



## Organisational Engagement & Contagious Leadership

We human beings are natural imitators and research has revealed that we are easily influenced by the behaviours of those around us. For us behaviour is very contagious, particularly when there are emotions involved. This natural fact is worth considering in terms of an organisation wishing to create an engaged workforce.

A growing body of research is revealing that behavior and attitude can become contagious and is spread by people modeling the behaviours of key influencers in an organisation. In fact, it can be spread by a small number of people with higher degrees of influence, both hierarchical and social, through the networks that commonly emerge in the workplace.

In his book the 'Tipping Point' Malcom Gladwell highlights 'The Law of the Few, also known as the 80/20 Principle, which states that in any situation roughly 80 percent of the 'effect' will be created by 20 percent of the cause. In other words around 20% of the people in a team will usually be responsible for the emotional temperature, interpersonal dynamics and success or failure of the group.

This is because we humans are highly sensitive to environmental and behavioural factors. We are also great imitators who are often attuned to and affected by our surroundings and by others who interact with us. What seems to have the greatest affect on us is the energy outputs of persons, places and things: Noise, movement, light, temperature, and the emotions and attitudes of others.

Research by Professor Howard Friedman discovered that the presence of an energetic and expressive person communicating an emotion, even non-verbally, is powerful enough to have a considerable affect on others. This is due to the 'energetic' emotional impact highly expressive people can create.

Tom@4Dhumanbeing.com

t: 07583 446075

Philippa@4Dhumanbeing.com

t: 07958 316227

[www.4Dhumanbeing.com](http://www.4Dhumanbeing.com)

However less energised and expressive people may have little if no affect on others. Friedman called this effect 'emotional contagion'.

If we combine this with some interesting, recent studies of leaders in business we can begin to understand how emotional energy can be contagious.

Some interesting research conducted by Professor Paul Connolly and two pairs of psychologists Cote and Saavedra (2005) and Bono and Ilies (2006) came to similar conclusions by observing leaders interacting with their people. This body of research demonstrated that leaders considered to be engaging transmit their energy through emotions to followers more effectively, compared with non-engaging leaders.

Engaging leaders were observed to be able to literally change the mood of their employees merely by walking into a room. It was discovered that this effect was due to the leaders level of personal energy which increased their ability to communicate emotions verbally and non verbally. Their mood became contagious in a very short time with the workforce imitating the behaviours of the leaders.

This suggests that the quickest way to raise or lower our personal energy and the energy of others is through connecting with our emotions.

Eminent psychologists like Howard Friedman and Richard Wiseman have been studying the emotional effect of charismatic leaders and have apparently discovered that it's all to do with being highly expressive. Friedman suspected it had to do with non-verbal behaviour so he created a test to try and find out. The test allowed people to self identify how easily able they are to express their emotions using their body and voice. In other words, were they able to unambiguously express emotions so that people around them could recognise what type of mood they were in.

After testing a random group Friedman and his team then paired two high-scoring, emotionally expressive individuals and invited them to sit in a room together with a pair of two low scorers for just two minutes. The subjects were allowed to look at each other but asked not to speak. After the experience they were invited to complete a questionnaire about how they felt during the experiment.

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t: 07958 316227

[www.4Dhumanbeing.com](http://www.4Dhumanbeing.com)

In every case they discovered that the low scorers had been affected by the mood of the high scorers, demonstrating that the presence of an expressive person communicating an emotion, even non-verbally, is powerful enough to have an affect on others. However the low scoring, less expressive people had little if no affect on the high scorers.

So what was going on?

How was the mood being communicated?

It may be staring us in the face.

### Let's Face It.

Charles Darwin was the first to seriously study how our faces reflect and communicate our emotions and his work continues to influence contemporary thinkers in the field.

In the 1960s San Francisco psychologist Paul Ekman found that facial expressions do in fact indicate a person's emotional state and are present in early infancy. Even a person born blind has the same facial expressions as someone who is sighted because facial expression is not simply learned; it is hardwired into the brain and is universal in nature. Ekman discovered that many, human facial expressions are common to all races and cultures around the world. In fact, animators have utilised his findings and theories of 'facial coding' to make animated characters faces appear more human.

