coachees' strengths. This information must be gathered with purpose, intentionality, and respectful use. Never, ever should it be gathered for suppressive use. Some of the strengths that you will identify might align to creativity, adaptability, communication, pedagogy, curriculum design, assessment, student engagement, lesson design and more. Here are some ways to learn about your coachees' strengths:

# Identifying and Understanding Your Coachees Strengths



- Engage in conversations; let the coachees do more of the talking to identify their strengths. Ask questions such as:
  - What are your authentic strengths and how did you develop these strengths? In this way, you will get to find out the experience from which the strength was born.*
  - How have you used your strengths to impact teaching and learning?*
  - How would you like to use these strengths to impact teaching and learning?*
  - What are some strategies you have used to develop your strengths even more?*
- Observe your coachees in action to determine authentic strengths that they may not have identified.
- Help your coachees identify their passions, talents and productive areas to determine strengths, as some may need support with identifying them.

As you listen carefully to your coachees, make sure that you are documenting this information on a platform that you will visit often. Some people are dedicated to using OneNote and Word, but there are many other methods. During conversations with my coachees, I use a journal because I do not like typing on a computer when I talk with them. At the end of the day, I transfer this information to a Google Doc coaching cycle (Appendix 4).

Once you have identified and documented your coachees' strengths, you as the coach must take the time to see these strengths in action; observe how alive and motivated your coachees are when allowed to focus on their strengths. "*Motivation is desire. It is the "fire" that fuels great performances, outstanding victories, persistence, perseverance, determination, and drive*"- WG Coaching. Observation can also include analyzing artifacts of your coachees work. Observing your coachees' strengths helps to create an enduring image of how much strengths-based coaching fuels intrinsic motivation. Store this image and refer to it every time you are inclined (by internal or external factors) to focus on weaknesses only, or to advocate for yours or other leaders' way of doing things, instead of coachees' strengths-aligned strategies. I would suggest sharing each coachee's document with the specific coachee in the form of a coaching cycle and get ready to help them use and develop their strengths even more (Appendix 4).

# Allowing and Acknowledging Strengths

Now that you have identified your coachees' strengths, you need to find ways to allow, acknowledge and develop them. There are many ways to allow and develop strengths, however, to ensure that we are genuinely allowing our coachees to use their strengths, we must release the rein and give educators the autonomy to use their strengths. We must never control and suppress the strengths of others or use them only for personal gain. We must also be comfortable with all educators being in charge, leading, shining and bringing new knowledge to the table. If we examine schools and organizations that are doing well, we will notice that authentic strengths are allowed, celebrated, and supported. These organizations and leaders know that "when an individual employee is motivated to use their skills or perform a task to the benefit of the business, it's a performance win-win for everyone" ~ Boldly. Most certainly! However, so many still lead in a way that suppresses and suffocates strengths; this leadership style will not work for strengths-based coaching.

As a coach and former teacher, I can attest to the fact that my students, teachers, and I have had the greatest success when our strengths were allowed to soar. Another personal example relates to my wife. I watch her exist in her full element as her strengths are allowed, acknowledged, and supported in her new role as a Curriculum Manager. As a result of this, she is motivated to create amazing products. It makes me so happy to know that she found leaders who lead and coach with a strengths-based mindset. We both mentioned and know from experience that this would not have been the same for my wife in education as her ideas would have been suppressed, as they were in the past. Why as educators do we do this? Why do we stifle strengths? Are we that insecure about what we bring to the table? Remember it is a win-win for everyone when we allow and acknowledge strengths.



