



Summary Report: Alex Kuchnir

The one day conference organised by Benchmark for Business allowed managers, chief executives and industry professionals attending, to listen to the thought provoking ideas from two extraordinary thought-leaders. Offering two different approaches on "*Finding your Strengths*", both Tom Rath and Tara Swart forced delegates to rethink simple, yet game changing thought processes but also complex theories applied to everyday life and business.

Bob Mackenzie of Benchmark for Business introduced the first speaker of the day - **Tom Rath** - along with his many accolades including number one New York Times bestseller, Amazon's number one selling book in 2013, Apple iTunes best nonfiction book of the year and one of The Globe and Mail's top three business books of 2013. Bob also touched on one of the influences on Rath's work and thoughts: the diagnosis at the age of 16 that Rath had VHL syndrome, a rare genetic disorder that causes cancer cells to appear in various part of the body. Since the time of the diagnosis, Rath has been researching and experimenting with various ways of slowing down the growth of tumors in his in kidneys, adrenal glands, pancreas and spine.

Rath's engaging thoughts and ideas centred around the different levels of happiness and wellbeing and how these create difference, meaning and influence in the world through little actions. The three hour session led by Rath covered three main topics - **Meaning, Moments and Energy**.

**Meaning:**

The initial part of the session focused on creating meaning in everyday life and spending time focusing on personal strengths as well as the strengths of those around you. "*How can you be more of who you already are? Don't focus on the weaknesses.*"

Rath informed the audience of the varying levels of employee engagement and the effect managers can have on these employee engagement levels. For example, employees are actively disengaged if a manager ignores both their strengths and weaknesses and a good manager can eliminate disengagement. Work induced stress damages the body and the quality of a manager impacts on health more than your doctor.

Rath discussed the importance of focusing on people's strengths or they may lose confidence. The best leaders are NOT well rounded; they have specific strengths that cause them to become a leader. But the best teams ARE well rounded (a collection of people with different strengths).

Employees want from leaders: trust, compassion, stability and hope. With this, leaders are faced with two challenges:

- 1 - finding hidden talents that one hasn't yet seen themselves
- 2 - helping people imagine a positive future NOT reciting what is wrong

When questions were opened up to the audience an interesting question arose.

Q: "*How do you get the boards to think about engagement and take it seriously?*"

A: Employee engagement takes time to become truly present in an organisation. Investment in employees becomes part of the corporate brand which in turn has a positive effect on customer experience and this allows a board to quantify the return on investment.

### **Moments:**

The next segment of Rath's session revolved around moments. We experience almost 20,000 moments each day, however human nature allows bad moments to outweigh the good ones.

Meaningful moments and interactions in the workplace are specific, individualised and deserved. Specific interactions offer employees behaviour to repeat. Individualised moments create a lasting impact and deserved interactions offer a sincere and trustworthy interaction. Development of another human being is sacred and strong interactions lay the foundations for development.

### **Energy:**

During this part of the session, it was clear to see how Rath's medical condition influences his work. Rath's diagnosis affected his daily choices - "*live like tomorrow depends on it*".

Positive life choices e.g. diet, exercise and sleep lead to upward spirals and "*health starts with a series of small choices*" - you have more energy after a good night's sleep and eating good food.

We can set behavioural defaults by snacking on the right foods and making the right decisions and in order to stay active we must take responsibility for engineering physical activity and movement into daily activities. Big employers have the opportunity to do good by encouraging health, sleep and a healthy diet and can leverage these networks in order to build healthy organisations.

Rath stated that in order to create sustainable health and wellbeing one must focus on their own health first and people will follow. It is also important to invest in interactions and relationships and to serve a larger purpose - create more meaning through daily experiences to lead to better life evaluation.

Rath delivered a profound presentation which allowed the audience to reflect and look at themselves as others see them whilst offering small pieces of advice to serve as a catalyst for change.

The second thought leader of the day came in the shape of **Tara Swart** - who began her career as a medical doctor and psychologist and recently became an MIT faculty member. Swart's three hour session centred on Neuroscience in the context of business and fostering the strengths from our brains to achieve leading sustainable performance.

Swart used her medical training, experience and humorous anecdotes to inform the audience of simple yet effective tips to use on a day to day basis. For example, out of the five human senses, smell is the most emotive sense which is often why we can recall memories based on a particular smell and lavender is a strong neuro-settler Swart recommends for her clients. Interoception is the sense of what's going on inside the body and Yoga is a great tool for engaging both brain and body.

An interesting topic of conversation arose around how different generations are working for very different reasons and leaders must learn how to motivate these different people in the most appropriate way.

Swart successfully engaged the audience by using a variety of exercises that allowed the participants to analyse their basic human emotions when remembering a good memory and a bad memory. An emotional anecdote was shared by an audience member about his expedition and aim to climb a mountain a month in memory of his wife whilst raising money for charity.

More scientifically, the different hormones and their effect on the body were discussed. For example, for oxytocin to be transferred person to person there has to be physical contact or laughter. Secondly, too much cortisol erodes the immune system meaning high stress levels cause colds, flu and illnesses as severe as heart attacks and cancer.

Meditating and taking a daytime nap resets our cognitive function and allows brain activity to be at the same level as after a full night's sleep. Mindfulness meditation allows more time to register what is happening – providing relaxed alertness as well as mental and emotional coping.

Embedding this type of behaviour in an organisation takes time, trust and relationship building. Swart reiterated Rath's point of concentrating on your strengths but always continue to flex your creativity. Within organisations, for behaviour change to take place there are four steps to success: raising awareness, focused attention, deliberate practice and a therapeutic relationship.

Both thought-leaders were highly engaging, and offered unusual insights into the external perspectives of employees and the inner workings of everyone's strongest tool - the brain.