

**The Impact of Strengths on Work Engagement:**  
***The Make Rhode Island Stronger Initiative***

**Kathi J. Lovelace**

Menlo College

**Kevin Lo**

University of San Francisco

**Kevin Cooper**

Leadership Rhode Island

**Jane D. Parent**

Merrimack College

**The Impact of Strengths on Work Engagement:  
The *Make Rhode Island Stronger* Initiative**

**Abstract**

This paper analyzes the *Make Rhode Island Stronger* initiative, which involves the efforts of Leadership Rhode Island and thousands of Rhode Islanders to transform individuals, communities, and companies through adopting a strengths-based philosophy and building on the states' strengths. The impetus for this initiative was Gallup data showing that Rhode Islands' percentage of actively disengaged employees was the highest in the nation and the state ranked sixth lowest on actively engaged employees. We report on outcomes of the initiative, which include significant changes in workplace engagement. We provide an example of a state-wide initiative that positively shifts work engagement through the practice of recognizing one's own strengths and the strengths of others. We also add value to our understanding of how strengths-based leadership can be appreciated at all levels of the organization and to show that positive psychology and a positive, strengths-based approach in the workplace benefits individuals and organizations.

## **The Impact of Strengths on Work Engagement: The *Make Rhode Island Stronger* Initiative<sup>1</sup>**

This paper analyzes the *Make Rhode Island (RI) Stronger* initiative, which involves the efforts of Leadership Rhode Island (LRI) and thousands of Rhode Islanders to transform individuals, communities, and companies through adopting a strengths-based philosophy and building on the states' strengths. The impetus for this initiative stems from a state history of political corruption and the subsequent culture of malfeasance and despondency that inevitably resulted from this climate. For Mike Ritz, Executive Director of LRI, the turning point was the data from Gallup's 2013 State of the Workplace Report showing that Rhode Islands' percentage of actively disengaged employees was the highest in the nation (Gallup, 2013; Ritz, personal communication, June 29, 2017). According to Gallup's Report, actively disengaged employees tend to be unhappy at work and can negatively affect workplace performance through higher turnover rates, absenteeism, and quality defects. In addition, the Report showed that Rhode Island ranked near the bottom of the nation in actively engaged employees (6th lowest in the nation). Individuals who are actively engaged in the workplace are involved in their work and contribute positively to organizational creativity and innovation. Moreover, Rhode Islanders ranked their state among the worst places to live. Thus, Rhode Islanders were not only *not* actively engaged but were the most actively disengaged in the workplace – and perceptions of living in the state were dismal at best.

Therefore, in 2014 LRI embarked on its *Make RI Stronger* initiative with the goal of boosting engagement and improving life in the state. Building on earlier successes from their

---

<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to acknowledge and thank Ret. Brigadier General Marcus Jannitto and Mr. Mike Ritz from Leadership Rhode Island for making this opportunity possible.

community leadership development programs that focused on breaking down silos and developing leaders from all sectors, communities, and industries in Rhode Island, LRI did something never before tried: they selected a traditional business tool, used by 467 Fortune 500 companies (Feintzeig, 2015), and applied it to an entire state to make a positive impact. Two key practices are the cornerstone of the initiative: 1) Strength-based leadership, and 2) Positive psychology. Many successes can be attributed to these practices, including an estimated \$112.5-\$234.6 million boost to Rhode Island's economy and the decrease of actively disengaged employees, moving Rhode Island from 50<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> (Parker, 2017) in the nation (Gallup, 2016; Ritz, personal communication July 12, 2017). This jump prompted Jim Clifton, Gallup Chairman and CEO, to say, "Rhode Island went from the worst in the country — they were 50<sup>th</sup> — to 15<sup>th</sup>," Clifton said. "We've never seen a jump like this." Most impressive is that Rhode Island went from 49<sup>th</sup> place in 2015 to 1<sup>st</sup> place in 2016 on the engagement item measuring whether one has the opportunity to use their strengths at work (Gallup, 2013; Gallup, 2016). Jim Clifton commented: "Forty-ninth to first is insane...it's incredible" (Parker, 2017).

To better understand these changes, we analyze Rhode Island's *Make RI Stronger* initiative through the perspectives of work engagement and positive psychology. Our goal is to further investigate how the initiative's focus on strengths, and the practice of strengths-based leadership, which is at the core of the initiative, impacts engagement. To accomplish this goal we first provide a brief review of work engagement and introduce the different interventions for increasing engagement. We then focus on the intervention of leadership training programs by examining strengths-based leadership. This review provides the key concepts and definitions that are relevant to our case analysis. Our methods section includes background information on the *Make RI Stronger* initiative and both qualitative and quantitative findings from the initiative are

presented in our results section. We aim to contribute to both scholars and practitioners by providing an example of a state-wide initiative that positively shifts work engagement through the practice of recognizing one's own strengths and the strengths of others. We also seek to add value to our understanding of how strengths-based leadership can be appreciated at all levels of the organization and to show that positive psychology and a positive, strengths-based approach in the workplace benefits individuals and organizations.