We can allow and acknowledge strengths by giving our teachers/educators opportunities to be co-participants in trainings, lead training and meetings, freely share their ideas and creations, and more. However, I cannot stress enough that this **must not** be a selective process where some are allowed to share and some are not, because this will lead to many forms of inequity and wreck culture and productivity. In addition, we must focus on authentic strengths and the expectation of having a growth and excellence mindset in order to maintain high standards for work and products. Reflection and revision must be an ongoing process. Engaging in virtual and physical learning walks is also a great way for educators' strengths to be acknowledged. Encourage your teachers to invite others to their classroom to see their strengths-based strategies. Virtual learning walks can also be done asynchronously. Insight ADVANCE focuses on and specializes in video coaching. Videos are definitely a great way for teachers to highlight their strengths! Also, creating newsletters to share the strengths-based strategies that your teachers are implementing works magic. For four years I created newsletters to share my teachers' strengths and to also provide a powerful form of professional development. The impact this had in helping my teachers reach their fullest potential was profound. Additionally, find time to help teachers build and publish their websites to showcase their authentic strengths and unique talents. Remember that products must be of high and excellent quality and always in a reflection and revision mode to be made better.



## Guide and Give Feedback

To guide and give feedback to grow strengths, we must be dedicated to using

meaningful strengths-based structures, systems, and models. Using a strengths-based coaching cycle (Appendix 1) to coach and provide support is extremely beneficial and impactful. There are many coaching cycles/models out there that can be used, or you can creatively design one. As a coach, I designed personalized coaching cycles (Appendix 2) aligned to my SAGE coaching [framework](#) and model. The elements of my SAGE Coaching cycle are, **State the Goals – Acquire Action Steps – Guide and Support Action Steps – Examine Outcomes**. For every coaching cycle I engaged in, I followed these 4 elements with an intense focus on strengths. In addition, I created a coaching feedback document aligned to the coaching cycle to document goals, action steps, coaching tips, reflective questions, and inspirational and motivational words to help teachers use their strengths to achieve their goals (Appendix 4). This coaching feedback document (guided by a SAGE feedback cycle Appendix 3) was an original idea of mine when I started my first job as a coach. In doing a needs analysis from conversations and observations, I determined that teachers needed their strengths documented and supported.

Moving to a district level coach position, where I coached 26 teachers, I also decided to use these strengths-based coaching documents. Creating coaching documents for 26 teachers and being dedicated to providing feedback (in addition to working on other instructional coaching tasks and “other duties as assigned) took a lot of time, but teachers and leaders loved them. Teachers were able to go back and visit

ideas and strategies they incorporated into their lessons and reflect on and use my feedback to enhance their strengths. Principals, assistant principals, and academic deans asked for these documents and always stated how meaningful they were in guiding teachers’ strengths and growth. Know that teachers can also have the autonomy to document and track their own strengths, in addition to the coach’s documentation. Whether it is the method I have shared or another creative method you have developed to document your strengths-based coaching support, know that this must be implemented with fidelity. If you start it, you must see it through to the very end! Remember, your feedback must not be nit-picky or driven by personal insecurities, and it must focus on your coachees’ strengths. It is easy for anyone to find faults with someone’s work, but it takes a confident and talented coach to identify, highlight and develop strengths.

Questioning is another very impactful technique to guide strengths. During coaching conversations, ask your coachees strengths-based questions that will empower them to generate techniques that are aligned to their strengths. These questions are generally created in real-time from actively listening. Make sure during this time you are also reinforcing their strengths because it is very easy for questioning to come across as a constant criticism of strategies. To help your coachees connect to their strengths even more, engage in forms of embodiment coaching. This technique helps coachees take time to connect to the core of their being and the things that make them come alive, to recognize their limitations and liberations to fully using their strengths. Note, limitations here is not about them complaining about their bosses or colleagues, but their personal limitations and doubts. Your coachees may need help with ideas for growing their strengths, so use that image you created in your mind when you observed their strengths in action to motivate, inspire and guide them.



# Empower and Expand Strengths

We need to empower educators to implement strategies aligned to their strengths and learn from them to develop and expand their strengths even more. Focusing on strengths-based coaching does not mean we do not focus on weaknesses and areas for growth. Areas for growth are natural outcomes of strengths-based coaching that fall into place seamlessly when helping our coachees expand their strengths. When strengths-based coaching is authentically implemented, coachees feel empowered and motivated to identify and work on areas they need to improve, because each strength always has areas for growth. When our coachees set goals and use their strengths to achieve their goals, there will be challenges and setbacks. They will overcome some of these challenges based on their existing strengths, but some challenges will require them to develop new strengths.

