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# What Creates Energy in Organizations?

**S**pend some time in most any organization and you are sure to hear people talk about the level of energy associated with different people or projects. In some instances, an initiative may be characterized in terms of the energy “around” it. In others, a team in which ideas flow freely and its members build effortlessly on one another’s work will be described as “high energy.” In still others, a particularly influential person may be known as an “energizer” — someone who can spark progress on projects or within groups.

On the flip side are the people who have an uncanny ability to drain the life out of a group. These energy-sappers are avoided whenever possible, even when they have expertise to contribute to solving a problem. When a meeting with a “de-energizer” is unavoidable, people often waste time dreading it and mentally rehearse how they will cope. They usually find the interaction unproductive and disheartening and afterward may seek out colleagues in order to vent their frustration. Thus de-energizers not only drain the people they meet but often affect the productivity of people they might not even know.

Most people are quick to acknowledge that they have both energizers and de-energizers in their lives. Equally quickly, they relate energy to important managerial concerns such as team performance, innovation, employee motivation and job satisfaction. Yet while the term energy is pervasive in much of organizational life, it is also a highly elusive concept in that context.<sup>1</sup> Usually when people describe energizing conversations, they refer to ones in which they are mentally engaged, enthused and willing to commit effort to possibilities arising from the discussion. But is energy truly related to performance or learning in organizations? And how is it created and transferred in groups?

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People commonly talk about the energy (or lack thereof) associated with certain individuals or company initiatives. Managers can translate such talk into action that creates more energy, improves performance and fosters learning.

**Rob Cross, Wayne Baker  
and Andrew Parker**



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## We found a critical link between a person's position within the "energy network" and his or her performance as measured by annual human-resource ratings.

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To answer those questions, we assessed energy within seven large groups in different organizations. (See "About the Research.") While energy can be derived from intrinsic motivation or inspired by job design, we were interested in how it is generated in day-to-day interactions with others at work. Rather than considering energy as a product of charismatic leadership or something created within the confines of a team, we set out to assess how relationships with all of one's colleagues — in other words, within a social network — affect the energy of an individual, a group or an entire organization.

The social networks mapped from this information can be very illuminating. (See "Mapping Energy in Social Networks.") Yet these analyses are valuable for more than the light they shed on energizers and de-energizers in social networks. They also reveal why energy is important for performance and learning and

how it is created (or destroyed) in organizations. And they give rise to a set of questions that can help managers and the people they oversee increase the energy they generate in their interactions with colleagues.

### Performance and Learning Implications

Some may consider energy an impossibly squishy subject — one for which a correlation with performance and learning cannot be established. But we have evidence that indicates otherwise: In three of the seven organizations we studied, we were able to obtain reliable performance information on the people within the network.<sup>2</sup> And we found a critical link between a person's position within the "energy network" and his or her performance as measured by annual human-resource ratings.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, we discovered that those who energized others were higher performers, even after controlling for people's ability to get the information they need from their own networks and technologies. There are several important reasons for this connection between energy and performance.

Energizers are more likely to have their ideas considered and put into action. They motivate others to act both within an organization (to undertake change initiatives, for example) and outside it (such as a client considering the purchase of software or services).

Energizers get more from those around them. In the short term, people devote themselves more fully to interactions with an energizer, giving undivided attention in a meeting or problem-solving session. They are also more likely to devote discretionary time to an energizer's concerns. People working with an energizer will spend time reflecting on a problem while commuting, send an extra e-mail or two to find necessary information, or go out of their way to introduce someone to a valued contact.

Energizers also attract the commitment of other high performers. Their reputations spread quickly, and people position themselves to work for these engaging colleagues. The desire to work for or with energizers seems to account for our last finding about energy and performance: Not only are energizers better performers themselves, but people who are strongly connected to an energizer are also better performers.

