

Article

HUMAN ENERGY IN ORGANISATIONS

New ways to develop resilience, engagement and performance

By Christina Hersom,
chhe@implement.dk,
Implement Consulting Group

It signals engagement in organisations when employees get involved, are enthusiastic about what they do and commit themselves to the task-solving and common goal.

Since 2000, Gallup has followed the employee engagement of more than 30,000 employees in the United States. In 2018, they could conclude that only 34% of respondents were engaged, while 13% were actively disengaged. The remaining 53% were in a “not engaged” category as employees who were perhaps satisfied and showed up for work, but who probably only delivered a minimum and were quickly on their way if they got a better job offer¹. If we are to change these figures for the better, we need to find new ways to create engagement within our organisations.

Being engaged is linked to the human energy behind it. We can consider energy

as an organisational resource that increases the capacity of employees to motivation and action so that they can do their job and achieve the goals set². Energy that is needed for the people who need to do their very best every day – when stepping in and out of roles, working long hours, solving complex problems and constantly adapting to the technology needed to do their job. Demanding circumstances can deplete energy, which can lead to an absence of commitment – a commitment that is critical for sustainable organisations that need dedicated employees³. Fortunately, we can actively generate or maintain energy to build strength and resilience in the organisation.

For the past 20 years, the development of the capacity to mobilise energy in high-performing people has been explored in sports science. Each of us has the opportunity to increase performance through different human energy levels, in particular by building up our physical capacity. In addition, we also have the opportunity to develop and draw energy from the emotional and mental levels and to draw resources from a deeper sense of meaning and the values that contribute to our motivation and endurance⁴.

As management consultants working with managers, we learn that, in principle, it is often ordinary things that are crucial – no matter what level in the organisation we are working at. Everyday things you want to do more of. Things that you forgot to do. Or new things you want to introduce in your life. Something you want to think, say, feel or do differently. In connection with the development of a senior leadership group, a leader once said to me: “Well, these are the little things I have to decide to do ... and then do it!” Still, intentions want something new, while behaviour tends to want to stick to the old. We are up against the brain’s tendency to use the neural paths like it usually does, and it requires directional will, meaningful rituals and a good, supportive behavioural design that is followed all the way if we are to actually increase engagement through the development of human energy in organisations⁵.



Relational energy and insight into a new leadership role

Despite the fact that we have knowledge of how to build and support the development of individual energy for better performance, researchers point out that we do not yet know much about how energy can be usable at a relational level in order to achieve goals and results in the organisation⁶.

Some researchers define the energy as: “a heightened level of psychological resourcefulness generated from interpersonal interactions that enhances one’s capacity to do work.” (Owens et al. 2015:37). Since organisations can be seen as systems of interdependent individuals⁷, we can, from this perspective, make a shift in focus to a relatively unexplored source of energy in organisations, namely the relational energy.

This is the energy transfer that occurs between people where energy influences are shared and spread between employees and thus influence behaviour. Consider for example the following question: “Have you ever had a colleague, manager or team member that you felt energized by being near?” Through this question and the reflection on what happened in the situation, a change of perspective again takes place to you as a recipient of energy, and you find out what kind of influence an important other person has had on you and your performance.

Researchers have asked employees this question, and based on their answers they found three different types of energy stimulation. All with experienced transferred relational effects.



Motivational arousal	Stimuli from energy giver (leader)	Relational energy (employee)
Positive feeling	She always had such a good energy because she was a happy person who liked her job ...	Having her here as a leader motivated me to take things as they came and it gave me the energy to do my own work...
Cognitive stimulation	He always came up with new things and different perspectives ...	When I left him, I always got a lot more done because I got a lot of new ideas to work on...
Behavioural modelling	He developed a new way of doing it, and he knew exactly how he was going to spread it...	I was so inspired by the new ways we could do it, so it simply became more interesting...

Table (Owens, Bradley & Baker, Wayne & Sumpter, Dana & Cameron, Kim, 2015) customised with own leader/employee examples.



