

BY MARCIA ISBELL AND ANGELA LEE



# Charlotte–Mecklenburg successfully integrates field operations by managing individual and organizational strengths

MANAGING STRENGTHS, NOT  
WEAKNESSES, IS KEY TO AN  
ENGAGED AND PRODUCTIVE  
WORKFORCE.

**D**efinitions for integration abound. *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* defines it as “the combining and coordinating of separate parts or elements into a unified whole.” The *American Heritage Dictionary* calls it “the process of combining into completeness and harmony.” Regardless of which definition you prefer, the fact remains—integrating departments, individuals, or entire organizations seldom results in real harmony.

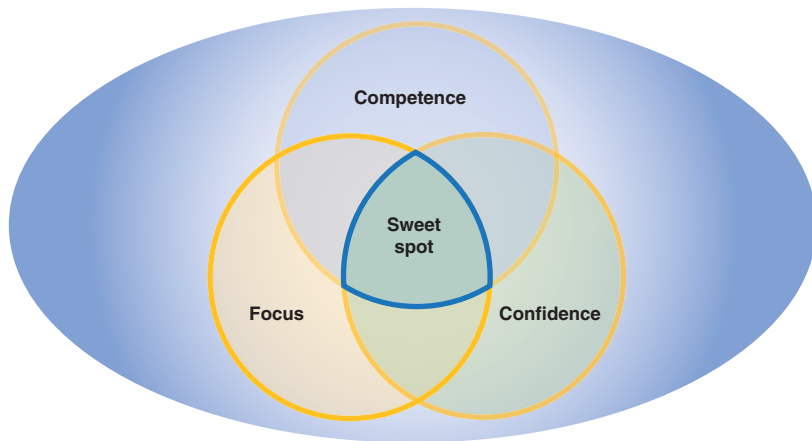
In Charlotte, N.C., the process of integrating the separate drinking water and wastewater field units of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Utility Department (CMUD) into a single, sustainable, effective field operations team has been successful. How did CMUD make integration work? The answer lies in its approach, which focused on managing individual strengths to place the right people in the right roles for long-term success.

## ORGANIZATIONAL INTEGRATION IMPROVED PRODUCTIVITY, EFFICIENCY, AND EMPLOYEE MORALE

CMUD is the largest public drinking water and wastewater utility in the Carolinas, serving more than 750,000 customers in Charlotte and greater Mecklenburg County. The utility employs 819 people, spread among eight operational areas: water supply and treatment, water distribution, environmental management, wastewater collection, laboratory services, customer service, engineering, and administration.

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**FIGURE 1** Three conditions necessary for peak workforce productivity and engagement



CMUD's infrastructure is typical of large North American utilities:

- 232,545 water connections,
- 3,528 miles of water mains,
- 205,569 sewer connections, and
- 3,433 miles of wastewater mains.

The utility is under the same type of operational pressures as its peers throughout the United States. Its service area continues to grow, making it difficult to maintain high levels of service. Water conservation and the realities of aging infrastructure are a challenge. Pressure to keep both service levels and rates competitive is constant.

The pursuit of more efficient service delivery is not new to CMUD. For years it has led the industry in testing new approaches. Simultaneously optimizing business processes, organization, and technology within field operations was a new and innovative approach the utility wanted to try.

EMA, the St. Paul, Minn.-based utility consulting firm, has been helping CMUD facilitate organizational change in its field maintenance divisions. During a six-month pilot program, CMUD's productivity improved 20%, equivalent to a savings of more than \$3 million annually.

The organization integration has been built on the principles of

strengths-based management—a practical approach to performance improvement that is predicated on identifying the strengths of individual employees and placing those employees in work roles that fit those strengths. The result is a more engaged workforce, greater productivity, a more efficient operation, and improved employee morale.