Finally, energizers affect more than just performance. They also have a striking impact on what individuals and networks as a whole learn over time. People rely on their networks for information to get their work done, and they are *much* more likely to seek information and learn from energizers than from de-energizers.<sup>4</sup>

### About the Research

We first used social-network analytic techniques<sup>i</sup> to assess energy in seven large networks in a strategy consulting firm, a financial services organization, a petrochemical business, a government agency and three technology companies.<sup>ii</sup> The networks were composed of between 44 and 125 people. Using a case-based approach informed by perspectives from social-network analysis, charismatic leadership, motivation, role theory and goal-setting theory, we then conducted 63 interviews with people from each of the seven social networks (interviewing three people from each hierarchical level) in order to understand better how energy is created or destroyed. The interviews were semistructured and required interviewees to discuss interactions and relationships with people they had identified in the social-network analysis as either energizing or de-energizing.

i. A social network is defined as a specified set of actors and their relationships. Social-network analysis applies statistics and mathematics to understand the patterns of relationships among actors and the implications of these relationships. See, for example, S. Wasserman and K. Faust, "Social-Network Analysis: Methods and Applications" (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

ii. For additional details, see R. Cross, W. Baker and A. Parker, "Charged Up: The Creation and Depletion of Energy in Social Networks," working paper, IBM Institute for Knowledge-Based Organizations, Cambridge, Massachusetts, July 2002.

While energizers have a disproportionate effect on group learning, the expertise of de-energizers often goes untapped no matter how relevant it is. Instead of finding ways to modify their behavior, however, de-energizers tend to persist in unconstructive approaches when they are bypassed. In the words of one executive: "Avoiding them just makes them yell louder and cause more problems because they don't feel heard. And it can become a crusade for them. They keep pushing their opinions harder, rather than trying different ways to engage the group constructively."

In short, we systematically found that energy is more than just a New Age concept. It has a substantial and predictable effect on performance and innovation in organizations. But can anything be done to create — or at least not destroy — energy? Yes, and the

first step is to understand some simple but dramatic differences between energizers and de-energizers.

## Energy Creation

Two themes emerged from our interviews with people about energy. First, energy is not just a matter of the observable behavior in an interaction; it is also dependent on characteristics of the individuals involved in a given interaction and the relationship between them. For example, in an otherwise identical discussion, people may be energized by the vision of someone known for her integrity but turned off by someone who is not considered trustworthy. Second, energy is created in conversations that balance several dimensions of an interaction. Hitting the midpoint, or

## Mapping Energy in Social Networks

Energy is part of everyday talk and experience in organizational life. It clearly is associated with people's motivation and willingness to exert effort, and it is tightly linked to progress in organizations — initiatives that are described as having energy are usually the ones moving forward. Yet energy is also an abstract idea with little clarity regarding how it might be created or how it influences outcomes. A social-network view of energy can make broad patterns observable and thereby actionable in organizations.

Managers can use social-network analysis to find out who the "attractors" in the organization are, which projects

generate the most enthusiasm, and whether reorganizations or strategic initiatives are having any effect. Social-network analysis can also identify energy sappers — individuals, functional or leadership groups that are having a de-energizing effect on the organization.

To create the diagram below, for example, we assessed a group of engineers within a petrochemical organization. We asked each of the members to rate the level of energy he or she usually felt when interacting with each of the others. Respondents were asked to indicate a value from 1 to 5, with 1 indicating that interactions with a given person were "strongly de-energizing" and 5

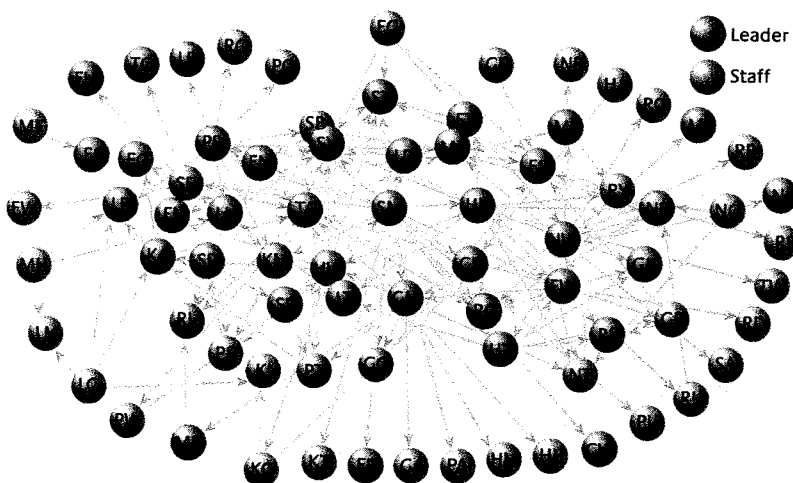
meaning they were "strongly energizing." The results indicated that many in the network found their supervisors de-energizing. In the diagram, the person to whom the arrow points was a de-energizer in the eyes of the person at the other end of the line. Group and organization de-energizers are identified where the arrow points cluster.

