

STRENGTHS + ACTION LEARNING: COMBINING TWO TOOLS WITH POWERFUL RESULTS

Chocolate + Peanut Butter.

As a leadership development consultant, I'm always on the lookout for new tools and techniques to help my clients and their companies to collaborate better, communicate clearer and achieve more. This led me to discover Action Learning in 2014, a tool which I immediately used for our clients with great results. This led us to create WIAL Philippines a year later, today one of the top 10 affiliates in the world in terms of number of coaches.

In my search I stumbled upon CliftonStrengths (formerly known as StrengthsFinder, created by Gallup). I initially thought it was just another profiling tool (like DiSC or MBTI), but as I got deeper I realized it was a great base to create high performing teams, increase engagement, and build an agile culture. Even better, Gallup had analytics that showed how implementing Strengths properly leads to actual measurable business results.

Just like with Action Learning, I saw the power potential behind Strengths. I decided to become a Strengths Coach and surprised by how much it resonated for our many clients, especially executive teams. I've since helped teams on how to build a strengths-based culture, which is not just tied in knowing strengths but also to reengineer performance management and talent development.

So I had this great chocolate that was Action Learning and this great peanut butter that was Strengths.

Then it hit me... just like the delicious Reese's Pieces, why not combine chocolate and peanut butter and come up with Strengths + Action Learning?

I decided to do a study and test my hypothesis.

TESTING STRENGTHS + ACTION LEARNING

The first combo I wanted to test it with were people who knew AL (some of whom were CALCs) and already took their Strengths assessment. They loved it! They saw the potential and encouraged me to continue the study.

The second combo I tested this was with people who were Strengths Coaches but did not know AL. Guess what? They loved it too! They said was a great avenue for people to "claim their strengths" (that's a Strengths Coach buzzword to see the power of your talent) and "aim their strengths" (another buzzword that means to put your talents in action).





1 Strengths Coaches discovering Action Learning - May 18, 2019

The third combo were those who are totally new (aka “virgins”) to Strengths and also “virgins” to AL. Of all the three tests, they had the brightest light bulbs and the most positive emotional reactions. They were pleasantly surprised that what makes them different is what makes them powerful and how the process of AL was able to create an effective solution to our problem presenter.



2 Testing AL with Strengths Newbies - CliftonStrengths Philippines Meetup, 27 July 2019



3 Testing out AL with Strengths Newbies - CliftonStrengths Philippines Meetup, 27 July 2019

All these tests led me to two major initiatives: one was to use Strengths + Action Learning in an actual live client, and the second was to share Strengths + Action Learning to the bigger Strengths Community.

INITIATIVE 1: STRENGTHS + ACTION LEARNING LIVE

The first one was for Minute Burger, the foodservice division of Leslie Corporation, a 50 year old food company. My friend, Mon Wong, who is also a Strengths coach, asked me to run a series of Strengths+Action Learning SPAL sessions for three separate teams, across a period of three months. Mon introduced strengths to everyone in their organization, and embedded into their people development.

Our intention to use Strengths + Action Learning was to help create change in the organization, both in actual business results and in the culture, while at the same time help aim and claim the strengths of her key talents. I sent Mon a few questions and here's what she had to say:

Q. What made you consider Strengths+Action Learning as an intervention for Leslie?

Mon Wong (MW): We had a really tough problems that we 'seemed' to have thrown everything (including the kitchen sink) at. What made the connection for me though was realizing that the common conversation revolving around these problems after a couple of months of not getting anywhere with them was 'we've done this before, we'll do this again' It was clear it was not getting us anywhere.

Q. How did the participants find the Strengths+AL experience as they were going through the sessions?

MW: They realized a lot more about collaboration that they thought they knew about it. It opened the possibility that the problem was not really the process (although there were fixes that were necessary) but the people and how we at the office coordinated and cooperated and worked together. We just never had that kind of 'collaborative' behavior modeled in the office so we never knew it was a possibility.

Q. What was the impact after Leslie completed the Strengths + AL sessions?

MW: 2/3 projects were successful in reaching the targets they set for themselves. 1 project resulted in a permanent improvement. 1 project reached target but they realized that they focused too much on one aspect, forgetting another. That in itself is great learning because they used to see it as mutually exclusive even though we kept telling them it was not. The last project was too broad to really see immediate results like groups 1&2. The best learning from there was really about team dynamics and collaboration. Performance targets to follow next year after setup.

Q. What message would you want to share to others who would want to go into Strengths+AL?

MW: Strengths and AL on their own are super powerful tools already. By putting them together in some super-powered team program, you're able to really leverage on the synergy of both approaches. If you're starting a really critical project on AL, be prepared to fail at the beginning. A lot. It's so worth it, though!

INITIATIVE 2: STRENGTHS + ACTION LEARNING IN STRENGTHS PHILIPPINES

With the positive experience in our live run as well as the encouragement of friends, I decided to share it to a bigger audience.