Dr. Dan Hill is a psychologist working in the field of micro gestures and how they express and reveal emotions, particularly in the area of facial coding and eye tracking. He is interested in the science of emotions and how that might apply in the commercial market place of advertising. Hill says that the whole face is the window to the emotions not just the eyes because the 43 key facial muscles are attached directly to the skin of the face; therefore any spontaneous flickers of movement can easily be detected. Even though these movements are small and very quick we humans are natural, facial coders and can read what mood a person's in by their micro facial gestures.

In fact, we rely on them particularly when verbal communication becomes confusing and difficult. Apparently we humans make our decisions emotionally but justify them rationally.

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Nicholas Rule, a psychology professor at Tufts University co-wrote a paper called "The Face of Success" which was published in the journal Psychological Science detailing his findings around people who were asked to identify successful, charismatic business leaders simply by looking at photographs of faces. The study revealed that the test group was able to accurately guess levels of competence, dominance, likeability and trustworthiness just by looking at their facial expressions. So as you might now be realising, the energy of emotion and behaviour are the key ingredients of engagement.

## The Importance of Energy in the Workplace

The best way to feel totally energised in the workplace is by doing a job that allows us to fully express who we are and what we stand for. In other words we need to be allowed to express whom we are by engaging in tasks that fully utilise our talents. Together with some praise, acknowledgement and reward for our efforts, most of us would find abundant and available energy for work.

There are some lucky individuals who will tell you that their job is their hobby so it doesn't feel like working. Sadly this doesn't apply to all of us. However, many of us are in positions or roles where we feel, given the opportunity, we could offer and achieve more. That might mean changing roles or careers but with the right motivation and support we could become more energised and in many cases all it would take would be the right support and encouragement from our leaders.

In 2006 research conducted by The Centre for Business Performance at Cranfield Management School revealed that businesses lose 520 hours per year in lost productivity due to workers lacking energy. Their recommendation was that companies should introduce energy management programmes to help boost peoples energy in the workplace. They found that successful entrepreneurs and organisations have more energy than the less successful.

The research also suggested that energy in an organisation is not simply the sum of the energy of the individuals working in it. Rather, it is the sum of the interactions between and around the workforce and how the infrastructure of the organisation impacts on them. They called this 'The Energy Performance Chain'

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t: 07583 446075

Philippa@4Dhumanbeing.com

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[www.4Dhumanbeing.com](http://www.4Dhumanbeing.com)

However, energy and performance wasn't just a matter of physical or mental stamina, although that does play a considerable part.

## Understanding Energy in Organizations

We can begin to distinguish a low from a high-energy organisation by observing the energetic, dynamic of the workforce. In a low energy organisation the work force only has enough energy to complete the necessary basic, tasks required to provide a service or produce a product. Having done the minimum, once the job is complete, the workforce leaves. There is little, if no energy to put in extra time or help colleagues to achieve goals or targets. Of course this lack of energy could be a deficit or block in any, or all, of the four energetic dimensions in both the individual and the organisation, but more on this later.

Conversely the high energy firm has a workforce that is engaged and has access to extra energy, enabling them to add value in the form of creativity, problem solving, communication between colleagues, effectively dealing with the dynamics of line management and of course maintaining a high level of customer care and service.

Again this will be because the individuals involved will be engaged, will have created alignment, developed balance and the ability to raise, lower, expend and recover their energy appropriately. In terms of managing energy for performance, three energetic aspects need to be addressed:

1. Individual energy
2. Team energy
3. Organizational energy

And these energies need to be managed in specific ways.

## Individual Energy

This is the four dimensions and two aspects of 'personal energy' -

- Physical, Intellectual, Emotional and Intentional (or Motivation)
- Quality and Quantity - high or low and Positive or Negative.

