

Fueling Resilience:

Organizational Strategies for Building, Sustaining, and Replenishing Human Energy



Physical



Mental



Emotional



Spiritual

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Human Energy is the Currency of Change

Every change an organization implements is fueled by human energy. The impact of a change on an individual is determined by the amount of energy he or she must spend to fulfill the requirements of the change plus the amount of energy spent to regain a sense of control and emotional well-being.

Four kinds of energy are used to deal with the challenges of change:

- **Physical: Using the body to get things done.** This includes lifting heavy things, moving objects, staying awake for long periods of time, enduring physical discomfort, and other forms of physical exertion.
- **Mental: Thinking clearly and quickly.** This includes concentrating attention on something, learning a new way of doing things, figuring out how to solve a problem or overcome an obstacle, perform analyses or calculations, and other forms of mental exertion.
- **Emotional: Working with difficult feelings.** This includes maintaining or regaining motivation while overcoming negative thoughts and emotions (worry, anger, sadness, fear, loneliness, etc.), absorbing emotional blows, dealing with tough interpersonal situations, and other forms of emotional exertion.
- **Spiritual: Connecting with a sense of meaning and purpose.** This includes dealing with challenges to integrity, doing the right thing in the face of obstacles, facing threats to personally meaningful aspects of one's work, and other forms of spiritual exertion.

These forms of energy are interconnected--depletion of one can lead to deficits in other areas. For example, physical exhaustion can lead to increased errors or emotional outbursts.

Each change uses some combination of these energies. For example, the implementation of new technology may involve long hours (physical), learning new tools and procedures (mental), feeling frustrated or fearful when encountering problems (emotional), and losing one's status as an expert resource on the old system (spiritual).

When people face large changes, or multiple overlapping initiatives, they may not have enough energy to meet all the demands. In a separate series, I've talked about the causes, effects, and solutions for change overload. Here I would like to focus on the organization's role in helping individuals do three things:

- Plug energy leaks
- Replenish energy as needed
- Build energy capacity

These things enable organizations to build human energy sustainability, which is a benefit not only to the individuals in the organization--who can achieve better results without long-term depletion--but also to the organization itself, which is then able to implement more significant changes because its human resources have the energy required to complete them successfully.

An Organizational Checklist for Supporting Physical Energy

Physical energy is the cornerstone of human well-being. When physical energy is depleted, the other forms of energy are likely to be affected as well—people may not think as clearly; difficult emotions may be more difficult to deal with; meaning and purpose can seem distant. Although the ultimate responsibility for maintaining physical well-being rests with the individual, many things that organizations do can make it easier or more difficult for people to stay physically healthy.

With the help of my friend [Megan Neyer](#), a former Olympic diver who works with elite athletes and others to help them reach their potential, I have identified five building blocks of physical well-being:

- **Rest**
- **Nutrition**
- **Hydration**
- **Movement**
- **Breathing**

Here are some questions for leaders and change agents to consider regarding the organization's support for physical well-being:

Rest

- Does your work schedule allow individuals to have sufficient time for rest and sleep?
- Do the organization's norms encourage unusually long hours that limit people's ability to get sufficient rest?
- Are people expected to be constantly available outside normal working hours, or are they able to shut down technology to enable relaxation and uninterrupted sleep?

Nutrition

- When food is provided at meetings and events, does it include fresh, healthy options in addition to (or instead of) items that are high in sugar and carbohydrates?
- Do the organization's norms and practices encourage taking time to eat nutritious meals rather than grabbing quick and often unhealthy fast food or snacks (or skipping meals altogether)?
- Is there a place where people who bring their own food can store perishable items and heat meals?

Hydration

- Is high-quality water (fountains, bottles, etc.) readily available in the workplace at no or very low cost?
- Do organizational norms support and encourage consumption of water and hydrating foods such as fruits in meetings and in the workplace?
- Are bathroom facilities clean and readily available?

Movement

- Are people who do office work encouraged and supported in regularly taking time to stand, walk, and move around?
- Are there places available for people to walk, move, or exercise during breaks?
- Do working hours and organizational norms support individuals who would like to schedule workouts and other physical activities before or after work?

Breathing

- Does the pace of work allow breaks in the action that enable people to take time to relax and breathe deeply?
- Do leaders and others understand the importance of deep, relaxed breathing to well-being?
- Do people remind one another to breathe deeply when they notice others displaying signs of stress?

General

- Does the organization take steps to educate people about how to increase their physical well-being?
- Do leaders and managers encourage and support the physical well-being of their employees and serve as good role models?
- Does the organization sponsor wellness programs that encourage employees to increase their physical well-being?
- Does the organization ensure that the environment is physically safe?

