

Leading with Spirit: A Question of Energy

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An Image of Leadership

Imagine that leaders who run organizations considered themselves to be keepers of society. Though committed to the well being of one company, one agency, one non-profit organization, these men and women — themselves also sons, daughters, parents and neighbors — would understand that their talent for organizing and motivating people must be for the highest good of all people and for the environment which supports them.

Because it would be impossible for these good leaders to divide themselves between their private beliefs (in which they care deeply about people) and their public roles (in which they expect a great deal from themselves and those around them), they would find a compromise between their deeply rooted ambition and their understanding that people have real limits. Activity would be balanced by capacity. Going the extra mile would occur in their organizations if and only if people were not depleted, because people are among the Divinely created natural resources and it is the job of people to preserve and enhance that which has been created. Water would not be drawn from stones in these organizations.

The notion of a “Natural Order”, of a set of patterns in which all things are linked and ultimately interdependent, is an essential element in leadership. Recent organization-speak refers to a subset of this phenomenon as “systems thinking” in which businesses learn to understand their functioning in a wider context. In general, this broader context is interpreted only to mean the wider *economic* environment, but that is only a subset of a vast spectrum of events, variables and movements that effect organizational life. If we were to consider how an organization can fit into a “Natural Order” we would include variables such as weather, natural resource management, health & vitality and individual and organizational meaning as necessary aspects to maintain balance while work is being accomplished.

Nonetheless, the use of systems thinking can be a good place to start because it forces the notion of holism rather than reductionism. It also implies that *we* are responsible for the whole. Then, it becomes impossible for *me* to guard *my* part of the whole and blame *you* if *you* don't take care of yours. There is an intrinsic sharing of responsibility underlying systems thinking that can help organizations reduce internal competition. Companies can be taught to analyze all the interactions within the system in order to find the root cause of organizational or economic dynamics, rather than merely shifting burdens to others. As a result, organizations often become more internally integrated; a few even link themselves to broader external contexts as well.

Imagine again, for example, if a municipality with a waste water problem or a company disposing of toxic by-products, understood that managing the effect of the discharge was their

natural responsibility. They would not only try to comply with government regulations, they would safeguard the communities whose people work for them; and it would be considered normal and appropriate to do so. Burdens would not shift from one organization to another or from an organization to an individual, we would accept our responsibility to each other as a necessary part of a natural order.

As befits our modern western society, it is understandable that a notion of holism should start with a redefinition of thinking. We often start with the head in our culture. However, systems dynamics also encompass the emotional, spiritual and physical dimensions of the people who provide the fuel for the functioning of these organizations. Lifeblood is not only mental. Person power comes from the whole person: body, mind and soul. Sustainable power comes from the **energy** which moves people.

Energy

As I coach leaders in organizations, I am constantly impressed by their levels of energy. Most operate at high velocity and believe it is good to fill their calendars, set ambitious goals and drive themselves. Many travel a great deal and compromise intimacy and family relations for the call of corporate duty. Americans, in particular, take little time off. They are full. Yet simultaneously some part of them is empty. One could say that their minds are full but their hearts are empty. Despite all good, even "systemic", intentions they have shifted the burden of leadership to their minds — which work overtime often at the expense of their minds and spirits.

As their careers progress, the emptiness in their hearts may gnaw at them. Other body parts also show signs of wear. Insomnia, headaches, changes in weight and other minor symptoms point to a disintegrating relationship between body, mind and soul in which physical energy is becoming depleted and thus not providing fuel for the whole person. Most of us assume the body will cope if pushed just a bit harder and we ignore the warning signs of imbalance.

Over time, we can become more and more separated from ourselves, our families, our communities and the homes which give us so much nourishment. Tasks become more important than maintaining these relationships and even work relations suffer. It no longer is important to stay connected to members of the system, rather, it becomes of supreme importance to get things done.

This is particularly prevalent in times of great organizational change. It only takes one significant shift in the life of an organization — one acquisition, one dramatic downsizing, one loss of a senior executive, one shift in stakeholder power, one change in the economy — for people to lose sight of the whole and focus on the isolated tasks which they think will move the organization to its future. Rather than using change to unify, organizations most often splinter, bifurcate or become isolated.

