

Manage Energy – Not Time

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When did we first start talking about balance in our lives? Now, in the 21st century, emails, voice mails, downsized/right-sized companies – there are more ways to upset the ‘balance’ in our lives than ever before.

Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz, authors of The Power of Full Engagement, propose that: “Energy, not time, is our most precious resource.” Paying attention to our energy will allow us to achieve what we wish to accomplish in a day and enjoy doing it. Their premise is that in managing our energy, which is a renewable resource, we escape the limiting paradigm of managing time, a non-renewable resource:

The Principles of Full Engagement

Principle 1: Full engagement requires drawing on four separate but related sources of energy: physical, emotion, mental and spiritual.

All four of these energy components are critical, each influencing the other. We are most familiar with managing our physical energy. We know that by building physical activity into our days we increase our energy and stamina for all our tasks. Still, our work/life activities often replace our planned workouts.

We are in a positive emotional state of energy and tasks go smoothly when we are happy, calm, feeling good,. At the end of a day or after a difficult meeting, we may notice that our emotional energy is drained – and feel unable to cope well with new tasks.

Mental energy is a commodity that many time management trainers discuss – they encourage us to work on our most difficult task when most alert, i.e., most mentally energetic.

Spiritual energy comes from feeling good about what we do. It is about doing something because it satisfies our purpose and values in life. It is that ‘feel good’ energy from maintaining our integrity in a contract negotiation, spending special time with our children, connecting with a distant relative, contributing to our community.

We need to hold ourselves accountable for managing these four energy dynamics.

Principle 2: Because energy diminishes both with overuse and with underuse, we must balance energy expenditure with intermittent energy renewal.

The measures of our energy capacity are strength, endurance, flexibility and resilience. We all need to manage our energy levels, to disengage and periodically seek renewal. Winston Churchill took afternoon naps regularly to ensure maximum energy was available to him in the high anxiety times of World War II in Britain. The authors suggest that a break every 60-90 minutes in the work day is highly beneficial for optimal mental energy management and excellent work results. For physical energy, they encourage several healthy snacks to replenish physical energy throughout the day.

Principle 3: To build capacity we must push beyond our normal limits, training in the same systematic way that elite athletes do.

Nietzsche wrote, “That which does not kill us makes us stronger.” These authors suggest that stress is the key to growth. We need to push our comfort zones in the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual dimensions to build our capabilities. And, we also need to build in a rest, to let the specific energy muscle rebuild. As an example, many of us avoid conflict situations. By stepping into a low level conflict situation we can begin to develop our skills and strategies. As our skills increase, we can enter into more difficult situations. If we hold the value of generosity, completing one generous act a day toward someone in our work/life circle is a step toward expressing that value, a gentle building of what is important to you in life.

Principle 4: Positive energy rituals – highly specific routines for managing energy – are key to full engagement and sustained high performance.

“A positive ritual is a behavior that becomes automatic over time – fueled by some deeply held value.”

Change is hard and habits difficult to overcome. Depending upon the area of energy we want to build, the routine – or ritual – helps us focus and commit to action. For instance, the ‘workaholic’ creates a routine that provides a break: at 10:30 and 2:30 each day. The person takes a 15 minute break – walks to a book store to browse, takes the stairs to the cafeteria and buys an energy drink, calls the children at home after school and chats about their day. These breaks from normal behaviors help the individual change the patterns and build new skills for managing various aspects of energy into the day.

Managing our energy using these principles starts with a discussion about personal/professional purpose, and about deeply held values. The next step is to look at our current way of doing life. Where are we out of alignment with our purpose and values? What is our action plan to replenish the four aspects of our energy? What can we do to increase our levels of energy in a way that supports us to achieve full engagement?

Reference: Jim Loehr, Tony Schwartz, The Power of Full Engagement, Simon and Schuster New York, 2005

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