



Strength Based Approach to Performance: The 10-80-10 Principle

To get results in this competitive landscape an organization needs to be stronger, faster, and more efficient. The pitfall that most organizations fall into as they embark along this journey is they get obsessed with correcting their inefficiencies and weaknesses rather than channeling their resources to their strengths. The 10-80-10 Principle is a framework that helps organization strategically navigate through complex situations with maximum results by helping them reduce the time they spend on weaknesses and increase the time spent on strengths.

Every organization has internal strengths (Top 10) and weaknesses (Bottom 10). All other actions are considered to be Majority 80; the Majority 80 tends to take the lead of either the Top 10 or Bottom 10, depending on where the attention and resources of the organization is focused. If an organization tends to lead with the Top 10, the Majority 80 follows them and they create a dynamic organization. If the Bottom 10 leads the Majority 80 follows them and they create a static organization. Through time organizations will fluctuate through cycles of being both dynamic and static. The more time an organization spends being dynamic is directly proportional to the performance of the organization – more time being dynamic, more performance, less time being dynamic, less performance.

To successfully implement The 10-80-10 Principle it starts with articulating a clear vision of what the organization is trying to do, this desired result forms the basis to successfully implement the remaining steps. Once the organization is clear on the desired results, they need to identify what within the organization is Top 10 with respect to the vision and what is Bottom 10. Top 10 refers to the activities that are currently being done that are working toward achieving the desired result, whereas Bottom 10 is the activities that are being performed that work in opposition to the vision. Keep in mind what is defined as Top 10 and Bottom 10 is NOT absolute. Top 10 does not mean “good” and Bottom 10 mean “bad”, Top 10 simply means it is supporting the vision and Bottom 10 is working against it. Top 10 and Bottom 10 may easily flip-flop when the desired result is changed.

A company going through a creative process considers rigid processes and procedures to be cumbersome, Bottom 10 weaknesses whereas a company going through a cost-cutting exercise considers the same actions to be Top 10. What defines Top 10 and Bottom 10 is how those actions fit relative to the desired result. A Top 10 behavior is one that currently exists that supports the desired result. A Bottom 10 behavior is one that currently opposes the desired result.

Once the Top 10 and Bottom 10 have been identified, the next step is to neutralize the Bottom 10. This means that the organization spends the MINIMAL amount of resources to prevent the Bottom 10 action from opposing the desired result. This exercise is not about converting weaknesses to strengths nor is it about try to eliminate weaknesses. Weaknesses will always exist in every organization at every level. The goal here is to mitigate the opposition toward the desired result with the minimum use of resources. Using minimum resources is the key, if you spend too many resources on this group you create a strong case for having the Bottom 10 take control of the organization.

With the Bottom 10 neutralized you have eliminated the strongest force that is preventing you from achieving the desired result. Next, we take aim at the Top 10, which is already helping the organization move toward the direction of vision. We want to accelerate that movement. While the goal was to reduce the resources spent on the Bottom 10 to the minimal amount, the goal for the Top 10 is the opposite. We want to increase the amount of resources spent to empower this group. As this group becomes more empowered, the Majority 80 is likely to follow their lead.

A recent example of this is the financial collapse of 2008. The initial practice of offering questionable subprime mortgage rates initially was an uncommon Bottom 10 practice. As it garnered more attention it became an acceptable, common practice that was required just to keep pace with your competitors. This is an example of how the Majority 80 followed the empowered lead of the Bottom 10. Eventually, after living as an unsustainable industry the entire thing collapsed. Every organization operates in the same way. Spend the bulk of your resources on the Bottom 10 and you get collapse. Spend the bulk of your resources empowering the Top 10 and performance continuously improves.

The Olympics perfectly illustrates this point. Athletes are continually honing their skills that they are already world class. The result is every four years more Olympic records fall simply because with the athletic world, they constantly focus on their strengths. A baseball team is not well served trying to make its pitcher the best hitter on the team.

There are only two reasons why an organization will not hit its desired results. First, the Bottom 10 is too great, that is, the force working against the vision is too strong to overcome. Second, the Top 10 is not strong enough to propel the organization to the level it wants. By targeting both ends you rapidly improve performance. Neutralize the Bottom 10, then empower the Top 10. The approach does not require more resources but simply shifting resources that would normally be applied at the Bottom 10 to be reallocated to the Top 10.