Are you bringing your best self to work everyday?
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About ten years ago, my colleagues and I published an article in Harvard Business Review entitled, “How to Play to Your Strengths” (available on this page: https://hbr.org/2005/01/how-to-play-to-your-strengths). Our article introduced a new approach toward strengths-based development, which incorporated the Reflected Best Self Exercise™ (RBSE), a tool we developed to help people contribute maximally to their organizations and communities. The RBSE is a holistic, strengths-based approach toward personal development, in which people learn how to tap into their highest potential by analyzing their previous contributions. “How to Play to Your Strengths” has been among the most widely read articles in HBR since it was published. Thousands of people are using the RBSE globally in corporate trainings, team building, executive leadership programs, and in graduate and undergraduate courses in a variety of disciplines. Research articles have been published that further document the impact of the RBSE for adolescents and adults, and uncover the mechanisms that create such a powerful impact from this unique feedback experience.

Despite the popularity of the RBSE and corresponding articles, I still encounter a high level of skepticism and anxiety when I invite people of all ages, cultures, and professions to bring their best selves to work. How can such a “positive” conversation provoke such angst, even among highly accomplished executives? I’ve learned, through my consulting, teaching, and research, that discovering, engaging and developing our best selves may be, in fact, the most challenging Alignment Quest™ that we will ever undertake.

As you embark upon your own Alignment Quest™, here are three things you can do to empower your best self, one contribution at a time.

1) **Get out of your comfort zone.** Ironically, the title of our article “How to play to your strengths” may give aspiring and accomplished leaders the wrong impression about how much intensity, dedication and growth are required for empowering best selves. Far too many people take the phrase “play to your strengths” literally; people assume that they can simply rest on their laurels, play to their strong suit, stay in their lane, and coast along the path to comfort and convenience. On the contrary, the Alignment Quest™ is a deeply reflective journey that embraces the radical personal and environmental changes that most people encounter throughout their careers. Those who think the keys to success lie in their comfort zone will be sadly disappointed in hypercompetitive marketplaces that demand continual innovation.

The Alignment Quest™ is a personal mission that connects past, present and future discoveries of value-creating opportunities, in order to empower best selves. Thinking about best selves makes many people uncomfortable. Talking about best selves makes them even more uncomfortable! Their discomfort is often due a lack of experience, coupled with false norms of humility. Once people come face to face with their best selves, and fully
examine their own potential for extraordinary contributions, they can no longer blame their circumstances or surroundings for their limited contributions. The Alignment Quest™ reveals people’s capabilities for contributing in the workplace and beyond, and clarifies their commitment to value-creation in various domains of life. In other words, empowering best selves means raising the bar. The more people learn about their best selves, the more they expect of themselves. It’s nearly impossible to take a “business as usual” approach to work after learning more about best-self empowerment. As people recognize the conscious and subconscious choices they are making in pursuit of best-self engagement vs. their comfort zone, they begin to empower themselves to reject the status quo and co-create the conditions in which their best selves can thrive and flourish.

2) **Become [more] curious about your best self.** Most people let societal norms of humility force them into patterns of “playing small.” They live beneath their potential because they don’t want to risk coming across as a narcissist or egotistical maniac. We have numerous opportunities to learn more about our best selves, yet we ignore these opportunities (and our best selves altogether). What can you do the next time you catch a glimpse of your best self in action? Instead of downplaying your contributions, try to learn more about how you can strengthen them in the future. For instance, imagine your colleague says, “Great job” as you are leaving a meeting in which you presented on behalf of your team. How might you respond? If you are more concerned with appearing humble than learning and growing, you’ll downplay the comment (e.g., “It was no big deal; he was just being polite.”) But if you are seriously pursuing best-self empowerment, you’ll take advantage of this opportunity to learn more about your best self. Start by stating your intention. “I appreciate the fact that you took the time to share your feedback about the meeting. I’d like to learn more about your observations. Perhaps you can provide suggestions on how I can be even more effective going forward. Would you mind talking to me about my presentation for a few minutes?” Note how you are being very clear and explicit regarding your goals for continued development and growth, even in your areas of strength. Instead of dismissing the compliment, frame it as a developmental opportunity, and take the initiative to learn more. Follow up with targeted questions. “Can you help me to understand which aspects of the presentation went well, and how I can replicate it in the future?” Then, write down whatever they tell you!

