



SUSTAINABILITY

BY KAREN DAWSON

“...I want managers to seriously consider energy as a critical, limited, but renewable resource that enables excellence in individuals and organizations.”¹

“Things are going well right now, but I’m worried about sustaining the forward momentum. How can I keep the energy up?” So ended a recent coaching conversation I had with a senior leader in a large health authority.

Questions like this are common within my coaching practice. Without effective methods for replenishing energy in the workplace, organizations will be challenged to sustain excellence. How can leaders, in their everyday behaviour, make a difference in activating, renewing, and sustaining the energy that people bring to their work?

“To sustain” is to assist, buoy, buttress, comfort, confirm, endorse, foster, keep alive, nourish, nurture, validate.² This stream of words suggests that a leader who *sustains* the energy of their team is someone who approaches their role from a ‘servant-leader’ philosophy.

My coaching experience tells me that it is primarily the quality of relationships among people in an organization, and the relationships between those people and clients outside the company with whom they do business, that sustains energy and vitality.

In exploring organizational cycles of crisis and renewal, David Hurst writes about the dynamic, creative phase that accompanies the evolution of the social system of any new organization. It is at this 'young stage' that new organizations are charged with energy and insiders experience intense excitement as people work closely together with little formality or hierarchy. Intensive communication and interaction among teams allows them to deal with complex challenges and problems rapidly, as people reach out to each other.³

Is it possible to create and sustain that kind of dynamic energy in a mature organization? Unravelling, evaluating, and reconsidering the complex web of connections that exist within your own context seems like a great place to begin. A coaching question for your consideration: How would you assess the quality of *your* connections?

Jane Dutton writes that high-quality connections are marked by mutually positive regard, trust, and active engagement on both sides. "In a high quality connection, people feel more engaged, more open, more competent. They feel more alive." Dutton's research reveals that a high quality connection does not necessarily mean an intimate relationship, extensive interaction, or deep personal knowledge. Any point of contact with another person can potentially be a high-quality connection. One conversation, one e-mail exchange, one moment of connecting in a meeting "can infuse both participants with a greater sense of vitality, giving them a bounce in their steps and a greater capacity to act."⁴

Low quality connections seem to have the opposite effect on the energy level of organizational members. Peter Frost writes that low quality connections are marked by distrust and disregard of the other's worth. They eat away at people's ability to learn, to show initiative, and to take risks. Like metal corroded through exposure to toxic substances, Frost claims that people in organizations are corroded through exposure to the toxicity of low-quality connections. Motivation, loyalty, energy, and commitment evaporate.⁵

How does a leader grow and sustain high quality connections?

My reading of leadership books, my discussions with colleagues, and perhaps most important, my work with executives who work well in relationship with their team members have given me *some* sense of the high quality

connection process. Of course, this is always easier said than done. None of us are very good at knowing exactly when and how we are connecting effectively. However, our "connection detectors" are often good at reading when we are failing.

Respectful engagement in every relationship is a place to begin. In *Energize Your Workplace* Dutton offers these tips:

- Be present (minimizing distraction and being available)
- Be genuine (speak and respond from a real and honest place)
- Communicate affirmation (look for value in the other person)
- Listen effectively (listen actively, contextually, and learn as much as you can)
- Communicate clearly (express views and opinions with clarity to minimize defensiveness and support the other in understanding your message)

Our own effectiveness at building high-quality connections will increase when we pause to reflect, self-assess, and try new ways of interrelating. Asking for feedback from our colleagues and sharing our goals will improve the likelihood of sustaining our own leadership development.

Benjamin Zander, in his video *The Art of Possibility*, says that leaders are the relentless architects of the possibility that others can be.⁶ Once respectable engagement is alive and well, a leader's next challenge in sustaining energy is enabling others to act, to move forward, and to achieve success. Strengthening the learning and performance of a work unit or team creates dynamic energy. Those who are enabled feel an enhanced sense of being worthy of investment and at the same time the enablers are energized as they see themselves as having something worthy to offer. There are many actions that a leader can choose to directly (or indirectly) aid the performance of colleagues. Teaching, coaching, mentoring, advocating, and offering authentic feedback can all contribute to enhanced development and achievement.

Acting towards others in a way that conveys your belief in their potential is another key factor in sustaining energy. Seeing another person as creative and dependable builds trust and it allows them to venture forward with increased confidence.

Sharing valuable information, offering responsibility, granting access to resources, and encouraging risk-taking are all methods for creating a context in which motivation to perform well can grow. It is an engaging leadership challenge to explore your trust level and your trusting behaviour towards your team and colleagues.

As a leader, you are an architect of the environment in which high quality connections can flourish. To sustain the energy and motivation of your team is your responsibility, and I see it as an engaging challenge. As you reflect on the leaders in your life, the people who have trusted you, connected with you successfully, and supported you in achieving success it helps put into context the power of these relationships. Who do you need to be in order sustain the energy and vitality of your team?

Footnotes

- ¹ Dutton, J. (2003) *Energize Your Workplace*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- ² <http://dictionary.reference.com>
- ³ Hurst, D. (2002) *Crisis and Renewal*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press
- ⁴ Dutton, J. (2003) *Energize Your Workplace*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- ⁵ Frost, P. (2003) *Toxic Emotions at Work*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press
- ⁶ *Leadership: The Art of Possibility* Video, Groh Productions Inc.

About the Author

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