In another study, we analyzed a government agency that had recently gone through a reorganization following the September 11 terrorist attacks. New executives had been brought in to establish and mobilize support for a new set of priorities. In this case, the responses to the question about energy, in conjunction with interviews of network members, made it clear that the new leaders were highly energizing and effectively engaging others in the new strategic direction.

In both the petrochemical company and the government agency, the insights created by social-network analysis formed the basis of feedback and informed coaching and development processes that improved morale and effectiveness.

Figure adapted from W. Baker, R. Cross and M. Wooten, "Positive Organizational Network Analysis and Energizing Relationships," in "Positive Organizational Scholarship," eds. K. Cameron, J. Dutton and R. Quinn (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, in press).

### De-Energizing Supervisors in a Petrochemical Organization



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## The ability to create a compelling vision is a consistent differentiator between energizers and de-energizers. Energizers see realistic possibilities; de-energizers see roadblocks.

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sweet spot, of these five dimensions, rather than the extremes, is the challenge for those interested in generating energy.

**People are energized by interactions in which a compelling vision is created.** Energy is not usually generated in conversations about current or past problems. Whether in the pursuit of personal or business objectives, energy is produced from a focus on possibilities. These possibilities, or visions, must be inspiring and worthy of people's time and effort, but they cannot be overwhelming. Interviewees consistently indicated that conversations about unrealistic projects were draining and that they often left such interactions either annoyed that they had wasted time or distressed by the amount of work they had inherited.

The ability to create a compelling vision is a consistent differentiator between energizers and de-energizers. Energizers see realistic possibilities; de-energizers see roadblocks at every turn. By consistently airing their negative views, they can have a deadly effect on the ability of a group to create a compelling but realistic future. As one manager said about two people on his team: "We have one guy who always sees only problems or reasons that we can't do things a certain way. That gets old over time. It's not a single disagreement that kills you; it's the personality behind it. But another member of the team has more of a tendency to see opportunities in situations, and that's energizing all around. People want to take part in building something."

**People are energized by interactions in which they can contribute meaningfully.** Energizers create opportunities for people to enter conversations or problem-solving sessions in ways that make them feel heard. In contrast, de-energizers often either do not create the space in a conversation for others to engage or do not find ways to value different perspectives. This can be a particular problem for people with a great deal of expertise. One software developer had this to say about a colleague: "I couldn't even get into the conversation. It was like she knew the answer already, and we were just doing the team thing to come to the answer. And if anything wavered from that path, it was put down. When I finally got into the conversation she just kind of glossed over my point and gave me a look like 'Nice try, but ...' and went on in another direction. I didn't say anything else in that meeting and didn't push hard after that for the rest of the week."

This is not to say that all contributions should be received

uncritically — just that effective contributions need to be acknowledged and ineffective ones handled in a way that does not marginalize the contributor. Consider how an employee of a government agency talked about her boss: "In one case, he sat down with me over lunch and said, 'I don't think we should go in the direction you suggest, and here is why. Do you think I'm off base?' And he really meant it — he would have changed his mind or built on my ideas if I had different opinions that held up. I know that's true because it has happened since then. But he let me know that he was most concerned with getting a good idea, not with whose idea it was."

