

Unlimited Potential

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Newsletter

Managing Energy is the Key to Sustaining High Performance

"To be fully engaged in our lives, we must be physically energized, emotionally connected, mentally focused, and spiritually aligned with a purpose beyond our immediate self-interest."
– Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz, *The Power of Full Engagement* (2003)

Some executives thrive under pressure, others wilt. There is an epidemic of stress and burnout in our personal and work lives. We pride ourselves on our ability to multi-task and use computer aids to organize the demands on our time; we become more efficient and take on more responsibilities, and with them, more stress.

Even when managing our time well we still end up exhausted and stressed, unable to concentrate, keep focus, and be productive. That's because the problem isn't time management, it's energy. One major quality that executives seek for themselves and their employees is sustained high performance in the face of ever-increasing pressure and rapid change, and that takes energy.

The tools for sustaining high performance are not taught in business schools. Leadership development courses rarely broach the issue of energy management, either individually or organizationally. Depleted energy may be one of the reasons more than two-thirds of employees feel less than fully engaged at work (Gallup Organization, 2004).

Some of the secrets of sustaining energy and high performance come from studying professional athletes. Professional athletes spend most of their time training and, at most, a few hours a day actually competing. Corporate executives, however, have almost no time for training and must perform at peak levels under intense scrutiny and competition for often 12 or 14 hours a day. Most professional sports have an off season of several months. The typical executive has several weeks of vacation; even then, as many as 47 percent report taking their laptops to answer e-mail



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ASSOCIATES**

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P.O. Box 20389
St. Simons Island, Georgia 31522
912.634.9300
877.626.2960
(toll free)
potential@Herdlinger.com

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during their breaks. The career of the athlete spans 7 years on average; that of a corporate executive may last 40 or 50 years.

The skillful management of energy—both individually and organizationally—makes sustaining peak performance possible. According to authors Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz in their book, *The Power of Full Engagement* (2003), we need to rethink much of what we've believed about organizing our lives. We need to learn two new rules:

1. Energy is the fundamental currency of high performance.
2. Performance, health, and happiness are grounded in the skillful management of energy.

Lack of Energy, Lack of Full Engagement

Full engagement ought to be a bottom line priority. Companies incur unnecessary costs in the billions because of unengaged people who are just showing up for work—estimated at \$350 billion a year by the Gallup Organization. Few executives or managers understand energy management and how to build it into daily routines. Yet the ability to sustain drive and passion throughout the work day—and have some left over for family at the end of the day—is based on acquiring a few positive habits and understanding energy management concepts.

These principles were discovered by studying the differences between highly successful professional athletes and those who “also ran.” At top levels, most sports stars are highly talented. The difference between the consistent winners and the others is in their ability to manage and conserve their energy. Top tennis players, for example, use certain rituals between games to help them remain focused and manage negative emotions. Their heart rates can drop 20 percent between points. Other talented players who do not engage in positive recovery rituals do not show such recovery signs and are not consistent winners.

The 4 Principles of Energy Management

The same principles can be applied to corporate executives. Here are the basic concepts, from Loehr and Schwartz:

1. Energy has four dimensions: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. It is necessary to draw energy from each domain and to manage it in all four.

2. Energy is best managed when there is oscillation between stress and recovery. Stress in this case is meant in a positive sense. Stress is what makes us stretch ourselves and use our talents and skills; however, it must be balanced with recovery and rest, and most of us don't know how to do this.

3. Pushing beyond our usual limits builds our strengths. Building mental, emotional, and spiritual capacities is similar to physical training to improve our strength or cardiovascular abilities. We must push in order to grow.

4. Creating specific positive energy replenishing rituals sustains and expands our energy. This is the key to recuperating and making our energy reserves fully available to us.

Too much energy spent with insufficient rest and recovery leads to trouble. Life is not a marathon, but rather a series of sprints. All of life and nature is built upon rhythms and oscillations, including the tides, the sun, the moon, and our physiological functions. Yet, so many of us are in a hurry because we think in terms of linear time; we forget to create quality moments. Most of us are in a race against the clock and make incredible demands on our energy reserves as if we had unlimited resources.

Creating More Physical Energy

Executives can perform successfully even if they smoke, drink, and weigh too much. Much of their work is sedentary, yet they may excel without having any regular exercise routine. Obviously many do live and work this way, but they cannot perform to their full potential or without a cost over time to themselves, their families, and the corporations for which they work. It can be compared to trying to get peak performance out of a computer whose hardware and software is several years outdated. High mental, emotional, and spiritual energy requires that the body be in good physical condition.