### **Work Engagement**

Work engagement is a timely topic to both organizational members and researchers due to its positive links with individual and organizational outcomes (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011; Harter, Schmidt, Agrawal, Plowman, & Blue, 2016). Workplace and employee engagement is also a global conversation. According to Gallup, only 13% of employees worldwide are engaged; 33% of American employees are engaged. Engagement in the workplace can be described as a motivational concept that influences how an individual physically, emotionally and cognitively connects with their work (Kahn, 1990). It is through this personal involvement with work that the individual positively connects with not only her work tasks but also the people in her work environment. Indeed, research on work engagement covers a variety of areas including how to achieve high engagement (Knight, Patterson, & Dawson, 2017; e.g., Perschel, 2010), the effects of engagement on well-being (e.g., Rivkin, Diestel, & Schmidt, 2018) and performance (e.g., Harter et al, 2016), and construct and methodological validity (e.g., Christian et al., 2011). One study even found that certain types of workplace fun can increase engagement at the individual task level (Plester & Hutchinson, 2016). As such, understanding the

benefits and multi-faceted nature of work engagement, and how to improve employee engagement is a topic that is central to the *Make RI Stronger* initiative.

To illustrate the impact of engagement, several large scale meta-analytic studies have found that work engagement positively affects business unit level performance such as increased profitability, customer loyalty, quality, and productivity and also reduced turnover, absenteeism, shrinkage, and safety incidents (Harter et al, 2016; Harter, Schmidt, Asplund, Killham & Agrawal, 2010; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). For example, Harter and colleagues' most recent meta-analysis, which included 339 research studies and over 1.8 million employees found consistent statistically significant support for the positive relationship between engagement and performance (Harter et al, 2016). Their results showed that business units scoring in the top half of engagement were nearly 50% more successful than those business units in the bottom half. The range was even more dramatic for business units scoring at the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile of employee engagement; they were four times as successful as those business units scoring at the 1st percentile.

There are many additional examples of the benefits of work engagement. At Standard Chartered Bank it was found that branches with highly engaged employees produced 20% higher returns than branches with lower engagement scores. Marks & Spencer reported that a 1% improvement in employee engagement produced almost a 3% increase in sales per square foot. JC Penney reported that their stores with top engagement scores generate about 10% more sales per square foot and have a 36% greater operating income than similar stores with low engagement scores (Gallup, 2006; Dow Jones Business News, 2007). Moreover, Molson Coors Brewing Company reported multi-million dollar safety savings through strengthening employee engagement (Singh, 2013).

Furthermore, in a study of 394 service encounters among bank consultants it was found that employees' positive affect and engagement was positively related to customers' positive affect about their encounters. This in turn was positively related to increased customer service (Giardini & Frese, 2008). In another recent study of 482 service employees and customers in the retail industry, it was found that greater engagement was related to more positive service employee performance (Menguc et al., 2013). These examples demonstrate that engagement at work is clearly beneficial. Nevertheless, defining and operationalizing the construct and determining the best ways to foster work engagement remain important issues for both practitioners and scholars.

### ***Definitions of Work Engagement***

Christian and colleagues' review of work engagement notes that most definitions build on Kahn's (1990) conceptual foundations of engagement (Christian et al., 2011). In Kahn's (1990) early research on personal engagement in the workplace, he identifies three psychological conditions that affect engagement: meaningfulness, safety, and availability that foster engagement. Finding meaning in one's work involves doing work that is creative, challenging, varied, clearly delineated, and somewhat autonomous. Kahn (1990) relates these task characteristics to Hackman and Oldham's (1980; 1976) job characteristic model, which focuses on the psychologically motivating aspects of work. Also related to meaningfulness are the degree to which individuals identify with their role characteristics and the status or influence associated with their work role(s). Similarly, rewarding interpersonal interactions are attributed to increased meaning at work. The psychological safety dimension of engagement includes workplace interactions that are supportive and trusting. Positive group dynamics, workplace norms and supportive management also contribute to a sense of psychological safety. Finally, the

psychological availability dimension encompasses a person's physical and emotional energy, their sense of job security as well as their life outside of work.

Importantly, Kahn's (1990) research demonstrates the holistic, multi-dimensional nature of engagement and the dynamic interplay between the self and the workplace. Engagement's multi-dimensional conceptualization is one way it is distinguished from similar constructs such as job involvement (a cognitive construct), and organizational commitment (an affective construct). Job satisfaction is often associated with engagement, however, job satisfaction is considered an evaluative, reflective statement about the job, whereas, engagement is identified as a formative statement that describes one's experiences resulting from work (Christian et al., 2011; Harter et al., 2016). The emphasis on tangible experiences is a distinguishing characteristic of work engagement, particularly for the measures of engagement given that survey items can serve as actionable items. In addition, while not considered a trait, engagement is conceived as a "relatively enduring state of mind referring to the simultaneous investment of personal energies in the experience or performance of work" (Christian et al., 2011, p.95). Engagement, therefore, is a multi-dimensional, experience or performance related, enduring state of mind that affects the individual's involvement with work.

