Energy in Organizations
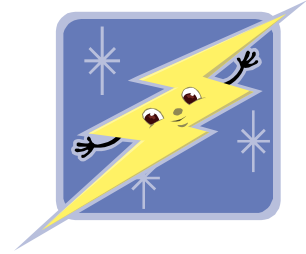
Clear on core values and mission…strong on culture…presence of strategic plan…high-performing board…outstanding leadership… clear policies…, competent technology. Many attributes define successful organizations.

In the rosters of qualities of high performing groups, however, we seldom see a factor that may actually be the most important ingredient in predicting sustained success. The word is energy. An organization can have all the right attributes, but lack the energy to bring then to life.

Energy is not only precious but scarce. It is easier to acquire information and even insight than it is to buy energy. In fact you can't buy energy. You have to make it.

This article explores the dimensions of energy in terms of a simple tool we call The Energy Audit that organizations can use to understand where they now stand relative to the generation, distribution, and uses of energy and take steps to increase energy.

Once you read this, please contact dgetchell@rinstitute.org if you want details on the actual Energy Audit we have refined, including worksheets, template for summarizing current views, and a plan to increase positive energy moving forward.

Beginning with Persons

Have you noticed that some people get twice as much done in a day than do others? And they always have time to take on one more tasks. Think about it. Is this a function of what they know? More likely it is a function of their energy than of their skill level, number of degrees, or almost any other characteristic or attribute. Energetic organizations are built on energetic people

Four elements of energy in people:

- Stamina. The mind must be willing and the body capable. This is not, however, a matter of brawn or marathon running. The question is the level of staying power and the ability to get that second wind when you need it.

- Sense of Humor. Humor and laughter (not bawdy but funny without any deprecation of anyone) is often critical to sustain energy in oneself and in others. Humor is a leavener and, where necessary, a leveler. At its best irony and whimsy help us to see things that we would otherwise miss.

- Optimism. Pessimistic people are energetic about their complaints but once they make them (sometimes over and over) they hit the wall. There is no other place to go. In contrast optimistic people have few limits and their often-naive faith drives change in a way that pessimism and even realism cannot.

- Enthusiasm. If optimism sees the future, enthusiasm is an engine to get there. High voltage people (or high amperage if you prefer) are charged for action. Enthusiasm is also contagious and can spread energy simply by its forceful and attractive presence.

On the other hand, energy is not tied to some dispositions that at first blush seem related. One is happiness. High energy is more likely to stem from restiveness than complaisancy.

Clearly some people are disposed to more enthusiasm, humor, and stamina than others. Whether this is due to genetic endowment or childhood nurturing remains debatable. What is known is that people can strongly influence where they come out on these factors. Building positive energy is a learned behavior.

Energy is in scientific terms "usable heat or power". It is a variable resource, not a static condition. When someone uses a noun such as "vitality" or "intensity" or adjectives such as "dynamic" and "vigorous" to describe a person, the chances are good they are describing expressions of personal energy—heat and power in action.

Energy in Organizations

Organizations also contain energy. It can be inventoried and mapped by looking at three dimensions:

1 **Sources of Energy.** All organizations contain sources of both positive and negative energy and everyone can see the difference. Some people make us smile and add bounce to our step. Others (such as that constant critic, whiner or sniper) take energy away. And how about the words that get used. When you are told that you are being held more accountable, how much energy does that add to your day?

Just as with physical energy, the source of energy is limited by storage capacity. In some cases generated energy is put immediately to work. But in other cases, energy is produced before it can be used and must be held and metered out. In these cases it is—as with physical energy—subject to degrading over time. The fifth time the flashlight is turned on the beam is dimmer. And at the fifth meeting of the strategic planning work when key decisions are made, at least a bit of the energy of the first session has left the room.

② Distribution of Energy. Communication channels are an obvious distributor of energy. Regardless of subject or mode all messages have ways of adding or subtracting energy as they convey information. Messengers are equally important. Some persons know how to convey energy with content and some do not. Rarely is energy contained in information. It is largely shaped by the communication of information that gives it life and even explanation.

Physical energy loses power over distance and this happens in organizations as well. Just as pipelines need pumping stations to increase flow, organizations need explicit ways to boost positive energy as messages flow over persons and time. Distance in our digital age is much less a factor.

③ Harnessing of Energy. Energy is undirected force until organizations learn put it to use. Applying energy to "work" is as important as creating or distributing it. We have all seen examples of highly energetic people such as those just charged up by a great speaker to deal with a critical social issue—only to find that they have no way of using that energy to achieve a result. Until we apply it, energy remains a latent resource.

Toward Energy Audits for Organizations

Organizations now look to assess themselves using such traditional measures as the SWOT Analysis—strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Many groups find that these techniques grow stale over time as the usual suspects in each category continually reappear. The Energy Audit is a fresh alternative to understanding your organization. We adapt a technique used for buildings, where the audit looks to define the needed amount of energy to be generated (typically by a furnace,) given the needs of the building and its ability to preserve and distribute usable heat and power within the structure.

The Energy Audit has these advantages:

❖ In organizations and people, the amount of net positive energy (e.g., positive minus negative energy present) is a huge predictor of achievement.

❖ Energy in many ways is more tangible that most factors we ponder. People see, feel, hear and even touch energy and tend to agree on its presence and whether it is going up or down.