Another way to empower and expand our coachees strengths is to have them identify and set goals based on their



weaknesses or areas for growth. For example, if a coachee is not great with incorporating student engagement strategies, then a goal can be to “incorporate student engagement strategies that are meaningful and authentic to student learning.” When we do this, we help our educators use their actual strengths in other areas such as assessment, curriculum design and more to develop the strength of student engagement. In addition, self-reflection is a critical part of empowering and expanding coachees’ strengths. So as coaches, we need to help our coachees instill the trait of actionable self-reflection as a natural part of developing strengths and areas for growth. I included the adjective “actionable” here because too often nothing comes out of self-reflection. We must have actionable plans when we self-reflect if we want to truly expand our strengths.

In empowering our coachees, we must not forget that in those moments when we are tempted to say to them, “*this is the way I would do it*” or “*I like this method,*” to have the trait of restraint and repeat the mantra, “*this is not about me and my strengths, it is not about how I will do things; it is about my coachees’ strengths!*” A coachee’s strength may not be your strength, so it is very likely you may not have their specific

talents. This does not mean you should not provide feedback to help your coachee expand their strength when things do not pan out as planned. Also know, it is okay for your coachees to struggle or make mistakes when using their strengths. If and when this happens, we should help them expand on or develop new strengths by providing honest and genuine feedback. I am a firm believer that to acquire growth we need to be direct about the specific areas for growth as this creates stronger neural connections for actual identification and recognition for improvement. However, remember that you must have taken the time to build authentic relationships and know how to inspire your coachees to implement change and expand their strengths.

Here are some questions to empower your coachees to expand their strengths. The last two questions were guided by the Gallup article, [How to Make Coaching Truly Strengths-Based](#).

- *With every strength, there is always room to grow, so how have you reflected on and improved on your strength?*
- *What new strengths have you acquired along the way?*
- *Are the products you create to match your strengths of excellent and outstanding quality? What do you do when they are not of remarkable quality?*
- *How do you hold yourself accountable for producing excellent work?*
- *What are some actionable reflective steps you have implemented to develop your strengths?*
- *Have you ever experienced strengths-envy? If so, what can you do to focus on your uniqueness and develop your strengths?*
- *What do you do to develop your strengths when you have those “less than” feelings?*



# Conclusion

When implemented authentically, strengths-based coaching is one of the most powerful ways to motivate employees, impact change, create profound products, attain success, acquire growth, and achieve excellence. As noted, it uses

coachees' strengths to attain the highest level of productivity and impact but does not ignore areas for growth. It focuses on **actual** talents and strengths and not self-perceived strengths that are superficial. Strengths-based coaching never ignores our limitations and shortcomings, but rather helps develop additional strengths.

Strengths-based coaching is a great way to value and appreciate what novice and veteran educators bring to the table. It genuinely intertwines the elements of adult learning principles, a focus of many job descriptions, and motivates and inspires all educators to become their best, even those we consider resistant. Note that behind every resistant action there is a reason, a need, a desire to be heard and valued. Strengths-based coaching addresses all these needs and keeps the focus of working with and seeing coachees' genuine strengths in attaining personal and organizational excellence.

There are contradicting views about strengths-based coaching, and the opinion that this type of coaching can weaken coachees. I am very open-minded to contradicting views as they help strengthen my advocacy for strengths-based coaching. As a part

of my research for this paper, one of the articles I used is "*Strengths-Based Coaching Can Actually Weaken You.*" It had thought-provoking ideas of what could happen when strengths-based coaching is implemented superficially. Some of these are, strengths-based coaching can identify false and superficial strengths, give coachees a false sense of competence, develop a lack of ability to identify toxic behaviors and weaknesses which results in "weaknesses that are overused strengths"; all of which ultimately affect the culture and success of an organization and its employees. The author of the article, Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, is a very dynamic and captivating speaker and author, and a professional psychologist. It is natural to assume from his high and excellent standard of work that along the way his authentic strengths were identified and supported by himself and strengths-based supporters. His article and TED Talk suggest that we must be genuine and honest in identifying actual strengths as too often "self-perceived talents tend to surpass actual talents" which I agree with wholeheartedly.