There are a number of ways that engagement has been defined and operationalized – all of which build on the degree individuals are physically, emotionally, and cognitively involved in their work. Specifically, we briefly examine three perspectives: Maslach and colleagues' (e.g., Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter 1997; Maslach & Leiter, 1997); Schaufeli and colleagues' (e.g., Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, & Bakker, 2002), and Clifton and Gallup's research (e.g., Harter et al., 2016; Rath & Conchie, 2008). We focus on Clifton's and subsequently Gallup's measure of work engagement (Gallup's Work Audit; Q12) because the *Make RI Stronger*

initiative includes this measure in their training and follows the practice of strengths-based leadership approach as set forth by Don Clifton (Rath & Conchie, 2008; StrengthFinder Assessment).

While LRI's engagement perspective and our case analysis is based on research from Don Clifton and Gallup, Inc., the first two perspectives noted above consist of the most recognized definitions and operationalizations of work engagement. To start, Maslach and colleagues define engagement as high energy, involvement, and efficacy in regards to one's work (Maslach et al., 1997; Maslach & Leiter, 1997). This research perspective positions engagement as the opposite of burnout, noting that exhaustion, cynicism and inefficacy (burnout dimensions) are at one end of the continuum and energy, involvement and efficacy (engagement dimensions) are at the other end of the continuum, respectively (Leiter & Maslach, 2005; Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Thus, the exhaustion-energy spectrum relates to workload and control at work such that a better fit between the person and these job experiences leads to energy, whereas a poor fit results in exhaustion. Similarly, the spectrum of cynicism-involvement relates to the person-job fit of work-related rewards and the sense of community in the workplace. The inefficacy-efficacy spectrum, or the perception that if you put forth the effort you can experience a sense of accomplishment is influenced by experiences of fairness in the workplace and the amount of values fit with one's work. Engagement within this theoretical perspective is measured through the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach et al., 1997). Critics note that since engagement is a distinct construct (i.e., distinct from burnout) it cannot be accurately measured through the MBI, which is firstly a measure of burnout and this debate continues today (Christian et al, 2011; Knight, et al., 2017).

On the other hand, Schaufeli and colleagues' define engagement as a distinct construct consisting of vigor, dedication, and absorption in one's work (Schaufeli et al, 2002). Specifically, work engagement is defined as "a positive, fulfilling, work related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli, et al, 2002, p.74). Vigor relates to mental resilience and higher levels of energy during work. Dedication is seen in individuals who have enthusiasm for their work, experience significance in work, and readily accept the challenges of work. Absorption refers to being fully engrossed in one's work and losing track of time when working (Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz Vergel, 2014; Salanova & Schaufeli, 2008). This definition of engagement is measured through the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES; Schaufeli et al., 2002; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). While these two perspectives of engagement are distinctly different, it could be suggested that energy is similar to vigor, involvement is similar to absorption and efficacy is comparable to dedication.

It is noteworthy that Schaufeli and colleagues conceptualization of engagement is based on the Job Demands-Resources model (JD-R; Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Essentially, the better one's job and personal resources the more likely engagement will be experienced. Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory, emotional contagion theory, job crafting (i.e., employees creating their own job opportunities), and the experience of better health are identified as the principles underlying the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Christian et al., 2011). Relating this to our case analysis, this focus on the positives - positive psychology and the identification of what makes people flourish is the basis of Don Clifton's research (Harter et al., 2016; Rath & Conchie, 2008). Clifton is considered the father of strengths psychology and is the creator of the CliftonStrengths assessment. It is this philosophy of

engagement and the practice of strengths-based leadership that is instrumental to the *Make RI Stronger* initiative.

From Clifton and Gallup's perspective, engagement refers to "the individual's involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work" (Harter et al., 2002, p. 269). As early as the 1950s, Clifton was a pioneer in the field, studying what factors enable people to capitalize on their talents. His research focused on emphasizing individual strengths over weaknesses, workplace relationships and friendships, personnel support, and learning (Harter et al., 2016). In 1988, Dr. Clifton and Dr. Gallup merged their work allowing Clifton's progressive management science to be combined with Gallup's superior survey science. As a result, the Gallup Workplace Audit was developed to measure workplace satisfaction and engagement (GWA; The Gallup Organization 1992-1999). This measure consists of one general satisfaction item and 12 items relating to work engagement. According to Gallup, the GWA (also known as the Q12) measures perceptions of the individual's work situation such as available resources, role clarity, receiving feedback, feeling appreciated, and person-job fit between abilities and requirements (Harter et al., 2016). In their review of work engagement, Christian and colleagues' argue that the GWA refers to work conditions rather than the work itself and therefore does not conform to operational definitions specifying the connection with the *performance* of work tasks (Christian et al., 2011). However, the GWA has been studied extensively and its reliability and validity have been strongly supported (Harter et al., 2016). In our case analysis, we examine work engagement through the 12 questions of the GWA.

### **Work Engagement Interventions**

An important part of this paper is to describe how the efforts of LRI and in particular, the *Make RI Stronger* initiative help to improve engagement in the state. There are a variety of ways

that organizations can improve work engagement. Knight and colleagues recently reviewed different work engagement interventions, with the purpose of discovering whether interventions overall are effective and if there is a difference among intervention approaches (Knight et al., 2017). Their research found a small but statistically significant positive effect of interventions on engagement in the 20 studies of their meta-analysis. In all the studies, engagement was measured as vigor, dedication, and absorption. No differences were found among the four types of interventions they examined: personal resource building; job resource building; health promotion, and leadership training programs. Their results did find that group interventions were more successful in increasing engagement than individual interventions and that combining different types of interventions was an effective training approach.