Here we see examples of how leaders through relational energy influence the transfer of psychological resources to the employees towards their goals. This is interesting because the energy transfer is associated with changes in employee engagement and performance. It therefore calls for a completely new type of leadership role. There is an opportunity here to increase engagement. Try to think through the above table with your own examples! Potentially, it is also the case that relational energy can lead to increased psychological resilience, mental health and well-being in the organisation⁸ which is possible because we as humans are more likely to seek out those who generate feelings of excitement, enthusiasm and positivity than those who do not. Try again to think through your own examples! Through this tendency to seek positive energy, the new role of the leader will also be able to contribute to the sustainability of the organisation in several ways in addition to the increased commitment of the individual.

Five energy questions that leaders can use

The researchers from before developed in their work five questions to be answered on a 1-5 scale (where 5 is “very much agreeable”). To understand the influence of relational energy, you as a leader can

consider these five questions yourself, or you can ask the questions to your employees. In doing so, you will gain knowledge of where (from whom) energy is transferred to yourself or the employees and how the engagement is affected. It is valuable knowledge, and it gives leaders a new opportunity for changed conversations about resilience, engagement and performance as well as a whole new basis for action. But this presupposes that we buy into the condition that we as human beings influence each other in organisations through energy. Here are the five questions that can be built into a traditional survey, a shorter pulse survey, or they can be integrated into reflections and conversations during development sessions.

1. I feel invigorated when I interact with xx.
2. After interacting with xx, I feel more energy to do my work.
3. I feel increased vitality when I interact with xx.
4. I would go to xx when I need to be “pepped up”.
5. After an exchange with xx, I feel more stamina to do my work.

Five paths to strategic energy in organisations

When Gallup conducted its employee engagement survey, they saw a clear difference between the organisations they worked with and their performance. The highly engaged and high-performing organisations took advantage of scientific, evidence-based approaches that could transform individuals and business performance supported by strategic and operational solutions that could transform the culture of the organisation. The less successful organisations introduced well-intended and periodic engagement surveys. However, they seemed to focus more on the measurement and reading of survey data itself than on improving engagement in the organisation through follow-up, methodological discipline and concrete action⁹.

Gallup also studied the highly engaged and high-performing organisations. It is often overlooked, but there is actually a lot to learn from what we can call the positive deviants. What we can learn from those who do well. From some of these organisations, five paths can be proposed for optimising engagement at the strategic level:

1. Ensure that you integrate engagement into the company's "human capital" strategy, e.g. through increased leadership involvement and a commitment to translating data through ongoing processes.
2. Use a research-validated survey to measure engagement in order to work on the solutions that actually affect what we might call engagement.
3. Understand where the company is and want to go. Examine what the real need to increase engagement is and how quickly internal capabilities need to change.
4. Take your eyes off survey data and see what conditions and elements help create engagement and drive performance in the organisation.

5. Consider employee engagement as the way in which the work is done. It needs to be integrated into workflows, and resources must be provided to support employees in doing what they do best.

Energy increases resilience and provides empowerment in the organisation

As human beings we can adapt to a lot. Leaders and employees are naturally adaptable and are highly able to change in relation to the environment in which they are located. In order to increase and maintain engagement, it requires ongoing processes of personalised thoughts, feelings and actions, drawing on the psychological skills that one possesses. This is not something unusual or extraordinary, but something that all employees can do on a daily basis as a kind of protective factor in what scientists call "ordinary magic"¹⁰.

At the same time, it takes energy to act dedicated as an employee in a changing organisation, and therefore it must be mobilised continuously. If it is to be sustainable, it must be in a healthy balance between the perceived challenges and opportunities for recovery. In a principle between these extremes, we can face the day-to-day challenges in a resilient way through sensible energy. We can thrive even if it is difficult, we can bounce back if we lose energy for a while, and we can actually achieve growth through positive psychological change based on the challenges¹¹.

The balance will be different from employee to employee, but at the same time it can also be seen in relation to the collegiate energy which in many situations makes up the context in which the employee is located. At the same time, it is also in this context that the leader's new role as an energy supplier may apply. Through the motivating and engaging stimuli and interactions, the people who drive the company forward together can succeed with their goals in the long term if they take the mutual human impact seriously.

The framework and preconditions of the work affect our energy as human beings and, conversely, the individual and relational energy ultimately also affects the engagement that supports the organisation's performance in the long term. There is still a need to optimise energy and engagement at a time when we need to thrive and perform in organisations which by default are now characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambivalence. It is something that is both challenging and rewarding at once, and it is something that calls for energy leadership.

References

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