In a SAGE approach to strengths-based coaching, coaches do not allow for superficial or a false sense of competence because they have skills to identify, support and develop strengths to an extremely high level while simultaneously working on areas for growth. Strengths-based coaching is "an unwavering and genuine partnership of support and belief that focuses on identifying and using coachees' authentic strengths to help them build confidence and competence, heighten intrinsic motivation, achieve success and acquire growth in reaching their fullest potential" ~ *Cherry-Anne Gildharry*. It allows coaches to genuinely and authentically coach and support educators in becoming even better than they were yesterday. It fuels educators with a passion that is undeniable. Whether we engage in direct, whole group, leadership, virtual, small group, or one-on-one target groups, strengths-based coaching is the technique that we need to implement more than ever to help our coachees reach their fullest potential to become authentically dynamic, competent and excellent employees.



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# APPENDIX 1

## SAGE Strengths-Based Coaching Cycle



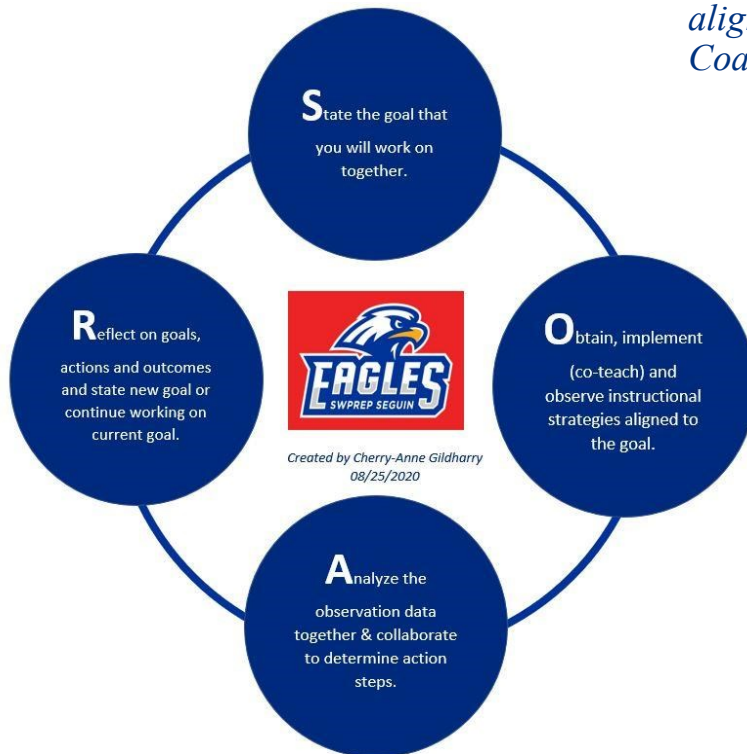


# APPENDIX 2

## SAGE Aligned Personalized Coaching Cycle



*I created and personalized these SOAR Coaching Cycles to support the teachers I coached at Fulmore Middle School, Houston Elementary School and Southwest Preparatory Schools. These are very aligned to my SAGE Strengths-Based Coaching Cycle.*



# APPENDIX 3

## Strengths-Based Coaching Feedback Cycle



# APPENDIX 4

## STRENGTHS-BASED COACHING FEEDBACK DOCUMENT



Strengths-Based Coaching Feedback documents I created for 13 school-based teachers and 26 district-based teachers to provide ongoing feedback based on strengths and goals, when I served as a school-based and district-level coach.



I created a separate cumulative feedback document for principals, assistant principals, academic deans and directors to document and share teachers' goals and strategies throughout the year when I served as a district-level coach.



At the end of the 2020-2021 school year, I created a quantitative and qualitative documentation of the strengths-based support and feedback I provided to teachers to support their goals. I shared this document with principals, assistant principals, academic deans, area superintendents, the executive director of curriculum and my supervisors. In seven months, I completed 224 collaborative sessions with teachers to support and enhance their strengths, and provided feedback for each session. This is in addition to creating and facilitating professional development, designing curriculum, attending meetings, creating newsletters, facilitating PLCs and so much more to support teachers strengths as a district level secondary math coach.