We next introduce strengths-based leadership, which is at the core of the *Make RI Stronger* initiative. Strengths-based training falls within the leadership training program category described by Knight and colleagues (Knight et al., 2017). Yet, an important aspect of the initiative is that strengths training is provided at all organizational levels such that everyone can learn and benefit from recognizing their own strengths and the strengths of others.

### ***Strengths-Based Leadership***

Strengths-Based Leadership (SBL) seeks to maximize organizational efficiency through continuous improvement of resources, namely systems, processes, and people. For the purposes of this article, we are most concerned with strengths-based leadership as it applies to people. The Gallup Organization is largely credited with the dissemination of strengths-based leadership through its 70 years of research on organizational behavior and leadership development. It defines a “strength” as “the ability to consistently produce a positive outcome through near-

perfect performance in a specific task” (Gallup Accelerated Coaching Course Manual, 2017, p. 15).

At the heart of strengths-based leadership sits the premise that no one is good at everything, but everyone can do some things well. A focus on weaknesses erodes confidence. However, a focus on strengths increases workplace engagement by a factor of eight (Rath & Conchie, 2008). Thus, managing, rather than improving, weaknesses and maximizing strengths is central to strengths-based leadership. Through their research on strengths-based leadership, Gallup has made the following three findings: 1) The most effective leaders always invest in strengths; 2) The most effective leadership surround themselves with the right people then maximize their teams, and 3) The most effective leaders understand their followers’ needs.

## **Methods**

### ***Setting: Leadership Rhode Island and the Make RI Stronger Initiative***

LRI is a nonprofit leadership development organization that has been in existence since 1981. Through its community leadership programs, LRI reaches a wide array of people from a cross-section of institutions, including business, education, finance, nonprofit, and government. Participants of LRI’s programs, such as its Core Leadership Program and College Leadership Program, develop problem-solving, organizational and leadership skills as well as build networks and strategic alliances throughout the state. The Core Leadership Program emphasizes personal growth, professional development, and community leadership and strengthens competencies in areas such as visioning, strategic thinking, collaboration, coalition building, emotional intelligence, and appreciation for diversity and inclusiveness. The College Leadership Program explores the private, nonprofit, and public sectors and participants cover such topics as what

today's companies look for when hiring, the ins and outs of networking, a positive online presence, strengths based interviews, and lessons from nonprofit leaders – to name a few.

While LRI has a relatively small staff of eight full-time employees, it enjoys a large and active alumni base of over 2,300 leaders that dates back 37 years to its 1981 founding. Its 13-member Board of Governors oversees financial management and fundraising and leads the organization in the realization of its mission and vision. LRI is considered a national pioneer in community leadership programs and in 2017 was recognized with the Excellence in Innovation Award from the Association of Leadership Programs. LRI's mission, vision, beliefs and values can be found at <http://www.leadershipri.org/about>.

***The Make RI Stronger Initiative:*** The *Make RI Stronger* initiative began in March 2014 as a program to improve life and boost engagement in Rhode Island through strength-based training and education. LRI applied an existing tool, the CliftonStrengths assessment, and the related language of strengths psychology, in a new way. LRI leveraged the state's small size to spark a cross-sector, cross-industry movement, influencing statewide dialogue through 2,300-plus alumni leaders and local media, resulting in 12,000-plus Rhode Islanders discovering their strengths and training a diverse cross-section of them through its cadre of 26 strengths coaches.

Widespread pessimism is a costly perception problem that LRI surveys have indicated since 1981 have impeded the state's growth. Gallup's 2013 report was the tipping point, quantifying the negative impact of an actively disengaged Rhode Islander. Many people saw the engagement problem as an employee issue. However, as management guru Peter Drucker noted, "A successful innovation aims at leadership," and LRI saw this as a leadership opportunity. By quantifying the cost of low employee engagement, LRI created a sense of urgency among leaders in every sector. By capitalizing on the opportunity to change the state's negative perception of

itself, LRI created a new marketplace and became RI's first and only full-service provider of strengths-based personal and professional development.

LRI has long believed that mining locales for what's working well, who are its champions, how they do it, why they do it, what has been produced, how it made a community better, and then connecting everyone is a convening well worth the investment of time and effort. Putting positive psychology and social weaving ideas to the test, over the course of 33 community meetings, LRI's 2015 Core Program participants convened hundreds of RI neighbors. This culminated in the first ever statewide strengths-based convening in the world – billed as “The Greatest Lil’ State on Earth,” where nearly 1,000 local champions attended. Attendees explored their individual strengths, the distinctive strengths of their communities, and the magical formulas for success across the state. Attendees were encouraged to continue these conversations after the convening was over. Events like this one meant awareness of the Make RI Stronger initiative grew quickly.

LRI's work has been enhanced by creating a common strengths-based language that is made possible through the CliftonStrengths assessment. The CliftonStrengths assessment has been administered to over 12,000 people as part of the Make RI Stronger initiative with the aim of having one in ten in the state know their strengths as outlined from the assessment. When individuals know and do what they do best, they are happier, more engaged and more productive which, research shows, results in lower healthcare costs, higher civic engagement, and more entrepreneurship – all conditions that have positive social and economic impact.

