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ASPIRE: A Model for Building Cultures Where Everyone Can Flourish

In this article, the author reflects, as a practitioner, on a collaboration between her, her business partner, and Dr Sue Roffey in which they created a tool to help people explore and understand their context. Inspired by the strengths cards they had already designed and Dr Roffey's ASPIRE model of flourishing, they worked together to create a framework for groups to use for conversations of hope and appreciation.

This is the story of a collaboration that started with a conversation at a conference dinner.

But we need to go back a few steps before we get to that.

I'm an occupational psychologist by training and, for the last twenty years or so, I've been drawing on positive psychology, solution-focused approaches and Appreciative Inquiry for my work in organisations. More specifically, a lot of my time is spent helping people to better understand and utilise their strengths.

My business partner Martin Galpin and I, as Work Positive, do this slightly differently from a lot of people. Rather than using questionnaires to help our clients work out their strengths profile using a pre-defined taxonomy of strengths, we developed the At My Best Strengths cards. It is a simple set of cards with single words on one side and images on the other. These words and images provide prompts for story-telling, allowing people to define their strengths in their own terms.

That's because we want people to truly own their strengths. We recognise that asking people to describe their strengths using their own language and context helps them feel a sense of agency, which in turn enables personal development, behaviour change, and self-efficacy. To use a phrase attributed to Joshua Heschel, often used by David Cooperrider and others in relation to Appreciative Inquiry, "words create worlds".

The process itself is energising and engaging.

What I love about this organic approach to the exploration of strengths is that the process itself is energising and engaging. The people I work with get to feel, right from the outset, the positive emotions that accompany strengths-based approaches. There is little need to explain the benefits of shifting the focus to asking questions around what is working – they are experiencing the benefits through the process of identifying their strengths.

Similarly, describing strengths using their own choice of vocabulary is immediately beneficial – they don't have to do any mental or linguistic gymnastics to convert idiosyncratic language into something more applicable to their personal circumstances.

Put simply, giving people a series of simple prompts whilst providing a structure to work within provides a very personalised, tailored way for people to identify and explore their strengths.

Clearly it isn't an approach to use if the need is to systematically benchmark people for assessment purposes, but if the aim is to embed strengths-based approaches into behaviour or culture, then our process role-models the behaviours that are being encouraged.

The process is part of the change

As with Appreciative Inquiry, the process is part of the change.

By using the simple card prompts to focus attention on what is already working and encouraging people to generate narratives around when they are at their best, the process actively demonstrates what we are looking to achieve.

We've evolved our approach to strengths.

Over the years, we've evolved our approach to strengths: we use this appreciative discovery process not just for one-to-one coaching but also with leaders to help them to better understand team members' strengths and, with teams, groups, teachers and classes, to have conversations about collective strengths. We're privileged to have seen some wonderful "lightbulb moments" and the building of connections within teams as people have explored and appreciated their own and others' strengths.

But there was always something missing from the picture. Facilitating people to have a better understanding of their strengths can make a huge difference to performance and wellbeing, but the context and culture someone is living and working within is a big part of the picture too. Whilst we can all influence our environment to some extent, we are significantly dependent on others for the situation we find ourselves in.

'Your strengths cards are great, but they're all about "me" what about "we" and "us"?'

Sue Roffey

We are focused on helping people to thrive.

That brings us to the dinner conversation I had at the conference.

The conversation was with Dr Sue Roffey, an international expert in creating educational settings where everyone can flourish, someone I've long admired. Sue's starting comment was:

"Your strengths cards are great, but they're all about 'me'; what about 'we' and 'us'?"

As a psychologist, my focus is on helping people to be at their best at work – whatever kind of organisation they might be part of. Sue is an educational psychologist by background, so her focus is the classroom or school, and all of the people – children and adults – within that.

