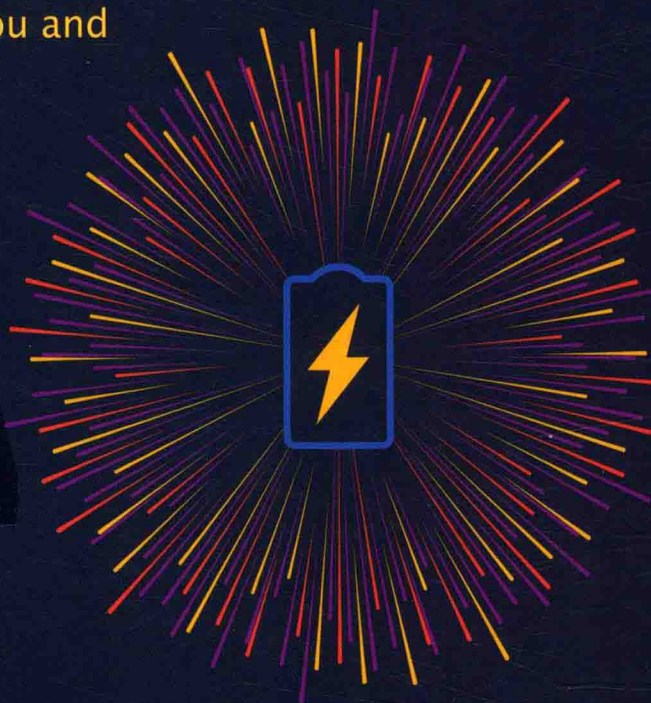


"A trove of ideas, insights and tools to guide you towards those areas of passion in your life, that will not only bring you greater personal satisfaction in your job, but also enable you to have greater impact at work."

Stuart Crabb, Director of Learning, Facebook

# Optimize Your Strengths

Use your leadership strengths to get the best out of you and your team



James Brook and  
Dr Paul Brewerton

WILEY

# **Optimize Your Strengths**

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the best out of you and your team**

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**WILEY**

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*"In today's pressurized workplaces, it's easy to forget to do the important stuff when it comes to leadership – knowing your strengths and how to use them, dealing with the things that may derail you, and becoming a great talent spotter so that you can lead through others. This book reminds us all about the most important leadership lessons and gives us a road map for putting them into action."*

**Michael Brooke, Head of Innovation, BNP Paribas Global Markets**

*"Discovering what your strengths are and building a work experience, and ultimately a career around them is one of the greatest opportunities afforded to readers of this book. Authors James Brook and Paul Brewerton have amassed a trove of ideas, insights and tools to guide the reader towards those areas of passion in their life, that will not only bring them greater personal satisfaction in their jobs, but also enable them to have greater impact at work, and ultimately in other areas of their life."*

**Stuart Crabb, Director of Learning, Facebook**

*"As a former Olympic medalist and current Olympic coach, I can't agree more with a strengths-based strategy. There is just so much more potential in people's strengths rather than fussing at the edges with their weaknesses. In addition, people are much happier working to their strengths and I know that happy athletes make better athletes. Paul and James' novel way of demonstrating the power of strengths and its four habits to build powerful leadership teams is captivating and like all good novels, very difficult to put down. I strongly recommend this book to all leaders and leaders to be."*

**Bill Barry, Managing Partner, Personal Best International Ltd**

*"Optimize Your Strengths is written as a fable, but it is based on reality. It describes the journey of a leader who moves from one worldview to another. Many people have had such epiphanies, but few have had the tools to move from enlightenment to execution to excellence. This book provides a practical toolkit for making that happen and achieving on-going success."*

**Mike Pegg, Author and Founder, The Strengths Foundation**

*"Brook and Brewerton offer four habits to stretch yourself beyond being an ordinary Joe at work. Optimize Your Strengths along with Joe on the path of possibility with shared vision, sparked engagement, skilled execution and sustained progress. Warning: This book may be habit forming and work may never be so limiting again."*

**David Zinger, Founder and Host of the 5000 member, Employee Engagement Network**

*"If you are serious about embarking on a journey to 'stretch' yourself and move forward professionally and personally, this book will be invaluable. James and Paul outline a positive and powerful approach to building on your strengths and addressing limitations. Through this enjoyable yet challenging story we're able to see the reality of just how transformational a change in thinking and behaviour can be. This is an important book which I would highly recommend to leaders and those aspiring to leadership."*