### ***Participants***

Over 12,000 Rhode Island residents, from high schoolers to government representatives, from activists to attorneys, and everyone in between, have completed the online CliftonStrengths

assessment since *Make RI Stronger* launched. This is significant because prior to the initiative launching, very little strengths activity was happening in Rhode Island, according to Gallup. LRI's campaign to embed strengths psychology into the state created a whole new market for strengths in Rhode Island, which has resulted in thousands of Rhode Islanders discovering their strengths.

Over 60 companies representing every sector in the state have participated in the *Make RI Stronger* initiative. Private companies, such as Gilbane Building Company, Cox Business, Nail Communications, and DiPrete Engineering; nonprofit organizations, such as Big Brother Big Sisters of the Ocean State, Year Up Providence, and Boys and Girls Clubs of Pawtucket and Newport; government agencies such as Rhode Island Department of Health, Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training, and the Governor's Cabinet, and higher education institutions, such as Brown University, Rhode Island School of Design, and Providence College have all brought strengths-based development practices to areas of their operations.

LRI has infused their leadership programs – the Core Program and College Program – with strengths over the last five years. Over 300 individuals, representing over 250 companies, organizations and state departments have taken the CliftonStrengths assessment and received strengths-based leadership training through LRI's Core Program. More than 150 students, representing every college and university in the state, have taken the CliftonStrengths assessment and received strengths-based leadership training through LRI's College Program. All LRI staff, members of the Board of Governors, and key volunteers have taken the CliftonStrengths assessment and received strengths-based leadership training.

***Intervention: Strengths Training***

LRI recognizes that each organization and group is unique and as a result creates customized packages for each client. Below represents what an ideal deployment of a strengths-based intervention looks like for a company engaging with strengths. Before LRI begins any strengths-based training, they encourage organizations to complete a Q12 employee engagement survey to establish a baseline of their employee engagement. If a company is already doing an engagement survey, LRI will move right to administering the CliftonStrengths assessment.

Clifton Strengths is a 177-item assessment that ranks individuals on 34 themes of talent. Respondents have 20 seconds to answer each item. The timed nature of the assessment is to tap into people’s gut responses. The 34 strengths are divided into 4 domains: Strategic Thinking, Relationship Building, Influencing, and Executing. Table 1 provides the strengths that match with each domain. Although Gallup has statistics on which strengths occur most frequently out of all 18 million people who have taken the assessment, no strength is argued to be better or worse than another. In addition, the objective behind CliftonStrengths is not to develop certain strengths, nor is it to ensure that your strengths balance equally across the four domains. Rather, the point is to determine what an individual is already good at and to think of ways to maximize those strengths.

Table 1: Strengths Categorized by Domain

|                  | <b>Domain</b>  |  |  |  |
|------------------|--|--|--|--|
|                  | <b>Strategic Thinking</b>  | <b>Influencing</b>   | <b>Relationship Building</b>   | <b>Executing</b>   |
| <b>Strengths</b> | Analytical<br>Context<br>Futuristic<br>Ideation<br>Input<br>Intellection<br>Learner<br>Strategic | Activator<br>Command<br>Communication<br>Competition<br>Maximizer<br>Self-Assurance<br>Significance<br>Woo | Adaptability<br>Developer<br>Connectedness<br>Empathy<br>Harmony<br>Includer<br>Individualization<br>Positivity<br>Relator | Achiever<br>Arranger<br>Belief<br>Consistency<br>Deliberative<br>Disciplined<br>Focus<br>Responsibility<br>Restorative |

Prior to a CliftonStrengths Orientation, all participating individuals will complete the CliftonStrengths assessment and are asked to read through and reflect on their unique insight reports that they receive upon completion of the assessment. Then, an LRI Strengths Coach will deliver an Orientation for all participating employees. The goals for an Orientation are to increase the participants' awareness and application of the principles of strengths-based development, and to increase the participants' awareness of and appreciation for their individual and collective strengths and how they can be leveraged.

Success of strengths in the workplace is dependent on managers and their ability to integrate strengths into the day-to-day operations. Given the integral role managers play to the success of implementing a strength-based program, LRI will work with managers to support them in integrating strengths-based management practices that seek to boost employee engagement. Should an organization wish to embed a strengths coach internally, LRI will deliver their Train-the-Trainer program to create strengths champions that support and sustain strengths-based practices without LRI's direct involvement. Finally, six months to a year after the initial Q12 survey was administered, LRI suggests administering a follow-up Q12, which serves as the metric to determine changes in engagement.

## **Results**

LRI systematically created a top-down, bottom-up social movement by embedding strengths-based psychology in every sector, from the Governor's cabinet to small nonprofits, from corporations to youth programs. A common strengths-based language now permeates the

state; transformation is evident in every sector. LRI established new dimensions of performance on three levels:

**1. State of RI:** In 3 years, in a national comparison by state, RI experienced unprecedented improvements in workforce engagement: moving from #50 (most disengaged in the nation) to #15 on the actively disengaged scale. These changes have brought back \$112-\$234 million to the RI economy, according to Gallup. Research shows active disengagement costs companies and organizations approximately \$3,400 per \$10,000 in wages.

