



HEALTH & WELLNESS / LIFESTYLE

Working as if Energy Matters

Nancy Post, MAC, PhD

I started by asking what my audience valued most about their work. Like corn popping, answers came from the audience of 35 professionals who had signed up for my seminar.

"Friendships with colleagues."

"Satisfaction with getting something done!"

"Making a difference in people's lives."

"Managing people."

"Excelling in my craft."

"Innovation."

"Paid vacation days."

"Getting my paycheck."

Let's state the obvious: People take classes about building energy when they feel they need more energy. The participants in this class fell into three categories: those who were fatigued by their current work; those in transition looking for a better opportunity; and those who had failed finding what they loved and wanted change. A number of the participants were referred by their acupuncturists or psychologists, who thought that their client's health would benefit from getting help.

"Does your work give you energy?" I asked.

"Sometimes," was the most frequent, though hesitant, answer.

"How much time in your adult life do you spend working?" I asked.

"About a third," was the most common answer.

"So, a third of your life may or may not give you energy, and that's OK with you?" I asked.

I've learned to wait and let people contemplate the big questions. As I wait, I imagine what they might be thinking.

Audience member A: I'm not taking charge of my energy. I never thought I could intentionally build energy at work. How intriguing.

Audience member B: I don't like my work at all. In fact, I'm in this seminar to learn how to build energy, but I can't even conceive of a way to do this while working. Don't you take a job, and put up and shut up?

Audience member C: I'm in a professional transition, and I know my last two jobs took every ounce of energy that I had. What have I got left now? It's hard to even drum up the energy to think about this.

The word "energy" was not new or threatening to these people, but the practices associated with building energy would prove revolutionary. I continued asking questions.

"For a moment, right now, pretend that your energy is the most valuable asset you have. Good energy brings vitality, mental clarity, emotional equanimity and engenders the ability to perform at high levels. If you have healthy energy, you'll spring back faster from difficulties, modulate your lifestyle and manage change more effectively. In fact, one could say that good energy is necessary for good performance on a sustained level. "So, if you pretend that your energy is such a valuable asset, what might you do differently at work?

Quit," said the first person.

"Eat," said another.

"Not work at night," replied a third.

"Fire my boss," offered another.

"I'm not sure," said the oldest member of the audience, a leader in the Chamber of Commerce.

A 30-something member of the audience, with a blue streak in his hair and tattoo on his arm, stood up.

"This whole question is so much about 'pretend.' Where I work as a software developer, no one cares about my 'energy.' They care about my output; what I can get done and how fast I can do it. They want speed and don't give a #&*! about balance or how much energy you have. They just want the job done."

"Great point," I answered. "Let's look at our culture's assumptions about key areas: health, time, diet and productivity, and see if we agree with these assumptions. First, how many of you in this audience go to a practitioner who helps you with your energy? A practitioner of Chinese medicine? Massage therapist? Chiropractor? Homeopath? Athletic trainer?"

All hands went up except for one - the Chamber of Commerce fellow.

"And how many of you get reimbursed for these services through your health insurance?"

Only a few hands were raised.

"So you are willing to pay money in order to improve your energy?"

"Yes," most in the room replied.

"Why?"

The people in the room were already aware of how they feel when their energy is good. As consumers of "energy medicine," they enjoyed the benefit of high-quality care and had already experienced that good care can lead to feeling better. Each, however, also knew that good energy can easily be lost if their work drained them. Most were seeking ways to change their approach to work so that they maintained, or even built, excellent energy at work, as well as with their practitioners. The assumption about health in our culture is that it's your job to keep yourself healthy. It's your responsibility alone, using your own money, to keep yourself in balance. Even if work dynamics present impossible challenges, the worker is responsible to cope.

I wonder what would happen if we fostered a different idea. Health is a collective and individual responsibility, and organizations that value health have the obligation to foster work environments that induce health.

"Would this be revolutionary?" I asked the group. "What might your employers do if they wanted your energy to be great?"

"They'd give us time to eat lunch," the software developer said. "And I wouldn't keep picking the crumbs out of my keyboard."

I then asked about the most loaded issue: time. People use time, wish they had more, and frequently feel victimized by not having enough of it.

"At work, how do you use time? What pace do you keep? Do you have enough time to do your work? Do you work too much? Too little? How do you know what's correct for you?"

Most of the audience said that they have more work than they have time for and usually felt pressured. We agreed that, across most organizations, people were expected to get a job done once it was given to them, regardless of whether or not they had the time or resources to do the job. In fact, many people said that they simply accepted what they knew to be utterly unrealistic deadlines rather than negotiate for what they felt was reasonable. About half the audience believed that they needed to multitask in order to get their work done. Talking on the phone while walking between meetings was the most common multitasking method. One woman even made business calls while cooking dinner for her family.

Three people in the audience who worked for a major health care center admitted that they often had two or even three meetings booked during the same time period, and that they never stayed in any meeting until it ended in order to attend at least two. They also admitted that they didn't have enough time to finish anything that came up in any meeting. Each of these three had children at home and firmly stopped work for at least an hour to be with their kids, and then went back to work at home at night. The cultural rule they were following required that you use as much time as necessary to do a job, despite intrusions into personal time. If you have more to do than time to do it, multitask.

An acupuncturist in the room piped in: "I found that I enjoy my work more when I do one thing at a time with clear focus. I can't call patients back while I do billing. When I make time for each, I do each well, without the need to redo anything."

In fact, most research on productivity supports a mindful approach to time, arguing that a series of single-minded tasks are done more effectively with less need for rework or correction. In fact, there is a significant body of literature that proves downtime improves productivity.

One of my favorite clients, a CEO of a health care system, mandates sabbaticals for her highly pressured VPs and also requires that all vacation time must be taken each year rather than accrued. An athlete, she also understands the role of food as fuel during work days that can seem like a race, so she commissioned a task force to change the cafeteria's offerings. Now busy employees can not only buy healthy food and snacks, they can purchase low-cost healthy dinners for their families and pick up the food before leaving work. She doesn't want her employees to go home and do work while they spend time with their families. She wants them to eat healthy food together.

When we work, we contribute our energy to get our work done. Whether you teach, heal, write, produce, manage, lead or play ball, you are contributing to our society. Your energy matters to us all. You deserve to eat, rest, do one thing at a time and have time and resources to do your job well. You deserve to work as if energy mattered.

Class dismissed!

DECEMBER 2009