❖ This is a way to tackle some tough issues, like how to make budgeting or planning more useful, and how to deal with difficult employees who put toxin into your spaces.

❖ You can try it as an innovation and keep it going if useful. This does not require great study or research. Just get out your notebook and start looking!

Here are the elements to consider in looking at sources, distribution, and application of energy in your organization.

Energy Sources

✴ **Words and images**. People can tell you what words turn them on and off. Being admonished to do "more with less" is rarely uplifting. Nor are words like compliance and monitoring. How many of us work up this morning wanting to be held more compliant? How many of us get better because we are monitored? At the same time, words and images about success and achievement tend to add energy. Look closely. While general praise, "You are a great staff" may add slight energy, it pales in comparison to specific praise for something a person or group does well.

✴ **Persons**. When we interact with some individuals, we always seem to leave the conversation with more bounce in our stride. When we talk with others, we seem to often feel drained. Praise tends to build energy while criticism depletes it. Often the greatest sources of negative energy in an organization are persons who constantly whine or criticize others…especially when they are not in the room.

✴ **Structure/Processes**. Structure is what is fixed in an organization; divisions and departments, roles, job descriptions, compensation, key policies, etc. They are the framework. Processes are the major ways that organizations do their work. Strategic planning, program design and delivery, and budgeting are examples. Both structure and process are generally created with no thought for how they might add or subtract energy. But they invariably <u>have</u> an effect on it. We include "culture" in this grouping. Think of this as not only values and beliefs but as habits and behaviors.

✴ **Problems and Issues.** All organizations have their challenges. But in some they tend to have a far more negative effect than in others. Factors include problem duration (episodic issues are more readily handled than perpetual ones) and whether leaders and staff feel they can solve the problem or must remain victims of outside forces. While the latter view may bring short term relief, the statement that this is not our fault often also says, there is nothing we can do about it.

✴ **Change and Innovations.** All organizations have changes—whether intended or not. And is some cases they add energy and some they subtract it—to some extent depending on the view of the person whose energy is affected. Most organizations also at times promote change by trying new approaches as innovations. Innovators and those experiencing efforts to try new things also tend to see an effect on their energy.

Energy Distribution

⛰ **Written channels**. Energy as well as information flows with all explicit communication, be it policy guidelines, formal plans, budgets, memos from a leader, program descriptions or such in formal writing as e-mail. Some of the energy comes from the words, some from the ideas and concepts, and some from the communicating style—shorter beats longer in the energy building business, for example, as does use of example rather than long abstract description.

- ✦ **Spoken channels**. Energy comes from what is said as much as from what is written. Even more than with writing, the message content is no more critical than the inflection of delivery - - whether the talk is a leader talk to the annual retreat or casual every day conversation. Degree and nature of interaction among sender and receivers also influence energy. Meetings with questions and a spirit of inquiry tend to yield more positive energy than meetings in which people make assertions to each other.

- ✦ **Non-verbal communication**. No one need say a word. When you walk into a room or a meeting you can either see animated people (whether speaking or not) flatness. You see it on faces, arm movements, body positioning. You feel it in the air. Sources and distribution of energy often interact, of course. An office structure can enhance or restrict communications in a way that overrides individual tendencies.

Energy Applications

Work in organization is the application of energy and it has three categories:

- ➢ **Proactive work**. This is what we determined to do to achieve goals. It is that part of our work that is intentional to results. All strategic action happens here.

- ➢ **Routine work**.   Whether a Monday morning meeting, an employee review, or participation in a new budgeting cycle this is the work expected of us to maintain the organization. In general, work defined by our job or position description comes here.

- ➢ **Reactive work**. The phone rings with requests—whether to put out a fire or respond to a colleague who needs something. In general, this is all the work that is neither intentional nor routine. And it can vary from little to most of a person's actual use of time.

The nature and proportion of our kind of work has major consequences for our energy. Most people feel more energized by being proactive rather than reactive, for example. And while an occasional crisis can get the juices flowing, constant crisis becomes a dispiriting fixed condition.

We generally do these three kinds of work in three states of companionship.

(1) **Working alone**. Whether reading a document or tapping at our keyboard, we do some things by ourselves.

(2) **Working with a colleague or two**. When we are on the phone or e-mailing we are speaking to one or several people who are involved with us in whatever we are doing.

(3) **Working in meetings**. Still other work involves many persons in short meetings or long retreats. Work is presumed to be done in a shared context. How do we do either kind of work? We do it in three modes: alone, with a few colleagues, or with many others in the format known to us as "meetings."

Again, energy is affected by our personal dispositions and by environment. In the first instance, some people love solitary conditions and others can't stand the silence for more than ten minutes. The key external factor is the other people. Some use our time wisely and some waste it.

When we are interacting with 1-3 others energy is strongest when we feel we are collaborating rather than just coordinating or cooperating. The real turn-on is to create something that none of the persons could, by himself or herself, create. Energy is lowest when nothing exciting is happening and agreement either settles on the lowest common denominator or on the one person who by status or assertiveness carries the day with a viewpoint.

In working with many others, energy is tough to build. Indeed, most people report that they spend 25% or more of their time in meetings and that most are not a good use of their time. People lose heart when the meetings seem to achieve little or when they do not feel their insight or knowledge has been tapped.

Energy is tangible, important, and build-able in your organization. Consider an Energy Audit to look at this most precious result as you pursue increasing achievement and enjoyment in your organization.