**2. RI-based companies and organizations:** Individual organizations' outcomes have measurably improved since adopting strengths-based practices. For example, LRI's intervention with one division of Gilbane Building Company, a privately held company, resulted in an 18% increase in employee engagement while the rest of this company saw no change. Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Ocean state, a non-profit organization, saw transformation on almost all levels of their Q12 survey, highlighted by an 8% increase in the number of engaged employees.

**3. LRI itself** is transformed, too. LRI created this social enterprise to oversee the strengths effort, which has diversified LRI's revenue stream, creating a new sustainable source of revenue that has allowed for the program to grow every year. In 2017, the program accounted for 25% of LRI's operating budget, up from 10% in 2016 and 0% in 2015. LRI created new dimensions of performance for all of its programming by embedding strengths psychology into all aspects of the nonprofit, from staff and board development, volunteer recruitment and engagement, and leadership development opportunities for career professionals and college students in Rhode Island. As a result, engagement of its alumni base has increased dramatically. Alumni generated three-fourths of the social enterprise's clients, and 13 alumni serve as strengths coaches. Alumni giving is up 20 percent.

The results demonstrate that LRI has been successful in tackling one of the reasons they launched the *Make RI Stronger* initiative in 2014: improving work engagement. The other area LRI wanted to move in a positive direction was the states' negative psyche. Measuring attitude change is challenging. Research shows that those who do what they do best are happier, more engaged and more productive. The Gallup survey indicates that RI has jumped from 49th to 1st place on a workplace performance measure: "At work, I get to use my strengths to do what I do best." Additionally, in 2015, LRI hosted a strengths-based convening that drew almost 1,000 guests representing every city and town (39) in Rhode Island. A survey of participants after the event indicates positive impact on those who spent the day learning about their own talents and the strengths movement at large. For example:

Q. I have a positive attitude toward RI. (Using a scale of 1 to 5)

- Before Event: 3.96 (average rating)
- After Event: 4.32 (average rating)

Q. This event influenced my thinking about how I can use my strengths to contribute to making my community better:

- 68.67% of respondents Strongly Agreed or Agreed

These results show that that the initiative has had a positive impact on the mindset of Rhode Islanders, but there is much work still to be done.

In addition, below is data relating to the impact of LRI strengths trainings:

\*Please rate how the [CliftonStrengths] Orientation affected your knowledge and/or understanding of your individual strengths (on a scale of 1-5 where 1 is strongly disagree and 5 is strongly agree):

- Before Training: 3.00

- After Training: 4.30

\*Please rate how the [CliftonStrengths] Orientation affected your knowledge and/or understanding of your co-workers' strengths (on a scale of 1-5 where 1 is strongly disagree and 5 is strongly agree)

- Before Training: 2.27
- After Training: 4.05

\*96% of LRI Core Program participants strongly agree or agree that learning about their own strengths has helped them see the strengths in other people.

Table 2 provides qualitative feedback that represents a sampling from training participants in profit, non-profit, and public sectors.

Table 2: Qualitative feedback from the *Make RI Stronger* Initiative

| <b>Feedback from Individuals Working in For-Profit Sector</b>   |
|---|
| "Strengths-based leadership is going to change my life and already has. The Gallup Strength-Finder is extremely powerful and has taught me a great deal about embracing my strengths and not focusing on what I am not strong at (weaknesses). I will be sharing my experience with my team. I will use my strengths to make better informed decisions. One of the most important aspects of leveraging strength-based leadership is how I relate to others, how I understand the motivations and personality traits of others and how I can leverage their strengths to aid in making my projects, interactions, goals even stronger as a team as a leader. One of my favorite quotes recently which I constantly remind myself: "Where there is understanding, there is no judgment." This will greatly help me relate to other leaders and align myself with diversity and strategic, critical thinkers." Individual from the private sector |
| "LRI's coaching of StrengthsFinder energized our Gilbane team and spurred discussion around our personal leadership skills. Beyond our individual leadership talents in our careers, LRI demonstrated how our talents could be used to engage our community, our personal relationships, and our overall well-being." – Individual from the private sector  |
| "I will leverage strengths-based leadership approaches in my professional life by giving co-workers opportunities and experiences which will allow them to identify and make use of their individual strengths, and thus find satisfaction and success." – Individual from the private sector   |

"There is so, so much focus on being a well-rounded person in life & in particularly business, that I find myself spending lots of energy focusing on my areas of weakness instead of highlighted my strengths. It is also interesting that that is usually the focus of associate reviews- a stronger focus on improving their weaknesses instead of highlighting their strengths. As I approach my mid-year reviews I am going to attempt a different style of review for my associates, a true focus & discussion on what they are doing well and where they would like to go with that but also how we can continue to improve & build upon those strengths to have a stronger team overall." – Individual from the private sector

**Feedback from Individuals Working in Non-Profit, Public Sectors**

"The possibilities are extensive. Immediately, the strength-based leadership approach has already started to change the way I think about professional development. Long-term, this has real possibilities for me as an HR professional who is responsible for employee and organizational development." – Individual from the non-profit/education sector

"Understanding what skills I had, and the skills of colleagues, has helped me put many of my working relationships in perspective, and has also helped me work better with my colleagues as I better understand their skills and perspectives." – Individual from the public sector

"The Clifton Strengths orientation offered by Leadership Rhode Island will most certainly engage even the most pessimistic and disengaged people in any working environment. The program is well designed and delivered, meeting the highest standard of any professional development program. I learned how to use my natural talents to influence and improve how I interact with people, professionally and personally. I'm a more effective team member because of it." – Individual from the non-profit/education sector.