CMUD has made six strategic changes to its business practices to drive productivity improvements. Cost avoidance in the pilot program resulted from these changes:

- Crew skill mix (25% of savings). After analyzing the size and technical skills of the drinking water and wastewater crews, CMUD optimized the skill mix for maximum efficiency. This resulted in combined water/wastewater crews that were smaller and more effective.
- Headquarters consolidation (10% of savings). The integrated water and sewer field operations division now works out of four decentralized, geographically based zone headquarters. As a result, crews are working much more closely with towns in areas that previously may have been underserved. This has created better working relationships and improved service levels.

- Cross-training of drinking water and wastewater personnel (25% of savings). Some water staff had concerns about safety issues associated with working around wastewater. Additional training, immunizations, and the provision of new suits and gloves eased the apprehension.

- Increased team leader responsibility (10% of savings). Each team leader is now responsible for overseeing four or five crews. Giving team leaders more responsibility and implementing the planner/scheduler position relieved much of the pressure on supervisors.

- Crew size (15% of savings). The number of workers employed on a particular crew now depends on the scope of the specific job. Efficiency has improved, and the number of customer complaints is declining.

- Enhanced communication (15% of savings). Effective communication is vital in this major change initiative. Increased training, accountability, and the division of the service area into four zones have helped employees see how important their role is within the whole team. Because of this awareness, as well as a focus on evaluation and recalibration, communication has improved even though it remains an ongoing challenge.

**Employee engagement.** If employees are to thrive in the long run, they must do jobs that fit their strengths. It's that simple. The key to CMUD's success occurred in two steps. The first was to put the right people in the right roles for long-term sustainability. The second was to help independent workers adjust to being part of a team. Only then could employees become truly engaged in their work—happy and productive and spending most of their time doing the work they do best.

The Gallup Organization has been measuring employee productivity for 30 years. According to their surveys of three million employees and 200,000 managers, the majority of workers are clearly not engaged in their work. In the United States, fewer than 30% are engaged. The



# Difference Between Standard and Strengths-based Interviews

## STANDARD INTERVIEW FORMAT: EXPERIENCE, KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS

**Experience.** Tell me about your work experience: What jobs have you had? How long have you worked at each job? What kind of work did you do in each job? What supervisory experience have you had?

**Knowledge.** Focus in on technical questions such as, “What is the legal limit for fecal coliform? What is the policy on calling workers in on overtime?”

**Skills.** How would you rate your writing skills on a scale of 1–10? How would you look up a work order?

## STRENGTHS-BASED INTERVIEW FORMAT: TALENTS AND STRENGTHS

- Tell me about a work experience in which you felt “in the zone”—like you were doing great work that seemed easy.
- Recall one of the best leadership experiences of your life. What things made it so memorable?
- Describe a work situation in which you took the initiative to deal with a problem, even if it wasn’t necessarily in your job description.
- Tell me about a situation in which you had to coordinate

several people to achieve a goal. What prompted you to take the lead? How did you go about coordinating and leading the group/team? How did they respond?

- Describe a situation in which you were able to use persuasion to successfully convince an individual or team to see things your way.
- Describe a situation at work in which you got to do something that you love to do, when you could honestly say you were having fun at work.

**1. Define talents.** Defining talents is the first step to managing an individual in a way that builds on his or her strengths. Organizations must recognize that every individual brings unique strengths to the workplace. The key is assessing those strengths or talents and putting people in roles that complement them.

Talents are not the same as skills or knowledge. For the purposes of strengths-based management, the terms are defined as follows.

- **Talent.** An individual’s recurring thoughts, feelings, or behaviors that can be applied productively.
- **Skills.** The “how to” aspect of work; transferable, can be taught in steps, and are learned by practice.
- **Knowledge.** Factual, experiential information that comprises what a person is aware of.

A number of myths regarding knowledge must be dispelled. Many purport that talents are rare and special and that some roles are so simple that no talent is required. In reality,

everyone has talents of one kind or another, and even the most simple of roles requires specific talents.

To discover its employees’ talents, CMUD used the online *StrengthsFinder Assessment* ([www.StrengthsFinder.com](http://www.StrengthsFinder.com)) created by Buckingham and Clifton. The assessment divides talents into four categories, identifying an individual’s strongest inclinations, tendencies, and patterns in each category.

