Discovering and Utilizing Character Strengths

Intervention Overview

Dr. Martin Seligman and his colleague Chris Peterson (2004) identified 24 personality traits or "character strengths," that each person can possess in varying degrees. These character strengths include traits such as kindness, compassion, gratitude, hope and perseverance . Each character strength is grouped into one of six values: wisdom, temperance, humility, courage, justice and transcendence (VIA Institute on Character, n.d.). Identifying and utilizing one's core strengths in daily life and at work can promote a greater sense of engagement and flow (Seligman et al., 2005). For teachers, implementing core character strengths at work is associated with improvements in positive emotion and work satisfaction, as well as reduced stress and burnout (McCullough, 2015).

Intervention Guide

Materials:	Paper, pencil, free VIA character strengths test found here
Duration:	20-30 minutes, repeat as needed.
Implementation:	1. Identify your top five strengths through the VIA character strengths test. The basic version of the test is offered free of charge at viacharacter.org. 2. Review the definitions of each of your top five strengths. 3. Make a plan for how you can use one of those five strengths in a new way each day for one week. 4. Repeat activity as needed.

Does it work?

In a study of about 500 participants, Martin Seligman and colleagues (2005) assessed the impact of various positive psychology interventions, including a character strengths activity, on emotional wellbeing. For one of the activities, participants were instructed to use one of their core character strengths in a new way each day for a week. Participants in the activity reported increased happiness and decreased symptoms of depression up to six months following the intervention(Seligman et al., 2005). Mollie McCullough(2015) studied this same intervention, but with a small group of elementary school teachers. Teachers participated in four, hour-long sessions over the course of 2 weeks in which they worked together with researchers to discover their core character strengths and develop plans for implementing those strengths in new ways at work. Teacher participants experienced increased happiness, work satisfaction, and decreased stress and burnout at post-intervention and a month later, although the degree of these effects varied per teacher (McCullough, 2015).

Lavy and Littman-Ovadia (2017) surveyed 1,095 participants from various occupations, about a quarter of whom worked in education, to better understand the impact of strengths use at work on employee wellbeing. Participants completed multiple self-reported surveys evaluating their understanding and use of character strengths at work, job satisfaction, productivity, engagement, and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). OCB involves contributions that go beyond job responsibilities in the workplace, such as helping coworkers, showing tolerance, and participating in organizational events(Lavy & Littman-Ovadia, 2017). Strengths use at work had a direct relationship to higher levels of work productivity, satisfaction and OCB. It was also suggested that gains in these domains by strengths use may also be mediated by levels of positive affect and engagement(Lavy & Littman-Ovadia, 2017).

References:

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Seligman, M., Steen, T.A., Park, N. & Peterson, C. (2005) Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of intervention. American Psychologist, 60(5), 410–421. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.60.5.410

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