An Organizational Checklist for Supporting Mental Energy

Mental energy is important for concentrating, thinking, and solving problems. When people are low on mental energy, they may feel overwhelmed, have trouble concentrating or staying alert, and make mistakes or poor decisions. Because the world of work is where many people encounter a large part of the mental stimulation they experience, and because mental acuity is critical to job performance, organizations have a particularly important role in creating an environment that supports mental energy. Here are some things to consider as you evaluate your organization's effectiveness in this area:

Attention

Human attention is a finite resource. Each thing that engages a person's mind drains a bit of this capacity. Organizations support strong mental energy when they help people use their attention in focused, intentional ways. Here are some questions for leaders and change agents to consider about the organization's support for *attention*.

Multitasking

- Do the organization's practices and norms encourage and enable people to focus on one thing at a time where possible?
- Do people understand that multitasking involves switching attention back and forth between different activities, and that extra energy is used to do this?
- Do leaders set realistic expectations about how many things can get done at once?

Distractions

- Does the organization's physical environment provide places where people can work without high levels of noise?
- Is it acceptable for people to set aside times when they turn off phone and email?
- Do people have ways of signaling to others that they should not be disturbed?

Systems

- Does the organization create processes and procedures that enable people to reduce unnecessary effort on routine tasks?
- Are people clear enough about their roles and responsibilities that they don't need to spend extra mental energy figuring out what to do or how to do it?
- Are materials and information stored in organized ways so people can easily find what they need?

Mental Activity

The human brain is capable of a wide variety of operations; each of them needs exercise to function at its highest potential. When people have a chance to regularly engage in different kinds of thinking activities, and to move back and forth between different kinds of mental work, they are better prepared to deal efficiently and effectively with new mental challenges. Here are some of the types of exercise the brain needs:

Creativity

- Do people have regular opportunities to explore new ideas and possibilities?
- Does the work environment include time for spontaneity and fun?

Problem-solving

- Do people regularly have the opportunity to solve challenging problems or address tough issues? Is analytical thinking valued in the organization?
- Do people come together periodically to combine their knowledge and expertise on dealing with important concerns?

Focus

- Do people have the opportunity for concentrated thinking about important topics related to their work?
- Are people encouraged to think deeply about things?

Reflection

- Do the organization's practices and norms encourage individuals to take time for self-reflection?
- Do people and teams take time after major events to pause and evaluate their effectiveness?

Down Time

- Does the organization's pace of work allow time for people to periodically step away from work demands?
- Do the organization's practices and norms encourage individuals to replenish their energy with breaks, time off, and vacations?

Learning

In addition to making sure that attention is not drained unnecessarily and that people have a chance to exercise their brains, organizations can help people increase their mental energy by enabling them to expand their thinking and learn new things. Here are some things that contribute to building mental energy:

Expertise

- Does the organization provide training and other learning opportunities to help people deepen their knowledge?
- Are people encouraged to develop their expertise by teaching and mentoring others?
- Is learning seen as an important investment of time and resources?

Stretch

- Are people encouraged to take on new assignments and responsibilities that require them to push beyond their current patterns of thinking and behavior?
- Are goals set at a level that encourages people to continually improve their effectiveness?
- Do leaders support people in taking the risks that come with moving outside of their comfort zones?

An Organizational Checklist for Supporting Emotional Energy

People use emotional energy to remain motivated, overcome negative thoughts and feelings, absorb emotional blows, and avoid becoming drained by setbacks. When people have low levels of emotional energy, they may spend a lot of time feeling fearful, defensive, or concerned, and may have a hard time experiencing pleasure. Because there are many potential sources of stress in the work environment, organizations have an important role in helping people protect, sustain, and build their emotional energy. Here are some questions for leaders and change agents to consider regarding the organization's support for emotional well-being:

Positivity

- Does the organization seek to foster a positive climate?
- Is the ratio of positive to negative interactions, feedback, etc. at least 3 to 1?
- Do organizational norms and policies encourage people to be polite and civil to one another?
- Does the organization take time to celebrate success and happy occasions?

Support

- Do people provide emotional support to one another?
- Does the organization provide access to counseling resources?
- If people are feeling threatened or distressed, do they have a place where they can safely share these feelings without fear of retaliation?

Emotional Intelligence

- Are emotions such as sadness, fear, and anger recognized as normal reactions to unpleasant or undesired situations?
- Are leaders and managers trained to recognize and deal appropriately with a range of human emotions?
- Are people encouraged to acknowledge and incorporate their own emotions into their thinking and problem-solving?

Clarity

- Does the organization ensure that people are clear about their roles and how their performance will be evaluated?
- Does the organization communicate clearly and accurately to reduce the emotional strain associated with ambiguity and confusion?
- Are people encouraged to ask questions and seek clarity in areas where they are unsure?