Nevertheless, my work and Sue's have much in common: we are focused on helping people to thrive. We share a number of values, including a strong belief in the value of agency (everyone having a voice and a choice, the ability to influence and take action) and community (and the importance of relationships and connections). We also both recognise that focusing on positive outliers and stories of success leads to very different outcomes than when focus is concentrated around what's not working.

Sue's comment about the At My Best Strengths cards being all about "me" rather than "we" and "us" made me stop and think. My immediate response was, "I get what you're saying, but they aren't limited to individual development". Some of the most powerful ways my business partner and I use our cards are in groups to focus on team strengths and to strengthen connections between people through shared appreciation.

But Sue's comment was about much more than that. She was talking about culture and "how things are done around here". Over a number of years, Sue has evolved a model that she has been using in classrooms to talk about cultures that enable everyone to thrive.

Grounded in research and best practice, the [ASPIRE](#) model identifies six principles of flourishing cultures: Agency; Safety; Positivity; Inclusion; Respect; Equity. Each principle can be described in terms of the beliefs, feelings, and behaviours that exist in cultures where that principle is being lived in practice. Sue has documented extensively the theory and research she has drawn on to create the ASPIRE model (Roffey, 2024). As well as specific evidence underpinning the rationale for each of the ASPIRE principles, there are some well-established, overarching theories that the model draws on, such as self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Each principle can be described in terms of beliefs, feelings, and behaviours.

Agency	Agency is about empowerment. Having agency means recognising you have a voice and a choice, and that you exercise those; acting in a way that enables you to shape, rather than just react to, what is happening. It involves acting with awareness of the broader context, rather than only seeing your own perspective.
Safety	This is about having an environment that keeps people safe from physical harm and mental distress. In a safe environment people are accepted for themselves, are able to make contributions and take risks without fearing punishment, blame, or humiliation.
Positivity	This principle is about where the balance of focus is. It's about creating a culture that values and encourages a positive mindset, positive emotions, strengths-based conversations, and solution-focused actions.
Inclusion	This is celebrating everyone's unique place in the world and valuing our shared humanity. It's about appreciating diversity and encouraging behaviours and practices that increase a sense of belonging for everyone.
Respect	This is about valuing and giving dignity to the whole person, recognising and showing consideration for differences in perspectives, contexts, feelings, and needs. It is treating others in the way they prefer to be treated.
Equity	One size does not fit all. Equitable environments recognise differing needs. They flex to provide and encourage tailored accommodations to enable everyone to achieve optimal levels of contributions or outcome.

The chance dinner conversation with Sue was followed with more chats and an idea emerged. Could we work together to produce a tool that would do the same for conversations around culture as our strengths cards had done for conversations around strengths?

From our point of view at Work Positive, we were keen to produce a tool that was valuable in all settings – not just education. Sue's ASPIRE model is just as relevant in the workplace as the classroom.

Bringing the ASPIRE model to life

Over the following months Sue, myself and my business partner Martin worked together to produce a prototype set of cards. Our focus was on bringing the ASPIRE model to life, making sure the language and design we used meant it

remained both accessible to children in the classroom and relevant to leaders in the boardroom.

We were lucky enough to work with a fabulous group of people who volunteered to be part of the piloting process and try out our prototype in their own settings and give us feedback. Their extensive wisdom and experience gave us a range of insights into how we could improve the cards – from the colours we used, through to the definitions of the principles and the guidance that accompanied the deck.



Prototyping and piloting the cards

We undertook a two-stage piloting process, which enabled us to improve our initial prototype after a first round of trialling, and then gain more nuanced feedback on the improved prototype before producing our final card deck. This process gave us valuable understanding into how the cards worked in a broad range of educational, workplace, and community contexts. We learned a lot along the way, including that many of the tenets that had been built into the strengths cards also worked very well with the [ASPIRE Culture Cards](#), perhaps unsurprisingly as many of these basic principles are useful guides for any development process.

