



Executive Engagement: Managing Energy With Stories

“To be fully engaged in our lives, we must be physically energized, emotionally connected, mentally focused, and spiritually aligned with a purpose beyond our immediate self-interest.” – Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz, *The Power of Full Engagement* (2003)

Most of us respond to workplace demands by putting in longer hours.

But it’s fundamentally flawed to assume that investing time in the things we care about will generate results. This belief, and the stories that flow from it, are simply untrue.

We can work long hours, have lunch meetings with direct reports and make the required phone calls, but if we’re exhausted, distracted, frustrated and angry when doing so, the positive return we’ve hoped for won’t materialize.

Nothing positive comes from putting in extra time without devoting high-quality, focused energy. Time has value only when it intersects with energy. High performance requires you to manage energy – not time – well.

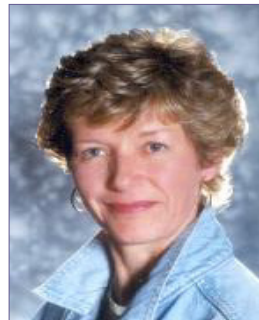
Executives strive to sustain high performance in the face of ever-increasing pressure and rapid change, but they cannot make it happen without skillfully managing their energy.

In *The Power of Full Engagement* (2003), authors Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz assert we need to learn two new rules:

1. Energy is the fundamental currency of high performance.
2. Performance, health and happiness are grounded in the skillful management of energy.

And Loehr puts forth a third important rule:

3. The stories we tell ourselves and others drive the way we gather and spend energy.



Rona Fluney, a Certified Executive and Personal Coach, brings over ten years experience coaching leaders, executives, entrepreneurs and professionals. Her background includes leadership and board

roles, project management, and consulting. Rona’s effervescent enthusiasm and collaborative approach spurs clients to achieve business results, adopt and implement change, build on leadership capabilities, to step out of comfort zones, peak performance, and increase emotional intelligence.

Kinetic transformation occurs when connection and focus converge in ascending the “Peak.”

Benefits of reaching the “Peak”:

- Increased accountability and commitment
- Clarity in what you want and need
- Exploring new perspectives and opportunities
- Greater self-awareness and learning
- Improved working relationships and enhanced teamwork
- More joy, success, balance, and fulfillment into your life

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Loehr's new book, *The Power of Story: Rewrite Your Destiny in Business and in Life* (2007), expands on creating more energy for high performance. Faulty storytelling, he argues, drives the way executives gather and spend their energy:

"I believe that stories – not the ones people tell us but the ones we tell ourselves – determine nothing less than our personal and professional destinies. And the most important story you will ever tell about yourself is the story you tell to yourself."

Tell yourself the right story, and the dynamics of your energy will change. Stories you tell will either create or sap your energy.

A perfect example is the old story about two shoe salesmen sent to Africa. The first one telegraphs back to company headquarters: "Situation hopeless: No one wears shoes."

The second salesman reports: "Situation ideal: Everyone need shoes!"

Which story generates energy? Change your story, and you change your energy.

Workers in organizations like to complain about their workloads – a term that's both oppressive and weighty. How can professionals focus on what really matters when they're carrying around a "load" (work or otherwise)?

Change your language, and you change your story. You'll ignite a new kind of energy. Take a moment to reflect on two recent stories you told yourself: one that gives you energy and one that depletes it.

Full Engagement or Presenteeism

Depleted energy may be one of the reasons more than two-thirds of employees feel less than fully engaged at work (The Gallup Organization, 2004).

Companies incur unnecessary costs – approximately \$350 billion a year – as a consequence of unengaged people who simply show up for work. Some have dubbed this phenomenon "presenteeism": These workers aren't absent. But they're missing in action, and their impaired performance actually costs more than absenteeism – and it's potentially more lethal to the organization because it's less obvious.

Power Stress

Leaders are no exception: They participate in partial and selective disengagement. In all likelihood, they're more astute at covering it up. They have more sophisticated stories.

Even some of the most respected leaders – those with a great ability to manage their own and others' performances – can wind up depleted and disengaged. There's no doubt executives are prone to "power stress," a cycle of pressure and sacrifice, with little time for recovery or renewal.

Organizations encourage long hours, while leaders are scrutinized and continually monitored. While socializing is known to relieve stress, it's lonely at the top, and few executives take time to reach out to others.

The ability to sustain drive and passion throughout the day, and still have some left over for one's family, is based on acquiring a few positive habits, understanding energy-management concepts and telling ourselves the right stories.