If we don’t devote our time toward codifying strength-based lessons, our human inclination will be to reduce such conversations to vague memories of affirmation. Typically, affirmations are fleeting moments in a life-long catalogue of critiques that exist on an instant replay reel in people’s hearts and minds. Feeding your curiosity about best-self empowerment can help you to be at your best more often, and to make your best self even better. As an aspect of your identity, your best self should change and evolve over time, such that your best self tomorrow will be more highly developed and making even stronger contributions than your best self 5 years ago. Study your successes with the sole intent of discovering how your strengths equip you to offer distinctive ideas, analyses, virtues, and connections that can improve the quality of your relationships and contributions. Use these insights about your contribution potential to enrich the functioning and productivity of
organizations and communities. In other words, do more than play to your strengths. Keep asking yourself (and others) how you can be at your best more often.

3) **Bring out the best in others.** Unfortunately, many people become so enthusiastic about playing to their strengths, that they neglect to consider the damaging side effects of self-interested pursuits. Our core message about best-self empowerment, published a decade ago is even more important today. When we are at our best, we bring out the best in others. By definition, best-self empowerment is a collective force. At our best, we create value through relationships that benefit social systems. How can leaders use their understanding of best-self empowerment to strengthen their teams? The process begins with providing quality feedback to others. Don’t just offer empty praise and pats on the back. Take the time to have thoughtful, evidence-based contribution conversations with people. When you foster mutual understanding, it increases collaboration and cohesion in workplaces. The more people know about each other’s strengths, limitations and values, the more effectively they can work together. Contribution conversations are positive and constructive ways to build mutual understanding within teams; they help people to be more honest about contributions and mistakes, and identify opportunities for value creation. As with any form of performance management, leaders must prioritize team learning. Although damage control and course-corrections often dominate performance management conversations, leaders can build trust and maximize engagement through best-self empowerment. Dale Carnegie and John Maxwell likened the process of developing people to mining for gold: you must move tons of dirt in the process, but you go in looking for the gold, not the dirt. Similarly, leaders who recognize and affirm others’ contributions can bring out the best in themselves and others more consistently.

**Remember, becoming your best self and bringing out the best in others is a life-long journey.** With courage, curiosity and commitment, leaders can use best-self empowerment to transform themselves and their organizations.
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Dr. Laura Morgan Roberts is an author, professor, researcher and organizational consultant. She is a full Professor of Psychology, Culture and Organization Studies in Antioch University’s Ph.D. Program in Leadership and Change. Laura has served on the faculties of several of the world’s top-ranked business schools, including Harvard, University of Michigan and Wharton. She is also a faculty affiliate of the Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship (UM, Ann Arbor) and the Center for Gender in Organizations (Simmons, Boston). Laura has earned accolades for her executive, MBA, and undergraduate business and psychology courses in leadership, organizational behavior, group dynamics, talent management, diversity and negotiations in the United States, Europe and Africa.

Laura has a BA in Psychology (highest distinction & Phi Beta Kappa) from the University of Virginia, and an MA and Ph.D. in Organizational Psychology from the University of Michigan.

Laura is the co-founder and CEO of RPAQ Solutions, Inc., an Atlanta-based research and consulting firm that brings strength-based practices to leaders who seek extraordinary performance and personal fulfillment. She is an architect of personal and professional alignment, who helps leaders to unlock pathways for constructing, sustaining and restoring positive identities at work.

A thought leader in the areas of authenticity, identity, diversity, strengths, and value creation, Laura has published Exploring Positive Identities and Organizations (Roberts & Dutton, Eds.), and dozens of top-ranked articles, book chapters, and case studies. Her publications are among the most popular products from Harvard Business School Publishing, and have been featured in several media outlets. Laura’s extensive scholarship, tools, and workshops help leaders to discover and enact their best selves in their professional and personal lives. Through research and consulting, Laura has developed The Alignment Quest™ framework, a scientifically grounded, action-oriented approach for strategically engaging your best self and bringing out the best in others within work organizations and beyond. She provides a collection of tools, case studies, and lectures that promote self-reflection, action planning, group discussion, and evidence-based practical wisdom.

Laura delivers workshops, lectures, keynote speeches and executive coaching on the following topics:

- Executive Presence
- Diversity & Inclusion
- Branding your Best Self
- Leading transformations
- Strength-based development
- Leading authentically
- Spiritual leadership
- Cultivating positive identities
- Personal leadership
- Managing visibility
- Customising your career path
- Leading best self engagement
Laura’s publications include the following books, book chapters, and articles:

- **Reclaiming your Best Self: Harnessing the Power of Positive Identities at Work**
- **Your Guide to the Alignment Quest™**
- **Cultivating positive identities**, (2014) In J. Dutton & G. Spreitzer (Eds.). *How to be a Positive Leader: Small Actions, Big Impact*. Berrett Koehler.