"There are many ways that I leverage the strength-based leadership approach in my professional life. In the immediate, it has helped me think about how I manage my own tasks and responsibilities but more importantly, it has helped the way I think about staff supervision, nurturing a team approach, shaping curriculum development for my youth leadership program and has validated my beliefs that people work best to their strengths." – Individual from the non-profit sector

"I have already begun to use SBL by leveraging my strengths and not trying to improve or pour energy into something that I am mediocre at; instead, I outsource or delegate those items. Productivity is on the rise." – Individual from the public sector

**Discussion**

Our goal with this case analysis is to provide a theory to practice example of a state-wide initiative that has positively shifted work engagement through the practice of recognizing one's own strengths and the strengths of others. Through the initiative, Rhode Islanders found that

while many had a sense of their own strengths, they didn't always appreciate the strengths in others. This mindset shift could have profound consequences for how people work with and interact with others. In fact, qualitative feedback signaled that individuals felt energized when focusing on their strengths and had greater respect and understanding for others when they learned about their co-workers' unique talents. These changes have positive implications for work engagement and team processes and add to our understanding of how strengths-based leadership can be appreciated at all levels of the organizations. According to research from the Kenexa Research Institute, an organization's senior leadership team has a significant impact on its employees' overall opinions of the company and engagement levels (Wiley, 2010). Practicing strength-based leadership at all levels of the organizations means that all members are "senior" contributors and leaders in their own right.

Furthermore, by analyzing the impact of strengths-based leadership on the lives of Rhode Islanders we were able to learn how small interventions across diverse populations (i.e., for profit, non-profit, education sectors) can have a positive impact on business and society. Certainly, this state-wide initiative has the potential to lead to ample cross-pollination among organizations in and around the state of Rhode Island and beyond. With more and more people practicing a strengths-based approach, more widespread positive change can occur in organizations. The progress that LRI has made in leading positive change in the state contributes to our claim that positive psychology and a positive, strengths-based approach in the workplace benefits individuals and organizations.

Our analysis also demonstrates that the *Make RI Stronger* initiative and the work of LRI resulted in not only economic and organizational improvements but also individual growth and learning. Consistent with Gallup's research on the positive effects of work engagement (e.g.,

Harter et al., 2016), Rhode Island organizations experienced more efficient and effective operations as a result of the training. Qualitatively, individuals commented on how practicing strengths-based leadership led to increases in confidence and more effectiveness when working with others. Feedback even showed that Rhode Islanders attitude about RI improved. We believe that engaging individuals through recognizing their unique talents and those of their co-workers can be transformational.

Our analysis supports recent work engagement research that suggests that training leads to more engagement, which in turn leads to organizational effectiveness (Kataria, Rastgi, & Garg, 2013; Knight et al, 2017). In this case, training individuals in strengths-based leadership positively affected individual and organizational outcomes. The initial results of the *Make RI Stronger* initiative reported here are impactful and warrant further investigation. Indeed, it is important to note that LRI is a non-profit organization with just eight full-time staff members and a budget of just over \$700,000, with a small fraction and one staff person dedicated to the *Make RI Stronger* initiative. As momentum grows for this emphasis on strengths, we can only see continued success through increased engagement inside and outside the workplace.

In sum, our analysis brought together the concepts of positive psychology, strengths-based leadership and work engagement to show that meaningful change can occur at the individual, organizational, and societal levels. Undeniably, the research surrounding work engagement is vast and varied and Kahn (1990) suggests that the influences of work engagement (or disengagement) are complex. While this is a true statement, what is also true is that the *Make RI Stronger* initiative has had dramatic, positive effect in terms of work engagement and increased positive attitudes. Clearly, there is more to measure both in the state of RI and in terms of how strengths-based training can augment work engagement both in the state of RI and in

organizations around the world. Future research can use LRI's initiatives as models and further test whether or not this newfound engagement is sustainable over time as some studies suggest that as time progresses the positive effects of the intervention diminish (Knight et al, 2016). However, initial results indicate a strong relationship between the intervention and positive outcomes. This is powerful information in that there is little doubt that increased engagement leads to increased organizational outcomes which benefit everyone. The implications have the potential to transform many more states, for profit companies, non-profit organizations and individuals.