4 Strengths Philippines Conference 2019 - 19 October 2019

Strengths Philippines is a bit special in the global Strengths Community: we're a bit more active, a bit more engaged compared to other communities of coaches all over the world. We are the only one globally who makes our own local Strengths Conference, even without Gallup funding us, separate from Gallup's own global conference. Everything is self funded and self organized by the local community!



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**Achiever | Learner | Command
Self-Assurance | Ideation**

— TITLE OF LEARNING SESSION —

**Strengths and Action Learning:
Combining Strengths with the
Power of High Performing
Teams**



**STRENGTHS PHILIPPINES
CONFERENCE**
Strengths in Action

IN
PARTNERSHIP
WITH:

BELLE DE JOUR
POWER PLANNER



EXCELSIOR

FULLY BOOKED

SPEAK



For this year, I decided to run a session on Strengths + Action Learning. The theme for 2019 was “Strengths in Action”, and it seemed what I wanted to do was perfect! I negotiated for some additional time from the conference organizer as we didn’t just want to tell people what it was, we wanted them to experience it.

We had close to 50+ participants show up in our breakout room, but unfortunately we only had a few coaches in the Philippines who can run a Strengths+Action Learning session: myself, Tina Alafriz (SALC), Maita Beltran (CALC), and Elmo Alforque (CALC Candidate). All four of us were certified Strengths Coaches.



5 Strengths + AL coached by Leo Castillo, 19 October 2019

We each took 8 people to run a 60 minutes MPAL session and had a debrief. The rest of the participants became observers in the process. Many shared that they loved the experience and wish they were more coaches so they can experience it themselves. I asked the conference organizers for some quotes from the feedback forms, here’s what some of them said: 

“Loved action learning”

“Practical application [of strengths]”

“Being an observer was insightful. Action Learning helps as it delves deeper into the problem. It doesn’t just focus on the problem presenter but rather how the team works to identify the problem at hand and provide creative action plan or it might even unearth/identify the root cause of the problem and remedy the situation”  [I really liked the] live demo of action learning combined with talents and strengths”.

"[It was the] real deal."



6 Strengths + AL coached by Elmo Alforque, 19 October 2019



7 Strengths + AL coached by Tina Alafriz, 19 October 2019



8 Strengths + AL coached by Maita Beltran, 19 October 2019

I was very happy with how it turned out, and plan to encourage the conference organizers if we can do it again next year. The best part is, I think the session convinced a lot of Strengths Coaches to join and be certified as Action Learning coaches, as they've signed up for our December Intensive AL Certification Program!

I asked them why they decided to take AL and here's what they said:

Elmo Alforque (Strengths Coach, Former HR Director): It's a great tool to have. It's complementary with other existing coaching tools e. g. CliftonStrengths. I feel it's best used in teams/organizations. As a Strengths-Coach you have an advantage to offer expanded services and have an advance aiming platform that has direct impact to organization when AL with Strengths is applied/adopted.

Celine Sugay (Strengths Coach, Positive Psychologist): I've experienced Action Learning myself and I've seen how it helps people find solutions. I believe it's a good process to bring to teams, with or without strengths.

Nikki Sio (Strengths Coach, Certified Specialist, Facilitator & Guide): It's an added tool for us coaches to use in our team sessions.

Mon Wong (Strengths Coach, Systems and Strategy Lead... and our partner for Initiative 1) : We're in the process of revamping our whole culture. We recognize the gaps in team dynamics need a LOT of work, a really hands-on approach, with lots of small changes to implement very frequently to sustain the new habits. An internal [Action Learning] coach would answer that level of 'agility' needed which a consultant may not be able to give (depending on scope) that's also within the budget of the company.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED... AND WHAT'S NEXT

It's been a year since I started in this experience and now I have data on what I suspected in the beginning: this combination works.

Strengths and Action Learning both believes in the power of diversity. Strengths provides a language to understand what makes people in a team different, but Action Learning is what harnesses what makes us different into a high performing team.

Strengths and Action Learning both believes in the power of growth. Strengths tells us that we become more successful if we focus on what's working rather than what's not, and Action Learning focuses that into actual results.

Finally, Strengths and Action Learning is empowering. It empowers individuals by helping them find what they can be best in the world, it empowers teams by using what they're best at collectively, it empowers organizations by creating both a culture of strengths and continuous learning.

So what's next? ^[11]_[SEP] Well, we have a few clients lined up with Strengths+Action Learning as our approach, which will give me more data in a live setting.

I've also already applied to speak in the Gallup Global Conference in Omaha in June 2020. If the organizers say yes, we'll be bringing Strengths + Action Learning to a global audience.

I'll also be sending my application soon to speak in the WIAL Global Conference in Bangkok this September 2020, and hopefully I would also share my June experience with my additional data to our WIAL community.

Chocolate + Peanut Butter. Strengths. This seems to be the start of something special. Who knows where this will lead?

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