

# Human Energy: Fuel for Organizational Change

by Nancy Post, Ph.D.

**Organizational change requires energy.**

**The concept seems simple, but its implications are profound.**

**Let's examine why.**

People in organizations would not generally dispute that change takes effort and that, as a consequence of exerting effort, the energy is used. Nor would leaders who propose change debate the need to generate energy and enthusiasm to propel a change effort. Yet the simple laws of physics are rarely applied to our notion of human energy. As such, the natural laws that govern how energy is used and replenished are seldom applied in the workplace.

Cross-culturally, there is broad agreement that one can define “energy” only by describing the state that it is in. Our culture speaks about “kinetic” energy to describe energy in its active state while using the word “potential” to describe the resting or inactive state. **Life is promoted when an organism finds a sustainable balance between its ability to store energy and to use it.** The life cycle starts when kinetic and potential sources of energy meet and ends when the organism can no longer regenerate itself.

This is also true of organizations. How do organizations get started? Usually, someone or some group has an idea to create an organization. The project gains momentum. People agree with the idea, shape it, contribute their energy to it, find more resources to develop it and, lo and behold, an institution is created. This organization, an organism

sustained by its people, takes on a life of its own. It is more than the sum of all the energy contributed by its staff, community or market, investors and stakeholders. Systems are always more advanced than the sum of their parts because energy is not simply an additive variable. Energy can actually catalyze a system into converting potential energy into its kinetic form.

In organizational terminology, we often refer to this type of change as “transformational”. (In the old days, we considered such change to be “infectious”.) In either case, we realize that once catalyzed, a change process seems to take on a life of its own. This can be positive (or transformative) for organizations who learn to harness the energy but, if left unmanaged, it can also become an unruly consumer of human resources, like an infection which wears down your resistance and compromises your performance.

By the time organizations usually call me for help with “change management”, the beast is usually a monster. A downsizing, major growth, acquisition, merger, takeover, start-up or change in leadership has begun to wear down the people in the organization. Leaders are searching to find ways to motivate employees who are already short on energy. And, when questioned in private, these leaders have already begun to show signs of stress. “Where will the energy come from to move us through our next change?”, they want to know. Yet we rarely ever ask ourselves how to build the energy of our organizations in preparation for such times.

If “business as usual” leaves you tired at the end of the week, then it is unlikely that you will have extra energy to devote to the change necessary to deal with unusual business. In fact, the more divergence there is between what you now know and what you must do differently, the more immediate and dramatic the need for new energy. Eventually, as the new becomes usual, you will expend less. But until that time, you will be drawing on your reserves - your “potential” energy and converting it to “kinetic” energy which will be used up. This can feel very exhilarating in the short term, but is not a sustainable pattern if you are in an organization for the long haul. As such, it is necessary that you are careful to restore your energy.

So, here’s the trick.

To be fully prepared for organizational change, organizations should learn to store energy so that energy is available when you need it.

Think about it. How could you, dear reader, store some energy this week? How could you help a colleague conserve him or herself for future times? Or, if you are an employee in an organization in the midst of an important change, (and thus using a lot of energy now), how can you put a plan in place to replenish yourself later?

Keeping systems renewable is the key to their good health. In our next discussion, we’ll describe some ways that leaders devoted to the ecology of their workplaces have learned to manage energy. We will also address how to notice the warning signs that tell you to wait before you initiate change.

Smart leaders manage energy.

Reactive leaders become victims to the lack of it in their organizations.

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