**Dr Rebecca Newton, Visiting Fellow, Department of Management,  
London School of Economics and Political Science**

*"A key question for those who want to help others is how to get new ideas across in a fun, interesting way which allows them to be painlessly absorbed. Brook and Brewerton achieve this by drawing on the inherent attraction of our brain to a good story. This book is immensely readable, packed with great information in an easy to digest style. I think managers, leaders and trainers alike will love this book, and I highly recommend it for those interested in developing their 'leadership edge'."*

**Sarah Lewis, Psychologist, Author and Appreciative Inquiry Consultant**

# Acknowledgements

This book has been over 18 months in the making and would not be finished without the contribution, inspiration and support of a large number of people.

Our deepest gratitude goes out to Nicki Hayes, who helped us transform this work from its rough early form to the polished story you are about to read. She demonstrated diligence and good humour throughout, exercising tremendous flexibility and talent in responding to our demanding expectations.

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James and Paul, 2016

# Foreword

There are many parallels between elite sport and business leadership, from which we can draw valuable inspiration to help navigate through today's increasingly turbulent and competitive business environment.

Just like top-performing athletes, effective business leaders have very different characters and strengths. They spend time analysing their strengths and natural abilities and find a place where they can shine. For business leaders, this also means using their strengths to free up and optimize the collective talents and abilities of team members in pursuit of a compelling vision.

However, the truly outstanding leaders don't stop there. Through hard work, dedication and continuous stretch – of themselves, others and the organization – they ensure they are always looking for ways to improve and take advantage of new opportunities. Like Olympic gold medalists, they don't rest on their laurels when they achieve success. They look to the next challenges and work hard to move beyond their comfort zone, inspiring others to do the same. Olympians know that, in their pursuit of gold, it is unlikely that they will be enjoying what they are doing all of the time. They engage in training routines that sometimes sap their energy and can't be delegated to others.

They must also learn to tackle their weaker areas through hard work and by drawing on their strengths and those of others, including their



## FOREWORD

coach, colleagues and teammates. In business it is no different. Effective leaders remain mindful of their strengths to boost their confidence, resourcefulness and energy to overcome performance blockers. They tap into the talents of those around them, using their strengths to compensate for any areas of weakness.

I recommend this book because it is one of the few I have read that focuses on strengths building and provides practical guidance to help leaders discover their unique leadership edge, develop productive habits and achieve peak performance. Through understanding and practising the habits in this book, leaders can bring the best of themselves to their roles, inspiring passion, innovation and engagement in those they lead.

Kriss Akabusi, MBE, FPSA  
Soldier, Olympic Athlete, Television Presenter  
and Professional Speaker

# Introduction

There are myriad different leadership models and approaches, many of which are highly prescriptive about the type of personality and qualities you need in order to be an effective leader. For example, qualities like charisma, persuasiveness, emotional intelligence and courage are often highlighted as essential qualities for leadership effectiveness and success.

However, recent research shows that successful leaders have very different personalities and qualities that they draw on in achieving their results. What they do have in common though is a true understanding of and ability to leverage their “leadership edge” (their unique strengths, abilities and skills) to influence and inspire others to achieve extraordinary results.

Effective leadership is also about positive stretch – stretching yourself and your team to push the boundaries and achieve in the upper range of your collective strengths. This is particularly relevant in today’s competitive and evolving environment, where organizations (private, public and voluntary) are being challenged to do more with less, to work more efficiently by optimizing the discretionary effort, innovation and engagement of their workforce.

Our experience and research show that effective leaders master the art and science of “stretch”. They adapt to environmental changes whilst adhering to the four Stretch Leadership<sup>TM</sup> Habits. They establish

## INTRODUCTION

a clear “picture of success” for their own development and progression and that of their teams and the wider organization by *Sharing Vision* (the first Stretch Leadership™ Habit). They simplify this shared vision into manageable stretch goals ensuring buy-in from all stakeholders through the habit of *Sparking Engagement*. They *Skilfully Execute* (the third Stretch Leadership™ Habit) the road map to achieve their vision, celebrating success and *Sustaining Progress* (the final Stretch Leadership™ Habit) and positive energy throughout. In short, they push the boundaries of thinking and possibility, looking for new and innovative ways of doing things to achieve the organization’s goals, while advancing their own career.