Ultimately, change comes to be associated with losing energy. This defies the laws of nature in which transformation is a process in which energy is liberated. How have we done this? How can we restore human organizations while embracing an understanding of balance? How can a *natural order* be used to recreate holism in our organizational world? What will it take to bring the principles of the natural world to our human organizations? I believe that managing human energy is an essential part of the answer to these questions.

Doing and Being

The interplay between doing and being is at the core of the dynamics of leadership. The most highly paid corporate motivational speakers claim that if you adopt some unique combination of behaviors (acting collaboratively, delegating, empowering others, etc.), you will become a better manager. These behaviors, however, are only the outward manifestation of a set of values. You may act differently, but not changed your beliefs.

For example, if you accept that everyone in your organization has a unique understanding of the organization, you are more likely to actually believe that sharing power with everyone is a worthwhile thing to do. So if you *believe* in empowerment — in sharing power — you are more likely to act as if you are sharing power than if you are simply following a set of behaviors (such as calling together "self-directed work teams") that you *think* will be empowering.

The relationship between embracing values and changing behavior is a complicated one. With the exception of the occasional truly revelatory experience, it generally takes people time to change their values. Reading a book about collaboration does not make you collaborative. Repetitive practice where you feel in concert with others, change your behavior a little, notice the shift in outcome, reflect about the process, perhaps notice if you feel differently, then contemplate what "collaborative" actually means, is actually closer to how change happens. A change in being takes more time than simple changes of action.

Yet, organizations seem to focus on the active aspect of change. People want to know the answer to the question,

"How does one act if one believes what you say? Tell me, how does one act?"

Organizations judge people by their actions. Talk about values is generally considered rhetoric unless it is clearly backed up by the behavior of the organization's leaders. And we do value action more than non-action, which we consider "inactivity". A manager who sits in her office for half an hour to contemplate the meaning of a significant organizational event will justify the use of her time by calling it "planning" or "evaluation." She will not tell other people in her organization that she took half an hour to contemplate or synthesize or reflect. That would be too...passive to be considered productive. She will use action verbs that carry traditional associations of productivity with them. Without knowing it, she will adhere to a silent corporate missive that values *doing* over *being*.

Without going much further, I should say that this emphasis on doing takes energy. You use up more energy when you are in an active state than when you are in a resting state, and if you cannot manage to justify the time to rest while you are at work, you probably use up a lot of your energy at work. So, in addition to placing a higher value on doing over not doing, organizations reward expending energy over saving it or replenishing it.

A common belief in many organizations is that resources should be used. For example, if there is budget that has not been fully spent at the end of the fiscal year, it is more likely that the organization will make last-minute expenditures to use up the budget than go through the trouble of storing the money (which is often an administratively complicated thing to do). Unconsciously, we set up our systems to make storing or saving resources very difficult, therefore, we spend even when we don't need to.

On a personal level, we want our assets to be liquid — usable — rather than fixed, even if our debt increases as a result, consequently, as a nation, we carry more personal debt than any of the other developed nations. I find it of interest that after years of national policy that rewarded spending borrowed resources, we are now acknowledging that the accumulated debt is too heavy to carry and is damaging our position in the world economy. We seem aware that too much debt is bad for us, yet still seem unable to curb spending or develop new resources.

Organizations also use this approach with their people; they talk about assets (or liabilities) that can be directed toward problems. When managers "commit more resources to the problem" they are saying that sending in more people will help fix the problem. More is equated with better. I believe that we are acting on a set of values when we act this way. Quite simply, we are saying that:

- Doing is better than not doing;
- Using resources and energy is better than not using them; and
- More is better than less.

This emphasis on doing and on using up energy has become part of the standard vocabulary of organizations. As managers, we speak about "giving our all" to a project or "turning up the heat" on a program. And we punish people who do not give their all. We consider them "withholding" or "un-motivated." We wonder what's wrong with them assuming that something must be wrong if they choose to store their energy, do less, or save their resources. Perhaps they have an attitude problem, or have trouble balancing family with work? Perhaps they are "resistant" to change or to management? How can we get them to do more? If we can't, will we be judged negatively, as well?

I believe that this emphasis on doing and spending resources represents only half the picture. If doing work requires energy, we must use the laws of energy to guide us in the way we perform work so that we can replenish energy in addition to using it.

Laws of Energy

The laws of physics consider that there are primarily two forms of energy: kinetic and potential.