The four talent categories and qualities that fall within each include:

- **Striving talents.** Striving talents explain why a person is motivated, such as achievement, focus, or self-assurance.
- **Thinking talents.** These explain how a person makes decisions, such as through analysis, strategy, or consistency (fairness).
- **Relating talents.** Such talents explain who a person is when they interact with others, e.g., empathetic, responsible, or communicative.
- **Impacting talents.** These explain how a person motivates others

to action, such as through competition and being positive.

Every role that an individual plays in an organization requires certain talents to be performed at the level of excellence. It is impossible to achieve excellence without finding a match between talents and roles. Experience, determination, and intelligence are important, but none of these factors is as important as an individual’s innate talent. Talent cannot be taught.

To select employees based on talent, first consider the organization’s culture. This will help correctly define which talents are most needed. To define talents, consider current employees and identify one or two talents that each possesses within each of the categories. This will help identify talent gaps to fill when hiring someone new. Also, by studying the best performers, it’s easier to determine desired talents for those jobs.

**Interviewing for talent.** Interviewing potential employees for talent is not the same as traditional interview-

ing. Open-ended questions work best. Truly listening for the answers is key to assessing strengths, weaknesses, triggers (things that bring out a person's strengths), and learning style (the way a person learns). Look for patterns by asking questions that begin with, "Tell me about a time when. . ."

Other questions (and the qualities the answers indicate) might include:

- What was your best day at work in the past three months? (strengths)
- What was your worst day? (weaknesses)
- What was the best manager relationship you ever had? What made it so good? (triggers)
- What was the best recognition you have ever received? (triggers)
- When in your career did you learn the most? (learning style)

Listen for clues about times when the potential employee experienced rapid learning and great satisfaction on the job. Assess whether the candidate's recurring thoughts, feelings, and behaviors match the role you're filling (see sidebar on page 88).

Like interviewing, training is also different in a strengths-based organization. It's important to clearly define the required knowledge and skills that correspond with the right talents. The best approach to training is one that occurs while the work is being done. Identify which of the three learning styles—predominantly learning through analysis, by doing, or by imitating—applies to each person. Also identify the specific things that motivate each employee to learn, such as time spent with a leader, recognition, independence, or physical factors (e.g., time of day).

Another important component of the strengths-based approach is ongoing performance management. To get the work done, everyone needs to contribute. Research clearly shows that feedback improves performance and supports continuous improvement and employee development.

**2. Study the best performers.** It's not difficult to determine who the star

performers are in an organization. Studying them can help determine what talents they have that could be tied to the role they play. Then match similar talents with similar roles in the organization, and hire based on these talents.

**3. Teach the talent language throughout the organization.** Conducting multiple performance-management sessions teaches managers how to manage based on strengths. By identifying each employee's unique

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style of learning and his or her individual triggers, managers learn how to bring out the best in their people. Rather than focusing on the weakest performers in a futile attempt to "fix" those weaknesses, managers can focus on their star performers and turn other employees' innate talents into superior performance.

**4. Build a talent profile of the organization.** Next, develop a sound understanding of the existing organization's talents. Constructing this talent profile develops a better feel for the talents you already have and those you need to acquire (Figure 2).

By knowing everyone's individual strengths, you can place people in the right roles to succeed. From this base of strength, you can then begin hiring others based on the additional strengths they offer that match the organization's needs.

**5. Study links between talent and performance.** CMUD's fifth step was to collect baseline data to build a performance-management plan for every team member. Building a scorecard for employees assesses their effect on business results, the customer, and the culture—in a single measure. It also clearly illustrates to employees

what success looks like, and it reinforces the organization's values.

Because each person's talents are enduring, spend more time and money selecting the right people in the first place. Also, each person has unique talents, so it's important to focus performance measures on defined outcomes rather than on how well an individual is able to follow a series of forced steps in a defined process.

The greatest growth potential for an individual and the organization is

in advancing strengths. The key to making that work is finding ways to help each person grow, without necessarily promoting them out of their strengths.