Keep prompts simple

Each card has a simple phrase on it, carefully curated and piloted. The phrases are designed to prompt reflection and discussion, allowing people to add their own detail and depth based on their own context. In this way the cards themselves encourage the agency and ownership referenced in the model itself. For each ASPIRE principle there is a card that gives a short definition of the principle plus six other cards – each one describing an associated belief, feeling or behaviour. For example, a statement associated with the Agency principle is “What we do makes a difference”, whilst one from the Positivity principle is “We feel appreciated here”. These statements give a basis for exploration of each principle; they allow people to tell stories about how the principles play out in their environment and to build a narrative around what needs to happen for everyone to be able to flourish.

The phrases are designed to prompt reflection and discussion.

Use a semi-structured process

Our cards provide a structure for the conversation, but there is flexibility in how they are used and how discussions evolve. This flexibility allows individual needs to be met and different contexts to be taken into consideration, key to ensuring the equity and agency described in the ASPIRE model. We’ve had some wonderful feedback from facilitators using the cards about how having a framework gives

A framework gives people confidence ... but provides enough flexibility for a group to make the process and resulting outcomes their own.

people confidence in what is being asked of them but provides enough flexibility for a group to make the process and resulting outcomes their own.

Make sure language is accessible

Inclusion is one of the ASPIRE principles. Making sure the language used on the cards is straightforward but not patronising is one of the ways they embody that principle in practice. We've tried as far as possible to use everyday words that both children in the classroom and adults in the workplace will relate to. Having phrases and definitions that are as inclusive as possible and minimising the barriers to using the cards is an essential part of them being fit for purpose. If we, as the facilitators, need to interpret the cards that detracts from our aim of making sure the group recognise that they are the authorities in their culture; they should be the ones driving conversations about what they need.

Encourage playfulness

Embedding playfulness into the design of the tool is one way we encompassed the ASPIRE principles of positivity and safety. From the outset we decided to make the cards hexagon-shaped; they are aesthetically pleasing, nice to hold, and you can fit them together to tell stories or demonstrate patterns. It sounds frivolous, but our experience is these things matter. When facilitating teams, activities that are fun and engaging in a safe and meaningful way encourage more positive interactions between people; that leads to stronger connections, greater openness, more psychological safety, and better quality conversations result.



You can fit them together to tell stories or demonstrate patterns.

Use the active voice

The phrases on the cards use active voice in the present tense. This helps to keep the language simple but also encourages users to engage in a conversation based around their personal lived experience, rather than hearsay or hypotheticals. It's a way of encouraging the ASPIRE principles of agency and inclusion.

We've heard many stories about how the positive, inclusive, action-oriented tone of the cards has actively shaped the conversations people have had. One of our trialists worked with a team that was experiencing a particularly difficult period with people struggling to be positive about any aspect of their work. Previous conversations had quickly degenerated into complaining sessions that had left people feeling even more de-energised. Using the ASPIRE Culture Cards changed all of that; the team had a much more supportive and productive conversation, which left them feeling more hopeful.



The positive, inclusive, action-oriented tone of the cards actively shapes the conversations

Collaborating to develop the ASPIRE Culture Cards has been an overwhelmingly positive experience, and we're hugely grateful to everyone who has informed our learning.

There are a few observations that particularly stand out. The overriding one comes back to that conference dinner conversation and the importance of “we” and “us”. Now more than ever it is important for us to be talking about and shining a light on behaviours and environments that enable people to flourish.

In many parts of the world and within many professions, poor mental health is at unprecedented levels. With the stresses and strains of everyday life and the many national and global challenges we are facing, it is not unusual to hear people talking of a sense of helplessness. Numerous reports such as the World Happiness Report 2025 point to more people feeling lonely and relationships suffering because of the ways we are now leading our lives. Enabling people to connect over the cultures they help to shape and giving them agency to create change can make a real difference to lived experiences.

Our experience on this project is that the solutions don't have to be complicated. Simple, intuitive tools that encourage connection and conversation can build positive narratives that change people's outlook. And if you can design tools to embody the principles you are trying to embed, you can make sure change begins from the moment the inquiry starts.

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