4 Principles of Energy Management

The following principles from Loehr and Schwartz can be applied to corporate executives, as well as employees at all levels:

1. Energy has four dimensions: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. You must draw and maintain it from each domain.
2. Energy is best managed when there's oscillation between stress and recovery. In this case, positive stress allows us to stretch ourselves when using our talents and skills. But it must be balanced with recovery and rest. Unfortunately, most of us don't know how to do this.
3. Pushing beyond our usual limits heightens our strengths. Building mental, emotional and spiritual capacities is similar to physical training that improves our strength or cardiovascular levels. We must push to move forward and grow.
4. Creating replenishing rituals and stories sustains and expands our energy. This is the key to recuperating and bolstering our reserves so energy is fully available to us.

If you expend too much energy, without sufficient rest and recovery, you're headed for trouble. Life is not a marathon, but a series of sprints. Many of us, nonetheless, are always in a hurry. As a result, we forget to create quality moments.

Energy Flows from Stories

Your personal energy can reward you with wealth, innovation and fulfillment. Often, we fail to recognize how the stories we tell ourselves limit it. In some cases, our stories actually stifle energy,

defeating our efforts before we even begin a task.

Before 1954, everyone thought running a four-minute mile was humanly impossible. After Roger Bannister broke that speed barrier, 16 other runners followed suit by 1957. The concept is expressed like this: “If you believe you can, you can. If you believe you can’t, you can’t. Either way, you’re right.”

Let’s be clear: You cannot achieve everything you want in life with a simple wish and a bold statement. But through storytelling, you energize yourself and others. Purpose-driven stories grounded in reality will lead you and others to energized action.

Some stories engage us deeply in our work, while others have the opposite effect. It’s not the time we spend on trying to achieve success that matters most. It’s the quality of the energy we bring to the time we have. This defines “full engagement.”

There’s an almost perfect correlation between engagement and happiness. The more engaged we are, the more alive we feel. Full engagement in a mission that matters deeply delivers a rich sense of meaning, depth and dimension to our work and personal lives.

Disengagement has the opposite effect, pulling us away from meaningful interactions characterized by passion and intensity. It pushes us toward safety, protection and disassociation.

By being engaged, we experience true happiness as we ignite our talents and skills. In short, we give our all. Clues about necessary course corrections are more readily apparent.

If you have a full supply of energy that you manage well, you can help yourself and others. There’s a positive ripple effect throughout the company as goals are successfully completed.

Ask yourself again: What stories am I telling myself and others that help energize purpose-filled action?

Turning Points

All good stories have a turning point, a dramatic moment of truth that changes the way we think about life and work.

A turning point can be positive or negative. Perhaps it’s an event or circumstance that precipitates a significant change in the story. Turning points can suddenly alter our self-confidence, perceptions, and even our values and beliefs. They involve powerful

emotions that force us to face the truth as nothing else can. They’re not always obvious, but they may be experienced as “aha!” moments. Others may play out over a longer period, to be revealed in hindsight.

Which turning points can you identify in your personal career story, as well as your company’s? How can they energize you and your people?

3 Ingredients of Good Stories

All good stories have purpose, truth and action. There are also many underlying principles, such as the idea of a public versus private story, or our ability to be fooled by faulty assumptions.

This is why stories must be rewritten many times over: to correct faulty assumptions and misperceptions. But at the core of all good stories lie purpose, truth and action.

Purpose, Truth, Action

Here are several questions you must answer when creating an energizing story:

Purpose
1. What is my ultimate purpose? (Or, what is my company’s ultimate mission?)
2. What am I living/working for?
3. What is my defining principle and goal?
4. What makes me do what I do?
5. What is the one thing I would do, even if I had to walk through fire?
6. What would I work for, even if there was no pay?
7. How do I want to be remembered?
Truth
1. Is the story I’m telling true?
2. Is this truly my story, or is it what I believe it should be?
3. Is it grounded in objective reality?
4. What assumptions am I making, and are any of them faulty?
5. What am I white-washing to make myself look better?
6. Is my private voice in synch with my public voice?
Action
1. What actions will I now take to make things better?
2. Which habits do I need to eliminate?
3. Which habits should I begin to breed?
4. Am I an observer or a participator?
5. Are my actions filled with hope – the belief I will succeed and that the change I seek is realistically within my grasp?
6. Does this story inspire or influence others into action?

How Stories Help

When you ask yourself these basic questions about what you do and how you conduct yourself, you begin to identify your story's dynamics. This will help you write several versions: your old story and a new one.

First, write down your current story. After hard and honest work (and many rewrites), you'll produce a story that accurately reflects the way things have been going in your life.

Next, discard this story and recast it as your old story. It's time to replace it with a new, forward-moving story. Use the following questions to evaluate faulty elements in your old story – issues and behaviors that will no longer serve you well in the future:

1. Will this story take me where I want to go in life (while at the same time remaining true to my deepest values and beliefs)?
2. Does the story reflect the truth as much as possible?
3. Does this story stimulate me to take action?

If stories determine your destiny, achieving one of your own design requires commitment, honesty and energy. This requires editing your stories for as long as you're alive.

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