## References

- Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2007). The job demands-resources model: State of the art. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 22(3), 309–328.
- Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2008). Towards a model of work engagement. *Career Development International*, 13(3), 209–223.
- Bakker, A. B., Demerouti, E., & Sanz Vergel, A. (2014). Burnout and work engagement: The JD-R approach. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 1(1), 389-411.
- Christian, M. S., Garza, A. S., & Slaughter, J. E. (2011). Work engagement: A quantitative review and test of its relations with task and contextual performance. *Personnel Psychology*, 64(1), 89-136.
- Dow Jones Business News (2007). Few workers are engaged at work and most want more from execs, *Dow Jones Business News*, 10-22.
- Feintzeig, R. (2015, Feb 10). Everything is awesome! Why you can't tell employees they're doing a bad job. *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/everything-is-awesome-why-you-cant-tell-employees-theyre-doing-a-bad-job-1423613936>.
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychologist*, 56(3), 218-226. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.56.3.218.
- Gallup Accelerated Coaching Course Manual (2017). Washington, DC.: Gallup, Inc.
- Gallup (2006) *State of the Workplace Report*. Washington, DC.: Gallup, Inc.
- Gallup (2013) *State of the Workplace Report*. Washington, DC.: Gallup, Inc.
- Gallup (2016) *State of the Workplace Report*. Washington, DC.: Gallup, Inc.
- The Gallup Organization. (1992–1999). *Gallup Workplace Audit* (Copyright Registration Certificate TX-5 080 066). Washington, DC: U.S. Copyright Office.
- Giardini, A. & Frese, M. (2008). Linking service employees' emotional competence to customer satisfaction. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 29: 155-170.
- Harter, J., Schmidt, F., Agrawal, S., Plowman, S., and Blue, A. (2016). *The Relationship Between Engagement at Work and Organizational Outcomes: 2016 Q12® Meta-Analysis, 9th Edition*. Gallup, Inc.

- Harter, J., Schmidt, F., & Hayes, T. (2002). Business-unit-level relationship between employee satisfaction, employee engagement, and business outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87: 268–279.
- Harter, J.K., Schmidt, F.L., Asplund, J.W., Killham, E.A., & Agrawal, S. (2010). Causal Impact of Employee Work Perceptions on the Bottom Line of Organizations, *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, Vol. 5, No. 4, pp. 378-389.
- Hackman, J., & Oldham, G. (1980). *Work design*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Hackman, J., & Oldham, G. (1976). Motivation through the design of work: Test of a theory. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 16, 250-279.
- Kahn, W.A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33, 4, 692-724.
- Kataria, A., Rastogi, R., & Garg, P. (2016). Organizational Effectiveness as a Function of Employee Engagement. *South Asian Journal of Management*, (20)4: 56-73.
- Knight, C., Patterson, M., & Dawson, J. (2017). Building work engagement: A systematic review and meta-analysis investigating the effectiveness of work engagement interventions. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol 38(6), 792-812.
- Krishnaveni, R. & Monica, R. (2016). Identifying the Drivers for Developing and Sustaining Engagement Among Employees. *The IUP Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 15(3): 7-15.
- Leiter, M. P., & Maslach, C. (2005). *Banishing burnout: Six strategies for improving your relationship with work*. San Francisco, CA, US: Jossey-Bass.
- Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. (1997). *The truth about burnout: How organizations cause personal stress and what to do about it*. San Francisco, CA, US: Jossey-Bass.
- Maslach, C., Jackson, S. E., & Leiter, M. P. (1997). *Maslach Burnout Inventory: Third edition*. In C. P. Zalaquett, R. J. Wood, C. P. Zalaquett, R. J. Wood (Eds.), *Evaluating stress: A book of resources* (pp. 191-218). Lanham, MD, US: Scarecrow Education.
- Menguc, B., Auh, S., Fisher, M., Haddad, A. (2013). To be engaged or not to be engaged: The antecedents and consequences of employee engagement, *Journal of Business Research*, 66: 2163-2170.
- Perschel, A. (2010). Work-life flow: How individuals, Zappos, and other innovative companies achieve high engagement. *Global Business & Organizational Excellence*, 29(5), 17-30.
- Plester, B., & Hutchison, A. (2016). Fun times: The relationship between fun and workplace engagement. *Employee Relations*, 38(3), 332-350. doi:10.1108/ER-03-2014-0027

- Parker, P.E. (2017, Mar 4). Gallup: R.I. jumps to No. 1 in workplace performance measurement. *Providence Journal*. Retrieved from <http://www.providencejournal.com/news/20170304/gallup-ri-jumps-to-no-1-in-workplace-performance-measurement>.
- Rivkin, W., Diestel, S., & Schmidt, K. (2018). Which daily experiences can foster well-being at work? A diary study on the interplay between flow experiences, affective commitment, and self-control demands. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 23(1), 99-111. doi:10.1037/ocp0000039
- Rath, T. & Conchie, B. (2008). *Strengths Based Leadership*. New York, NY: Gallup Press.
- Salanova, M., & Schaufeli, W. B. (2008). A cross-national study of work engagement as a mediator between job resources and proactive behaviour. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 19(1), 116-131.
- Schaufeli, W. B., Bakker, A. B., & Salanova, M. (2006). The measurement of work engagement with a short questionnaire: A cross-national study. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 66(4), 701-716.
- Schaufeli, W. B., Salanova, M., González-Romá, V., & Bakker, A. B. (2002). The measurement of engagement and burnout: A two sample confirmatory factor analytic approach. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 3(1), 71-92.
- Singh, J. (2013). Importance of Employee Engagement: A literature Review. *International Journal of Computer Science and Communication Engineering*, 1-4.
- Wiley, J. W. (2010). The Impact of Effective Leadership on Employee Engagement. *Employee Relations Today*, Summer, 47-52.