Potential energy is energy that is stored, energy in a resting state. This would be equivalent, for example, to the energy stored in a leaf. Sunlight, a source of energy, is absorbed into the leaf, which synthesizes that energy. This process of photosynthesis is one in which the leaf captures and then stores energy from its environment. When the plant needs more energy for growth, this stored energy is used. When the stored energy is converted into usable energy, it becomes "kinetic" or usable. After a period of growth (which is limited by the amount of energy available to the plant), the plant stops growing and collects again. In fact, the two processes occur simultaneously. The emphasis on storing versus using energy shifts seasonally, based upon the availability of other resources (minerals, water, etc.) and the appropriate climatic conditions (heat and light) needed to permit this transformation to occur.

The interplay between activity and storage is a basic principle of physics. Since people still have bodies, the laws of physics apply to us. Let me recount the corollaries of these basic laws of energy:

- You can only use as much energy as you have;
- In order to be in a position ready for growth, you need a supply of energy;
- Using and replenishing energy occur simultaneously; and
- The relationship between using and replenishing energy shifts according to seasonal cycles.

Hiroyuki Itami, one of Japan's management gurus, calls this process "managing invisible assets". He considers the accumulation of invisible assets, such as customer confidence, reputation, employee health, or resiliency of corporate culture, key to successful strategy. In fact, he advocates that invisible assets are often a firm's only real source of a competitive edge that can be sustained over time.

Unlike many management specialists, Itami focuses on **ACCUMULATING**, not using assets. This approach gives equal importance to storing resources — to developing potential energy as an invisible asset.

Energy: An Invisible Asset

If the tissue in your body is the storage place for the fuel that moves you, your body is like a huge battery that stores and uses energy all the time. If you have a good capacity to build energy, you will have more to use when you need it. If you use a lot of energy, you will have to find ways to replenish it.

At a purely physical level, replenishment of energy comes from your capacity to get nutritive value from the food you eat, as well as oxygen from the air you breathe. Generally, you store

energy when your body is in a resting state. In addition, moving your body after it accumulates energy helps with the distribution of blood, fluids and energy. So, if you bring your body to work and you feel tired, you have only four options: **eat, move, breathe, or rest.**

As a management consultant, I am often hired to assess the cause of organizational problems. These problems are generally characterized by the client as "stuckness" or "poor performance". Commonly, people have lost motivation and frequently are tired. Sometimes, they even get sick. They have expended their energy while trying to solve their problems and often say they feel spent. Many times they expect me, the external consultant, to bring a new source of energy that they can use to solve the problem. They are caught in an "expenditure" model of problem solving. (I am careful to preserve my own energy when working with such organizations, since the state of my personal resource is my primary asset as a consultant.)

I often ask people in organizations what they do when they feel tired during the workday. The most common responses are that they either "work harder" to compensate for the loss of energy, or they drink coffee to give themselves a boost. Some prefer a cigarette that has nicotine, another stimulant. In all cases, three very valid options were omitted: no one thought to breathe, rest, or move.

My father, once a professional athlete and coach, would not approve of his athletes smoking cigarettes if they were tired. Nor would drinking coffee be an acceptable response. Everyone knows that artificial stimulants give a temporary boost, which, in the long run, is damaging to one's health. If the subject in question were a professional athlete — a person who relies on his or her body for work — we would consider the use of stimulants counter to peak performance. Yet, in organizations, we not only approve of these methods; we sanction them. Yes, smoking is now forbidden on-site in many American companies because direct or indirect inhalation of fumes is said to cause cancer, but we don't question the smokers who leave the building for their nicotine fix any more than we challenge the existence of the office coffee pot.

Somehow, we have deleted the body's needs from the corporate ethos. We consider the value of people to be in their minds and have developed intricate ways to improve mental functioning. Yet, except when occupational health hazards are in evidence, we do not consider the bodily functioning of our employees. Our focus is on limiting the potential hazard rather than on creating conditions that build people's energy.

In addition, we sanction the use of short term motivation techniques in order to rouse employees to continue to perform even when they are exhausted or overworked. It is time to debunk the myth of "rightsizing" and "job-enhancement" programs which simply shift the workload of laid off employees to the remaining few who have remained in a downsized organization. Companies may well need to slim down, but they must also realize that by laying off people, they are also reducing the energy resources available to them.

