

# ENERGY

## The Hidden Strategic Asset

*by Valerie Nishi, a Consultant with the Refinery Leadership Partners Inc., heading up the Calgary, Alberta operations*

Recently I've had several inquiries on "time management" as a need for leadership development. Global competition and belt tightening have left many organizations with less resources to get the job done - putting the squeeze on front line and middle management.

The search for the time management Holy Grail has become somewhat of a cottage industry - articles, books and "quick fix" solutions abound. If only we could control that finite resource we all want more of. What I'm more interested in, however, is how we manage energy.

Energy is the capacity of a system to perform work or to change. It exists in several forms and according to the law of conservation of energy (remember grade 7 science class?) energy may transform from one form into another.

Most organizations in the knowledge economy rely heavily on people to create value in the system in which they operate. Examples of this value include new product design, customer relationships, cost saving processes, and leadership.

Energy is strategic because it can be a source of significant competitive advantage that is tough to duplicate. Think WestJet, who created a unique culture that called on all its employees ("WestJetters") to be "the little airline that could". WestJet harnessed the energy of its workforce to enable the company to play in the airline industry major leagues, redefine the customer experience, and reset higher operating benchmarks such as load factor and aircraft turnaround time.

Human beings, unlike machines, are not driven by a simple formula of input (with some calculation) equals output. People are complex, unique, mysterious, and marvelous creatures - capable of reaching great and unexpected heights.



I say this because I have seen it time and time again. When people connect strongly with what they are doing and who they are doing it with, they are willing to put out discretionary effort. They unleash energy and create capacity to perform at a new level, and their energy is often infectious to others around them. Consider the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver. Anyone who was in the city or even watching from afar could feel the fire that brought out the best, not only in the performance of Canadian athletes, but the performance of a city and a country.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a psychology professor and author, described transfer of energy in his ground-breaking book, *Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Flow is a state of concentration, absorption or involvement in the present situation, when individuals or groups are *in the zone*, or *in the groove* and can apply themselves completely to attain higher levels of performance and fulfillment. Think about the best team you've ever worked on, and chances are you felt inspired, connected, energized, and so focused you lost track of time.

If we can't create more time how can we transform and direct more energy?

To begin, where does human energy come from? According to Tony Schwartz, author and consultant, who co-authored the HBR article, "Manage Your Energy Not Your Time", human energy comes from four sources; the body, mind, emotions and spirit.

The body relates to physical energy that comes from good nutrition, health, exercise, sleep etc. The mind is our ability to think and organize our thoughts in an optimal way. The emotions include awareness and healthy regulation and expression of emotions. The spirit is about living consistent with our values and beliefs that bring meaning to our lives.

Schwartz' 5 year research project showed that individuals, teams and organizations can increase capacity to get more done in less time, by increasing energy. Participating groups who applied strategies to increase energy in these four dimensions, consistently experienced higher financial performance than control groups, and reported positive impact on relationships with clients and customers.

Between 2004 and 2008 I was fortunate to be part of a grassroots initiative called the Women's Leadership Forum - that attracted over 3000 professional women across Canada, to develop their leadership. What was fascinating to me was the level of energy among the volunteer teams that spread to the larger learning community of participants and corporate sponsors. This energy translated into rich and innovative development experiences, leadership success stories, new businesses, mentoring relationships, spin off projects and many other unanticipated outcomes. None of us had "extra time" on our hands, with busy careers, kids, and lives - but as the story goes, passion and energy come from doing what you love, and contributing to things that matter.

In organizational life our clients often find themselves in environments of serial and extreme change, suffering from overwhelm and fatigue. When we discuss prioritization strategies people often default to doing the things that are easiest, fighting the fires that scream loudest, or doing what prevents the worst consequences. While this may be a good short term survival strategy, chances are it does not generate the intrinsic motivation that fuels great performance and achievement .



In our coaching and consulting work at the Refinery we have observed two themes that present both issues and opportunities for managing energy.

The first is that many individuals, even at senior levels, have not done enough personal due diligence. That is, they have not adequately reflected on who they are, what is important to them, their strengths and purpose, what their vision and goals are, and how they're going to get there. When you discover what brings energy to your life – you can manage it more effectively. Often when people are exhausted, depleted, empty - it's because they have lost touch with what brings joy, meaning and purpose to their lives.

The second theme is that leaders are at risk in our results-oriented business culture, of putting too much emphasis on financial results and not enough on getting to know their employees, teams and peers. Building deep and trusting relationships is central to the ability to align the values, strengths and aspirations of individuals with those of the organization.

Perhaps the best advice is that there are no checklists, silver bullets or quick fixes for managing energy. Like “work-life balance” it’s a bit of a phantom we chase only to realize that it is an ongoing endeavor to monitor and adjust our priorities in an increasingly complex world, where each of us is constantly developing.

Are there some good guidelines?

1. Pay attention to what gives you energy and what depletes it. Have the courage to make good choices about what you focus on, in work and life. In particular be aware of energy vampires - people who

drain everyone around them with their neediness or negativity can be very contagious and toxic. Seek ways to avoid, address or remove them.

2. Be aware of whether you have a healthy balance of seeing the world as a glass half empty or half full. Do you have a positive yet realistic outlook on life? Choose your attitude and recognize your impact as a role model for others.
3. Within your sphere of influence and control, seek ways to align and connect the energy of individuals, teams, your organization, and even the larger community. Invest time in getting to know people on a deeper level - building relationships that will have enduring payback.

Managing time will continue to be an issue in our busy post-modern life, however noticing and acting on what gives us and others energy will help us align our precious resources with the things that matter most to ourselves, our teams, and organizations.

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