**People are energized when participants are fully engaged in an interaction.** Energy in conversations increases as people contribute meaningfully and at the same time learn from others similarly engaged. Body language plays an important role; it can show lack of attention, as people attempt to do more than one thing at a time, and it can also signal and inspire energy through many subtle but important cues. One executive had this to say about an energizing colleague: "He just seems to exert a sheer force that you feed off of. He is animated and engaged with you. He is also listening and reacting to what you are saying with undivided attention. Not many people do that. They go through the motions of listening or they listen only to figure out how they can advance their own points of view."

The mental intensity required to engage fully with others can itself be draining. The use of humor, in the right measure and kind, can relieve the intensity of such interactions and help people refocus. But energizers are not simply entertainers or even necessarily all that charismatic or intense. Rather, they bring themselves fully to a given interaction, keeping their attention on the person or people they are involved with at the moment.

**People are energized in interactions marked by progress.** Energizers are driven to a goal (a compelling vision) but are open and flexible about how to get there. That allows progress to occur in unexpected ways as people determine on their own how to move an idea or a project forward.

In contrast, de-energizers may have a goal in mind but a preconceived notion of how to get there, which they attempt to impose on everyone. For example, one software developer told us this story about a manager he worked with: "We had been working like crazy

on this project when he swooped in and just started telling us what we should do. He didn't take the time to try to understand what we were telling him or even care about the work we had done. That really crushed not only the ideas that could have been developed in that session but also kept people from caring and putting in any more effort than they had to going forward." In other words, the heavy-handed intervention by the manager had the opposite of the intended effect, as the software developers disengaged and stalled any progress the project might have made. That happens far more frequently than busy executives might think. Often overloaded with problems, they come into meetings with a firefighting mentality and frequently leave feeling that they have made a real contribution to putting out the fires. What executives miss, however, is the devastating effect on energy that the exclusive focus on problems and their own favored solutions can have.

Interestingly, de-energizers can also wipe out a sense of progress by being too *unfocused* — by constantly bringing up unresolvable problems so that no one understands which direction to take. Although people do not have to leave an interaction with a solution, they must leave knowing which steps to take next.

**People are energized in interactions when hope becomes part of the equation.** People don't initially have to like either the tasks or the leader associated with a project in order to be energized. But emotion, in the form of hope, plays a role in energizing interactions. Hope allows people to become energized when they begin to believe that the objective is worthy and can be attained. They get excited about the possibilities and stop looking for the pitfalls.

Energizers have two characteristics that influence others' willingness to hope. They speak their minds rather than harboring hidden agendas or acting the way they think their role in the organization dictates. People feel like they get the truth from energizers, even when it is not necessarily pleasant. Second, they maintain integrity between their words and their actions. In our interviews, we repeatedly heard about scenarios in which hopes were dashed (and energy depleted) because someone did not uphold his or her commitments. A software developer described how this happened with one of her colleagues: "The first time we talked about a project, I went home ecstatic. I literally spent the weekend framing the project. But he never came back to me with anything he said he would, and of course I ended up with all the work. Now I know better when I hear him talk, even though most people, not knowing the history, would be pretty excited about the possibilities."

### **Eight Decisions That Increase Energy**

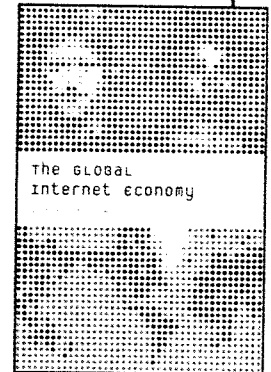
These eight questions form a diagnostic for addressing points in a network where energy is flagging or nonexistent. At a minimum, they can constitute a self-test that everyone might consider, either individually or by seeking feedback from colleagues.

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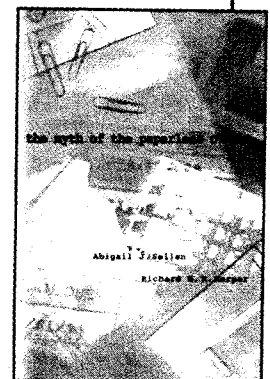


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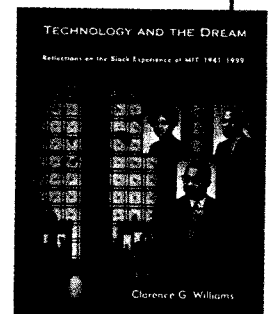


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We refer to these as decisions in order to emphasize that people choose behaviors — many times in most days — that have a striking effect on others' energy.