In short, we do not put a value on helping our employees or our organizations to regenerate their energy. Instead, we ask them to use their minds to override their fatigue and assume the

organization will go on as usual. This reinforces a split between body and mind and gives an indirect message to employees:

We value your mind over your body.

Then, when physical discomfort or illness occur later, we send another message:

Deal with your health problems on your own.

In fact, managers are often hesitant to ask about the health of their subordinates because they fear being considered invasive or inappropriate. This linkage stops people in organizations from recognizing how important physical functioning is to corporate performance.

I find this phenomenon most often when I work with an organization which is in the midst of great change. More often than not, people in the system have developed signs of strain. Absenteeism is higher, minor symptoms emerge and psychological stress is inevitable. Many leaders tell me about chronic illnesses like allergies, PMS or back pain worsening, and many experience some depression or mood disorders. Most have never mentioned these side effects of organizational change to anyone but they quietly wonder if it is worth it for them to stay in an organization which is using them up in this way.

Organizations avoid building energy as an invisible asset. They are usually uncomfortable talking about well-being and are even phobic about mentioning ill-being. As I have interviewed senior executives over the years on their notions about health, I have had the impression that I was opening up a taboo subject. "We just don't talk about that," they say verbally and with their body language. "Why are you asking me about my health? You are a management consultant, aren't you? Shouldn't we be focusing on the organization and not on me?" In reality, we should be addressing both.

In my experience, those who have been willing to discuss health are often fitness enthusiasts. When they feel they have control and are perceived to be performing well, executives will discuss their physical activity and sometimes talk about their diets. Yet, few could describe their energy levels, the effect of travel and sleep deprivation, or how a lack of physical contact with their mates actually felt to them. As long as their health was tied to performance, the most enlightened executives would venture into discussions about their well-being. Almost all others considered the subject immaterial.

The most common sequence goes something like this: You feel tired, so you override your need for rest, movement, oxygen or food, and push on. You do this repetitively over time and use up your reserves of energy. Your body is weakened, as a result, you become ill. You hide your sickness from others because you expect to be judged harshly. You probably do not give yourself sufficient time to heal. Thus, you return to work in a weakened state to face a greater workload since no one did your work while you were sick. In this weakened state, you use your mind to push past the physical barriers, and the pattern of depletion continues. Gradually, you find less meaning in work, feel less a part of the whole, and your spirit shrivels.

Organizational Energy

If your organization is in a period of change, it will need even more of your energy. Yet individuals often feel more fatigued, driven and stressful during times of change. If the system took full responsibility for maintaining its energy during change, it would not shift the burden to individuals or departments. Rather, it would recognize that organization-wide replenishment efforts are as necessary as systemic interventions that stimulate action. Unfortunately, if a conscious intervention is derived, it usually is one in which employees are pushed to change without any regard to what it will take — and, more importantly, without any regard to how the system can replenish itself.

I always feel more protective of people who get sick during major organizational changes. These people are often the unknowing casualties of organizations that use them up. If managers chose to notice that people were tired, or that the incidence of illness was increasing, or that people have lost a sense of their contribution to the whole, they could see these events as evidence that the system is using too much energy. This would be a time to help people develop more energy, not expend it, and the system would attend to its internal need for integration.

The strategy would be most successful if the replenishment were physical, emotional and rejuvenating to the soul. When body, mind and spirit feel replenished, energy is restored and people feel more naturally aligned inside themselves and the organization. Thus, rather than psychically segregating low-energy people, the system would reward them for the way they remind us to replenish ourselves.

It's not that we looking for something that is difficult. There are many ways to enhance balance and most are very simple. Thus, the next time you run a meeting, organize a tea, or engage in a new challenge at work, pause for a moment and ask yourself, "Do we have the energy necessary for this next endeavor? What will we need to sustain ourselves as we do our work? And how can I, as a leader, cultivate the energy of myself and my colleagues so that we remain replenished as we do the company's work? What commitments must I make to myself and my organization in order to hold to a balance? How can I achieve the highest good for all involved?"

In this way, work can be designed to help people learn how to cultivate organizational energy. Individuals, teams and, ultimately, the organization as a whole will perceive itself as part of an integrated unity by cultivating an invisible asset available to all organizations — energy.

Reference:

Hiroyuki Itami, *Mobilizing Invisible Assets*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987.