### STYLE OF THE BOOK

This book is intended to be a practical and accessible work of fiction, rather than an academic text. It follows the journey of a leader with a deficit (or weakness-oriented) mindset gaining insight and experience about how to lead more effectively through stretching and optimizing his own strengths, as well as the strengths of his team, to achieve outstanding results.

The objective of this book is to highlight powerful concepts, principles and techniques of the strengths-based approach to achieving peak performance. We hope that our story brings these concepts to life in a relevant and engaging way. Whilst the narrative does not delve into the finer details of such models, we have included them as part of a resource and learning toolbox in the appendix of the book.

Although based on actual research and experiences from our own work and coaching, the characters and organization described in this

## INTRODUCTION

book are fictional and do not reflect any specific person or organization. Whilst the story centres on a “for-profit” organization, the principles and concepts can be applied to any organization irrespective of the nature, purpose or size of the institution, as we have experienced over the past 20 years through extensive research and leadership development experience.

*“The leader’s role is to free people, not control them – to free their strengths, ideas, energy and value, rather than straightjacketing them with bureaucracy.”*

Tony Hsieh, Managing Director, Zappos

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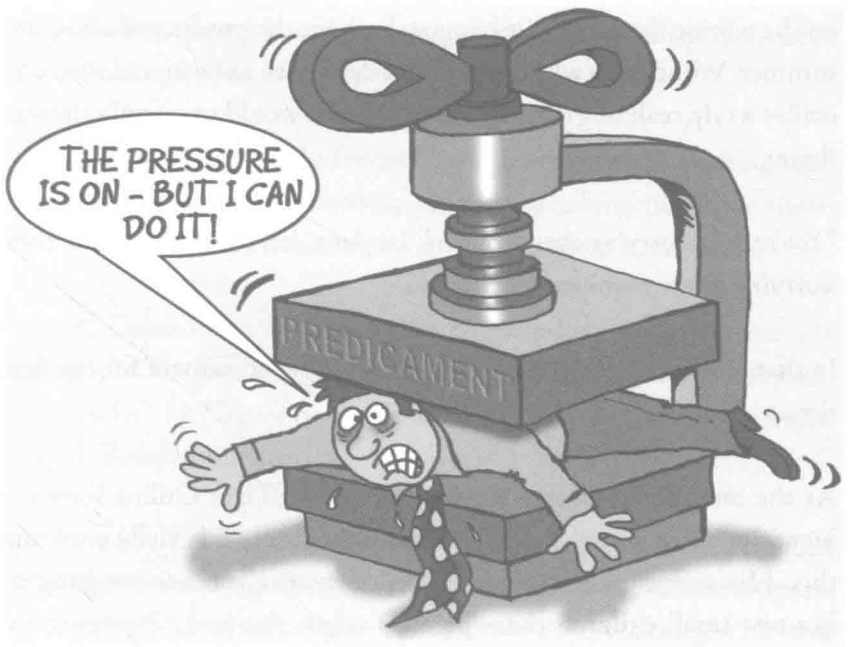
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## Chapter 1

# The Leadership Edge

In which Joe comes to terms with his predicament and challenges his beliefs about leadership...





Joe hangs up the phone on Kelly, his new boss, and walks slowly to his office window. Gazing thoughtfully across the park, he focuses on the wilting flowers in the hanging baskets, the product of a hot, dry summer. Wondering why the park wardens have not watered them, he smiles wryly, realizing that his estranged wife would say, if only she was there:

*"You're only worrying about the park wardens, Joe, because it's easier than worrying about your own problems..."*

In that second, he feels the full weight of his predicament for the first time.

As the recently appointed European head of Tiger Online Recruitment, Joe faces many challenges. His phone call with Kelly confirms this. His attention is momentarily drawn to a mother laughing as her two small children chase pigeons across the park. Frowning, he remembers his personal situation too, a situation he prefers not to think about.

"My life," thinks Joe, "is spinning out of control..."