Safety

- Does the organization take steps to minimize threats to human safety and well-being to reduce the emotional drains associated with worry and stress?
- Do the organization's norms and practices enable people to set and maintain appropriate physical and emotional boundaries?

Emotional Growth

- Do the organization's norms and practices encourage people to increase their skill in working with their own and others' emotions?
- Do leaders use tough situations as opportunities to help people become more effective at managing their own emotions?

An Organizational Checklist for Supporting Spiritual Energy

Spiritual energy is the ability to connect to and draw on a sense of purpose, meaning, and passion. People use spiritual energy when they choose to do the right thing even when it's not easy; do things that benefit other people, the community they live in, and causes that are larger than their own interests; and find meaning during painful circumstances. When people have low levels of spiritual energy, they may feel disconnected from the world around them, believe that life has no purpose other than for short-term pleasure, and take no joy from beautiful things. Because the workplace is a significant source of meaning and purpose for many people, organizations have an important role in helping people protect, sustain, and build their spiritual energy.

Here are some questions for leaders and change agents to consider regarding the organization's support for spiritual well-being:

Values

- Has the organization articulated a set of values to guide its decisions and actions?
- Does the organization take active steps to live by the values it espouses?
- Does the organization encourage discussion and exploration of personal values?

Integrity

- Do the organization's leaders effectively model high levels of personal integrity?
- Do the organization's norms and practices encourage telling the truth, owning up to errors and mistakes, and taking steps to close gaps in integrity?
- Does the organization support people who raise concerns related to integrity and ethics?

Purpose

- Has the organization clearly articulated its mission?
- Does the mission include a clear connection to something beyond the organization itself?
- Do the organization's norms and practices encourage people to see a connection between their personal sense of meaning and their work within the organization?

Character

- Does the organization spend time focusing on positive human characteristics such as honor, courage, loyalty, and love?
- Are there opportunities for people to reflect on and develop their character?
- Do the organization's norms and practices support people who take action consistent with their personal values even when personal and organizational sacrifices are required?

Feedback

- Are leaders open to candid feedback?
- Do the organization's norms and practices encourage people to seek and value constructive feedback?
- Do people reflect on feedback they have received and use it to grow and develop?

Service

- Does the organization engage in some form of service (pro bono work, volunteer activities, contributions to social causes, etc.?)
- Do the organization's norms and practices encourage individuals to participate in service-related activities?
- Do people within the organization provide support and assistance to one another?

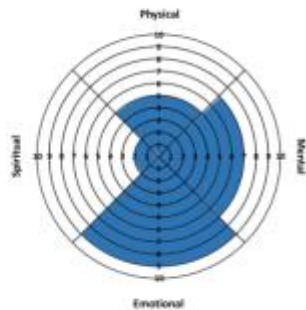
Self-Care

- Do the organization's leaders provide positive models of managing and maintaining high levels of personal energy?
- Do the organization's norms and practices encourage people to take time for vacation, leave, and other forms of recreation and replenishment?
- Do leaders attend to signs of employee burnout and provide coaching and resources to help people protect and nourish their personal energy?

Systems and Processes for Building Energy Sustainability

Self-Awareness

Individuals rate their energy in each area and identify strategies for building, protecting, and replenishing. People share strategies and support one another.



Leader Modeling

Leaders manage their personal energy effectively, taking time for fitness, relaxation, friends, family, and self-reflection. They initiate positive interactions, and display strong personal values and a clear sense of integrity.



Management Practices

Managers support individual energy by setting clear priorities, providing effective feedback, being attentive to the physical and emotional well-being of their employees, and limiting expectations of constant availability.



Processes and Systems

Clear roles and responsibilities and well-designed processes help people use their energy efficiently and effectively. The organization takes steps to identify and reduce unnecessary drains on human energy.



Policies and Rules

Policies in areas such as safety, working hours, and vacation time encourage employees to engage in energy-sustaining practices. As new policies are implemented, their implications for human energy are considered.



Culture

The organization's culture supports healthy eating, movement, mindfulness, mental challenge, emotional well-being, personal integrity, and other things that help individuals manage and build their energy.



Education

Employees have access to information on physical and emotional well-being. Training opportunities help them learn new skills, deepen their expertise, and stretch their thinking. Ethics and values are incorporated into employee education.



Facilities

The physical working environment offers opportunities for healthy food and water, movement, freedom from distractions, and other things that can help individuals take effective care of their energy.



Conclusion

I hope this article has provided some food for thought. Your next step might be to set up an organizational task force to evaluate human energy sustainability using the checklists and identify next steps for action.

If you're interested in learning more about how you can assess and improve your organization's human energy sustainability practices, please contact me!

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