

Sustaining Energy at Work

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We live in a country that is learning to be sustainable. We now see the need for change after having overstretched almost all of our resources - fuel, money and people - to the point of near collapse.

We have burned so much fossil fuel that its use as a real energy option is near end. We have over-leveraged assets, loaning money again and again to the point where the collapsed economy can no longer support a fake bubble. Going to work in this depressed economy, many people work harder because they are afraid to lose their jobs. People now use more of their own energy at work. Despite Jon Stewart's latest efforts to do away with the "fear," it seems to win the national popularity contest as the last emotion standing.

During these times, we must take human sustainability seriously.

There are a vast number of people who go to work each day feeling compromised. They may be tired, stressed out by workplace dynamics, and sorry that the weekend has ended. They are weary of being told to achieve "work-life balance" when every message they receive at work rewards them for doing more and doing things faster, despite the fact that this approach does not produce better results.

It is impossible, they think, to question this because it is the view of the world as they know it, yet they know that something is deeply wrong. They are expected to "multi-task" and divide their attention rather than to focus as a way to cope with more work. Their organization may have even downsized, reducing the number of people to do the same amount of work. They believe they must do more with less.

With this worldview, people along with their time, energy and health become expendable resources. In an organizational machine, they are used up and replaced with new people when they are tired. It's a production model which equates people with car parts, yet has no place for tired scrap metal.

Fatigue and unexpressed hopelessness has infected the American workplace. Estimates show that about a quarter of our working population is on Prozac. It is easier to medicate an employee than question a worldview about work.

What's really needed is organizational healing.

I am in agreement here with business experts. Even before the economy collapsed, *The Harvard Business Review* published an article in 2005 called "Are You Working Too Hard?"

The piece noted: "...the dangers of burnout are real. Studies cited by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) indicate that some 40 percent of all workers today feel overworked, pressured, and squeezed to the point of anxiety, depression, and disease. And the

problem is getting worse due to intensified competition, rapid market changes, and an unending stream of terrible news about natural disasters, terrorism, and the state of the economy. The cost to employers is appalling: corporate health insurance premiums shot up 11.2 percent in 2004 - quadruple the rate of inflation - according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. Today, the American Institute of Stress reports roughly 60 percent of doctor visits stem from stress related complaints and illnesses. In total, American businesses lose \$300 billion annually to lowered productivity, absenteeism, healthcare and related costs stemming from stress."

And this was written BEFORE the recession.

The article, a conversation with Dr. Herbert Benson, associate professor at Harvard Medical School and founder of the Mind/Body Medical Institute, continues to show that some stress is good, while other stress can hurt your health.

In Chinese medicine, we have a fuller understanding of stress, which can be diagnosed as one or more types of energy. Chinese medicine has dozens of diagnostic categories and stress falls into many of them. For example, patients who complain of one-sided migraine headaches caused by staring at computer screens all day or persistent frustration with work may fit the category "liver/yang" or "liver heat" syndrome. Others, whose panic about being laid-off led to lower back pain might have kidney deficiency. Worry can be the cause of sleeplessness, immunity problems, digestive disorders, or both. We might call this one "spleen/heart blood deficiency."

In short, Chinese medicine provides a subtler and more clinically accurate measure and also a capable response to work-related stresses.

In the early 1980s, I became fascinated with the interface of organizational life and the Chinese understanding of energy. Since people spend countless hours using their energy at work, it seemed natural to me to develop approaches that replenish energy at work. If we took an organic look at work, we would apply principles of organism health to the workplace.

Organizational expert Gareth Morgan's seminal work, *"Images of Organizations"* (1986) admitted that organizations were, indeed, organisms, needing to remain responsive to their environments. Yet, the dynamics of how to build and sustain energy were only considered in terms of remaining viable in a financial market. If we keep the organism called "an organization" alive, we also need to think about the life energy of the employees.

We know the dynamics of health. If you use energy, you need to replenish it. All day long, we breathe - replenishing oxygen, taking in scents. We move, using and replenishing muscle. We eat, using and replenishing nutritive *qi*. Sleep restores cells in the brain and body. It seems natural to use and replenish all day long.

Yet most workplaces are designed to expect "output." People are told to "use yourself fully," "give your all," "work hard and play hard." In short, use up your *qi* (energy) and use your sick days and vacation to recover.

If you are one of many feeling overstressed or overworked, you may be overusing your energy. If so, you may be depleting one or more of five primary types of energy.

As noted in the featured chart, if "stress" hits you mentally, you may find yourself in the third column.

If "stress" effects you emotionally, you may see yourself in column two. And if "stress" effects your body, you may be in column one. You may find yourself in a number of places when your energy is low (see chart).

The Five Elements: Common Physical, Emotional & Mental Expressions of Imbalance

Element	Physical Expression	Emotional Manifestation	Mental Manifestations
Water	Back Pain Dizziness Frequent Urination Dryness/Thirst Exhaustion Loss of Hearing Craving Salt	Excessive Fear Paranoia Bravado Lack of Fear Suspicion Passivity	Excessive ambition Dizziness Dullness Stupidity Aimlessness Lack of ambition Aimlessness
Wood	One sided Headaches Eye Strain Infl exibility Inguinal Hernia PMS with Anger Craving Sour Foods	Excessive Anger Fury Rage/Aggression Suppressed Anger Depression	Excessively analytic Lack of rationality Mental rigidity Lack of structure Excessively critical Poor sense of time Inability to initiate
Fire	Palpitations Poor Circulation Tendency to be Hot or Cold Insomnia Loss of Sexual Energy Craving Bitter Foods	Excessive Joy Inappropriate Humor Sadism Excessive Expressiveness Lack of Joy/Sadness Mania	Absent minded Incoherent Manic Inappropriate sense of Humor Vapid Abused/abusive
Earth	Weight Gain or Loss Stomach Ulcer Mouth Sores Muscle Weakness Craving Sweets	Excessive Sympathy Inappropriate Stasis Lack of Concern Scapegoating Masochism	Obsessional Overwork Poor concentration Excessively routine Worrying
Metal	Colitis Hay Fever Allergies Asthma Eczema Craving Spicy Foods	Excessive Grief Sorrow Mournfulness Lack of Grief Isolationism	Spacey Overly critical Excessive pride Overly exacting Constantly evaluating Overly hierarchical

The beauty of Chinese medicine is that it shows the relationship between physical, mental and emotional manifestations of energy as well as being more accurate in diagnosing exactly which energy needs help. Thus, when your company downsizes and you feel grief, yet also have a hard time concentrating, and also may be constipated, you fit a pattern, and can be helped with all three symptoms at once. When your company reorganizes and your decision-making authority is limited, your frustration and one-sided headaches are expected to increase.

In short, if work takes too much of a certain type of your energy, you will have less, and you will likely

be symptomatic in some way. Individuals, however, cannot be held totally accountable to replace energy consumed by work. This would be like trying to use blood from a mouse to give a transfusion to an elephant.

Well intended wellness programs must be matched by an organization's commitment to set sustainable goals, keep priorities rather than doing everything, and making the emotional and physical work environments healthy. There are many ways to make an organization sustainable if the leadership holds the vision.

I know I am stating the obvious. I am putting a spotlight on the cost of the burn out model that we are trying to change. In my next article, I will look at these same elements and chart how organizational energy can be sustained.

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