- Do you weave relationship development into work and day-to-day actions? Concern for others and connections outside of work-based roles allow trust to develop.
- Do you do what you say you are going to do? People's reservations fall away only if they can trust that others will follow through on their commitments.
- Do you address tough issues with integrity? People are energized in the presence of others who stand for something larger than themselves.
- Do you look for possibilities or just identify constraints? De-energizers keep ideas from ever getting off the ground by seeing only obstacles to success.
- When you disagree with someone, do you focus attention on the issue at hand rather than the individual? Energizers are able to disagree with an idea while not marginalizing the person who presented it.
- Are you cognitively and physically engaged in meetings and conversations? Rather than going through the motions of being engaged — something that is much more transparent than many de-energizers think — energizers physically and mentally show their interest in the person and the topic of conversation.
- Are you flexible in your thinking or do you force others to come to your way of thinking? Rather than force others to accept their way of thinking, energizers draw people into conversations and projects by finding opportunities for them to contribute.
- Do you use your own expertise appropriately? Too often, experts or leaders destroy energy in their haste to find a solution or demonstrate their knowledge.

When combined with a social-network analysis, this diagnostic can provide a useful device for two parties (or two categories of people, such as leaders and followers) to locate problems in their interactions. The network analysis can pinpoint problem areas, while the questions inform behavioral change.

Several of the organizations we worked with changed their human resource practices in an effort to inspire energizing behaviors more broadly. Simple alterations to hiring criteria or performance evaluation processes can have a systematic impact on how energy is fostered within an organization. For example,

one organization included items on enthusiasm and energy in rating schemes used to assess potential hires. Another included dimensions of energy and trust (a critical relational characteristic and foundation for energy) in 360-degree performance-feedback processes. A third embedded ideas about increasing energy into leadership-development training.

ENERGY IN ORGANIZATIONS matters for performance, morale, innovation and learning — people understand this intuitively and our research confirms it. By mapping relationships, managers can see where energy is being created and where it is being depleted. They can then take action, encouraging simple changes in behavior to increase energy in places where its lack is hindering the progress of important organizational initiatives.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## REFERENCES

1. *Energy* is defined as "a type of positive affective arousal, which people can experience as emotion — short responses to specific events — or mood — longer-lasting affective states that need not be a response to a specific event." See R. Quinn and J. Dutton, "Coordination as Energy-in-Conversation: A Process Theory of Organizing," *Academy of Management Review*, in press. Related concepts in psychology and sociology include "energetic arousal" in R.E. Thayer, "The Biopsychology of Mood and Arousal" (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) and "emotional energy" in R. Collins, "Emotional Energy as the Common Denominator of Rational Action," *Rationality and Society* 5 (April 1993): 203-230.
2. The first group consisted of 125 consultants and managers in one office of a global strategy-consulting firm; the second was a group of 86 statisticians in a major credit-card organization; the third was a group of 101 engineers within a large petrochemical organization.
3. In all three organizations, the rating was a composite figure based on an aggregation of project evaluations and objective data from the previous year. The figures were not entirely consistent — each organization was concerned with different dimensions of performance in the annual evaluation process — but they were consistent as general appraisals of a person's performance. The evaluations were also separate from the person's perception of his or her own performance.
4. For example, see W.E. Baker, "Achieving Success Through Social Capital: Tapping the Hidden Resources in Your Personal and Business Networks" (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000); R. Burt, "Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition" (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992); M.T. Hansen, "The Search-Transfer Problem: The Role of Weak Ties in Sharing Knowledge Across Organization Subunits," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44 (March 1999): 82-111; and R. Sparrowe, R.C. Liden, S.J. Wayne and M.L. Kraimer, "Social Networks and the Performance of Individuals and Groups," *Academy of Management Journal* 44 (April 2001): 316-325.

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