

Seeds and Hooks; Not Loaves and Fish *Building High Energy Organizations*

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*“Give a man a fish and you
feed him for a day.
Teach a man to fish and he
feeds himself for life.”*

THE PROBLEM

Most of us believe the foundation of all education is to foster independence, creativity and self-determination. With the same goal, the empowerment movement has been the touchstone of modern business for the last 20 years. Simultaneously, each new wave of employees have been seeking and demanding greater flexibility and meaning in their work. Accelerating change all across the business landscape has further complicated matters by necessitating constant re-creation of each company in order to remain competitive. The sum of this confluence of events is that the only sustainable competitive advantage may be a truly empowered work force that is motivated to reinvent their organization. ([The Fifth Discipline](#) by Peter Senge).

Since every manager knows that hiring and developing a work force that is willing and able to direct their maximum energies to achieve the goals is imperative, why have so many failed? All of us know that mediocrity is not a competitive edge, so why are so many seemingly well-trained leaders mired in the “barely adequate” category? In talking with these under-performing managers, the attribution of causality is usually an identification of limitations.

For some these limitations are created by the corporate or business environment, i.e., not enough resources, rigid systems, poor performance by others, unclear goals, market conditions, etc. Others focus on their own or their team limitations, i.e., a lack of industry knowledge, poor training in systems and procedures, or a lack of leadership capabilities. In all these discussions, not one ever said, “I really don’t have a clue about the fundamental process of building outstanding teamwork”.

Instead of attempting to identify the illusive core traits of the super leaders, it may be much more helpful to focus on producing a 10% increase in leadership productivity across your organization. For most industries, this will give you an immediate competitive edge that others will find hard to emulate. How can this 10% gain be achieved? By instilling in teams an understanding of human needs and by using a powerful team process that drives performance.

THE SOLUTION: CREATING ORGANIZATIONAL ENERGY

Each of us can quickly sense organizational and team energy. Spend a few hours in the midst of any team and we walk away with a clear impression of the members’ passion, intensity and involvement. Sometimes energy expresses itself as a crackling electrical current that seems to run through the team’s activities. On other teams, energy manifests itself as a quiet intensity that feels sustained and powerful. At the opposite end, the feeling engendered is a dull listlessness or a passive lethargy. Whether high or low, this energy is contagious. Our own excitement, involvement and passion increase with exposure to a high-energy group. Most of us are drawn to these teams because we want to participate. It feels great. On the other hand, low-energy groups bore us and, at times, repel us because of their seeming disconnected purposelessness. All of us would like to know how we can create greater energy on our teams.

MEANINGFULNESS: ENERGY’S FUEL

Every one of us wants to have a sense of purpose in our lives. Our desire to make a difference can range from small, everyday activities that give us significance, to major lifelong activities that fill us with purpose.

Meaningfulness comes in many different forms and has many facets. It is a reflection of our culture, our values and our personality.

Some of us are inspired by a mission, others gain purpose through relationships, and still others by demonstrating mastery in their field. Most of us have multiple sources of meaning and have a strong desire to satisfy part of our meaningfulness need in our everyday work. As managers and leaders, we must be keenly aware of each team member's need for meaning and purpose. Our task is to listen carefully and thoughtfully address how the work environment can be developed so that every team member has an opportunity to gain more meaningfulness. Every experienced leader has witnessed the burst of a team member's initiative and creativity when provided with an opportunity that matched their needs. Because of the uniqueness of each individual and the variety of work environments, there is no on-size-fits-all answer to helping our teammates gain feelings of purpose. However, there is a foolproof process that helps:

- A. Listen deeply.
 - 1. Have one-on-ones
 - 2. Ask questions about interests and values
 - 3. Don't interrupt
 - 4. Check your assumptions
 - 5. Have a real interest in their future
- B. Problem-solve
 - 1. Spend time in creative thinking
 - 2. Match skills and interest with job tasks (as much as possible)
 - 3. Think of ways to positively challenge
 - 4. Get ideas from others
- C. Have an in-depth team discussion
 - 1. Clarify the purpose and vision of the team
 - 2. Let the team help determine their future
- D. Develop a feedback process
 - 1. Set up balanced scorecard metrics
 - 2. Follow-up with each team member regularly

RESPECT: ENERGY'S ACCELERATOR

One characteristic that pervades peak performance cultures is respect. When we respect others, we show honor and esteem for them through our words, actions and decisions. In showing this consideration and high regard for our co-workers, not only is *what we do important* but also *how we do it*. When receiving

respect from others, our typical response is increased pride and self-esteem. We automatically become more energized, awake and involved. Increased self-confidence drives risk-taking, action and participation. All of us have a powerful need for respect from those around us, especially those that have influence in our lives. When respect is absent or when we feel disrespected, we either withdraw or become angry. The end result in a work environment is disillusionment, apathy and, sometimes, belligerence and aggression. One common feeling occurring in low respect cultures is a pervading sense of powerlessness: a powerlessness to impact their own work, career or future. Consequently, these employees go only through motions and sleepwalk through their jobs. Any organization hoping to build a re-inventing, innovative organization with powerless employees is doomed for failure. Some steps that always help to improve the respect level are:

- A. Make a deep commitment to increasing team energy through respect and esteem.
- B. Discuss with your team how respect and disrespect are conveyed (you might be surprised).
- C. As a team, identify behaviors that result in success of the respect value. How could you measure and track these successes?
- D. Jointly create problem-solving steps that involve the team and build energy.

A FINAL RECOMMENDATION

In the day-to-day business fire fight, the keys to creating exceptional high energy teams can be easily lost. How do we regain our awareness and focus on building greater meaningfulness of work and increase respect with our people? The task requires great commitment but can be made easier by frequently asking ourselves a few core questions.

- Has my behavior today increased or decreased the energy of my team or organization?
- How can I create more meaningfulness for (put any direct report's name here) in his/her job?
- How can I show my esteem for my whole team and each team member?

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