#### **GOOD LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVELY MANAGES INDIVIDUAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRENGTHS**

In a strengths-based organization, the final piece of the puzzle is great leadership (see sidebar on page 90). Great leaders build confidence in the sustainability of their organization. They discover what is universal and rally people to a better future. Great leaders build confidence by bringing clarity to the workplace and asking key questions:

- Who do we serve?
- What is our core strength?
- How are we performing?
- What actions can we take today?

Once behavioral changes begin, increased productivity is supported, and the organization becomes a sustainable business. The results are measurable in terms of customer metrics, lower turnover rates, increased productivity, greater profitability, and enhanced worker safety. Data will reveal improved morale, as well.

# What Makes a Great Manager Versus a Great Leader?

According to author Marcus Buckingham, “The difference between a good manager and a great manager is what they do with strengths and weaknesses once they know what those strengths and weaknesses are.”

In the mind of a great manager, there is no inherent conflict between an employee’s goals and the organization’s goals. Organizations begin with the employee’s goals.

This approach differs from the approach those at the top of most organizations take. Businesses often take strengths for granted, focusing most on weaknesses. In reality, managing around weakness—the typical approach—isn’t “development” but rather damage control. Great managers don’t overlook an individual’s weaknesses but manage those weaknesses, often by pairing an individual with someone who has correlating strengths.

Great managers spend the majority of their time supporting the people who do the work. They help set goals, acquire needed resources, remove barriers, communicate, encourage learning, and offer recognition and reward.

“Great managers play chess. Average managers play checkers,” said Buckingham. “What’s the difference? In

chess, all of the pieces move differently. In checkers every piece is the same.”

On the other hand, great leaders are eternal optimists with an ego. They are inquisitive, and they overcome the organization’s fear of the unknown through clarity—the ultimate fear antidote.

To achieve clarity, great leaders:

- Reflect—process information and think about excellence.
- Understand—know why things succeed.
- Pick the right heroes in the organization and tell everyone why they are heroes—Good isn’t the opposite of bad so focusing on bad will not produce the desired results.
- Practice—use words, images, and stories to convey the message, repeating what resonates. They don’t repeat the same stories many times, but rather repeat the same speech to different audiences.

So what is the difference between a great manager and a great leader? Great managers discover what is unique about each person and capitalize on it. Great leaders discover what is universal and capitalize on it.

## CONCLUSION

CMUD’s field operations display the three Gallup-identified conditions for highly engaged and productive work teams:

- confidence—finding strengths and building on them to improve productivity, profitability, employee retention, and customer service;
- competence—understanding talent as different from skills and knowledge and selecting and training for talent; and
- focus—using performance management to define strengths and manage weaknesses.

Integration of the drinking water and wastewater crews began in 2005. During 2006, CMUD is profiling the strengths of high-performing employees to establish more clearly how talents and roles match. Individual performance scorecards

are under construction for the CMUD leadership team as well. In the field, zone managers are using the strengths assessment to determine field crew composition, and plans exist to assess all field staff by the end of 2007.

Integration of the two division cultures and adapting to the rapid pace of change—an ongoing process—remain CMUD’s greatest challenges, along with establishing a new skills-based pay structure that compensates cross-trained employees.

“Great managers find out what is unique about a person, and they capitalize on it,” Buckingham said. “The challenge of management is not to grind these differences down. The challenge of management is to find out what [an individual’s] unique talents are and bring them to the party.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



*Marcia Isbell (to whom correspondence should be addressed) is a principal consultant with EMA Inc., 1970*

*Oakcrest Ave., St. Paul, MN 55113; (704) 948-8330; e-mail misbell@ema-inc.com. She has a BA degree in behavioral science from Mt. Vernon Nazarene College in Ohio and an MA degree in sociology from Bowling Green State University in Ohio. She has more than 16 years’ experience in designing and implementing organizational change programs for public-sector and utility clients. Angela Lee is a field operations division manager with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Utilities in Charlotte, N.C.*