Most approaches to high performance in executives and leaders deal with cognitive or emotional competencies. Some theorists have addressed the spiritual dimension as well, how deeper values and a sense of purpose influence performance. Surprisingly, almost no one has paid any attention to the role played by physical capacities. An integrated theory of performance management addresses the body, mind, emotions, and spirit, considering the person as a whole.

The body is our fundamental source of energy, and anyone concerned about high levels of performance

under intense pressures must be concerned with the physical domain. Sports science is clear about the body's need for both stress and recovery. For any muscle to grow stronger it must be stressed and then given time to heal. Repeated demands combined with recovery result in increased strength. Conversely, failure to stress the muscle results in weakness and atrophy. These same principles are true in all four domains of energy sources: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Growth occurs when there is demand, stress, and recovery.

Even if you are at a desk most of the day, you need physical energy. It begins with attention to breathing, a healthy diet, good sleeping habits, plenty of water, daily physical exercise, and recovery breaks every 90 to 120 minutes.

Although this may sound like hackneyed common sense everyone already knows, the evidence is clear: those executives who build into their daily and weekly routines exercise, healthy eating, good sleeping, and energy recovery breaks have more energy and are able to sustain performance under intense pressures.

Creating More Mental Energy

Physical and emotional energy help mental functioning. There is a correlation between productivity and positive thinking that generates mental energy. The most successful sales people have an optimistic explanatory style.

Thinking takes time, yet most jobs don't build in time for rest, workout breaks, and thinking. They should. In fact, one of the most productive ways to think is during exercise, breaks, walks, jogs, a simple game, or just daydreaming. Build downtime into your day and allow your employees to do the same.

Other ways of creating more mental energy include varying activities so that different parts of the brain are used. Mental preparation, visualization, meditation, introspection, and reflection are all pathways to creativity and innovation. Taking time to connect with your organization's mission, your personal purpose in life, and your true values are all ways of accessing your drive, passion, and energy.

Creating More Emotional Energy

Emotional energy expresses itself in self-confidence, self-discipline, sociability, and empathy. It's possible to build positive emotions just as one would build muscles and physical strength. Professional athletes know how important it is to manage negative feelings during crucial points. Frustration, anger, or fear are toxic and can bring performance down.

Executives who want to be able to perform well under stress must learn to "keep their eye on the ball" and manage negativity. The studies from the Hay-McBer Group have shown that leaders communicate their moods to their work groups in ways that directly affect the corporate bottom line.

Too few people recognize or try to create feelings of pleasure and joy, especially during grueling negotiations and intense business meetings. Research has shown, however, that humor and good feelings are contagious and can actually increase the chances of success in business relationships. Friendships are critical at work and affect job performance. Time taken for relationship building is crucial.

Creating More Spiritual Energy

Spiritual energy, in the sense meant here, has to do with your personal connection to your true values and deep sense of purpose. It depends on taking care of yourself and others with profound respect. It means honoring your values, paying attention to your gut instincts, and doing the right things.

It is an amazing source of passion, fortitude, and commitment. Those people who connect with a purpose greater than their own personal interests demonstrate the most passion and energy. Spiritual energy also depends on developing past your limits and rest, recovery, and renewal.

The Power of Positive Rituals

Getting in shape to fully engage in life and work means deep involvement with purpose, values, and self-examination and the establishment of effective energy replenishing habits. First you must define your true values and what is most important to you, being positive and unselfish. Then you must be honest about where you are now and be willing to admit that your excuses are no longer good enough. Third, plan to take action on three positive rituals that will make a difference in your energy levels. Be precise about when you will engage in these positive rituals—what time, for how long, and on which days.

Some busy executives who have built breaks into their already overburdened schedules have been astonished at how they have expanded their capacities in all four domains of energy. These breaks can include deep breathing for a few seconds, doing a quick meditation, rereading a vision or mission statement, calling a loved one, running up and down stairs, taking a quick tour around colleagues' cubicles for friendly chats, doing a few sit-ups or stretches, eating a healthy snack, or walking around the block. It doesn't matter what one decides to do, but it is crucial to be specific about the time and activity. The idea is to reconnect with purpose and recuperate energy reserves.

Working with an executive coach is a good way to reevaluate your performance in the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual domains. Get real, get honest, get positive—stretch your capacities and then recuperate your energy. It is your most precious resource.

Recommended reading:

Bruch, H. & Ghoshal, S. (2004). *A Bias for Action: How Effective Managers Harness their Willpower, Achieve Results, and Stop Wasting Time*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Groppel, J. L. (2000). *The Corporate Athlete: How to Achieve Maximal Performance in Business and Life*. N.Y.: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Loehr, J. & Schwartz, T. (2003). *The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, is the Key to High Performance and Personal Renewal*. N.Y.: The Free Press/Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Herdlinger Associates

P.O. Box 20389

St. Simons Island, Georgia 31522