Individuals may need coaching in order to facilitate the generation and release of energy and create a balance between all the four dimensions. During coaching sessions the individual can explore the two aspects and each dimension and how they relate to the workplace role. Beginning with an exploration of the 'Quality' of their personal energy by exploring the 'motivational' dimensions. This is essentially a person's driver, shaped by their values, ideas, beliefs and experiences. a person's V.I.B.E. is at the heart of their energy and synergy begins with the alignment of their own V.I.B.E. and the V.I.B.E.s of their co-workers and the organization as a whole.

## Team Energy

Team energy is generated during the day-to-day business and social interactions between members and their environment. Talking, thinking, problem solving, moving and working together. The quantity and quality of the energy is at the heart of workplace engagement and is determined by the motivation behind their interactions and their intellectual, emotional and physical responses to each other. Energy quality is also represented by the impact of the energy on tasks, productivity and team members and ranges from negative to positive. This will be determined by prevalent emotional tone and attitudes: happiness, excitement, gratitude, compassion, mistrust, conflict, fear and anger. Particularly important in shaping and influencing the energy of team dynamics is the role of trust, which facilitates energy flow, and it's creation or destruction. Interpersonal relationships in the workplace serve both psychological objectives at the individual level and collective objectives at the organisational level. It is the balance and alignment between these aspects that is crucial for energy management and engagement.

If an individual's V.I.B.E.s are at odds with key members of my team, this will alter the quantity and quality of the energy I have available for the organisation as a whole. The amount of activities performed, and the number of tasks and interactions, ranging from large to small, determine energy quantity.

## Organizational Energy

This is the sum of the energies and V.I.B.E.s of all the employees, plus the energy generated by individuals performing and interacting within and between teams. The emergent energy is considered the overall, organisational V.I.B.E. being the result of the quantity and quality of the integration of all the other forms of energy.

The infrastructure of an organisation can stimulate or stultify energy. This includes tangible and intangible dimensions that define the energy platform for developing and managing individual and group, energy dynamics. With careful thought and planning an infrastructure can be deliberately designed to stimulate, create and sustain energy in the organisation.

Tangible infrastructure includes systems, environments and all the facilities, equipment, décor, furniture and any other aspects which can affect individual or team energy by supporting the creation and/or renewal of energy as well as preserving and/or reducing the consumption of energy.

Intangible, organisational infrastructure includes recruitment, selection and HR practices, organisational culture, and performance measurement systems. The culture and recruitment policy determines what types of people are brought in to the organisation and how they are dealt with and developed. This is set and managed by performance management and appraisal policy. The nature of these processes determine and individuals energetic response and therefore their level of engagement.

It is crucial when building an energetic organisation to bring on board individuals that can positively energise others. Greenfield (2004) identified that when there is a disconnect between personal values and the perceived values of the organizations, employee disengagement is often the result.

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Greenfield estimates that organizations may waste up to 66% of their available employee energy through a variety of disengagement behaviors. The energy performance chain happens when the individual, the team and the organisational infrastructure create an energy loop that determines and connects all the energy states of the organisation as a whole. Here is a re-cap of the key aspects of energy in the workplace.

- There are three forms of energy in an organisation: Individual, team and organisational.
- Each of these energy forms must be managed to drive performance.
- Energy in an organisation is the capacity and will of an individual or team to take action and perform activities with vigor.
- Managing energy effectively enables the full potential of employees to be realised.
- Energy in an organisation is a key driver of business performance.
- Energy is dynamic in nature and changes constantly over time, oscillating from energy expenditure to recovery.
- Energy dynamics are driven by these three main sources and at each stage people can affect this.
- Individual energy dynamics are mainly driven by an individual's values, ideas, beliefs, experience and behaviour.
- Team energy dynamics are mainly driven by social, interpersonal interaction.
- Organisational energy dynamics are mainly driven by organisational infrastructure.

*"Without a high level of energy, a company cannot achieve radical productivity improvements, cannot grow fast and cannot create major innovations"*  
(Bruch and Ghoshal, 2003).

The interrelationships between all the above components are fundamental to the stimulation of an organisation's energy. Only by addressing all of these aspects can we really achieve the optimum, energetic organisation.

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