

Excelling Under Pressure:

Increase Your Energy for Leadership and Innovation in a World of Stress, Change, and Unprecedented Opportunities

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We know that leaders at all levels of an organization need vision, strategic focus, and a bias toward action. But to shine in today's complex and changing world, leaders also need new insights and skills that upend conventional thinking about how to increase energy and attentiveness in the face of ever-rising pressure.

"The world belongs to those with the most energy."

Few leaders today would disagree with those words, written more than 150 years ago by the great observer Alexis de Tocqueville. Without energy, life and leadership are merely latent possibilities. In fact, no less an authority than Peter Drucker has placed personal energy at the very forefront of leadership qualities: "Your first and foremost job as a leader is to raise your own energy level and then to help raise and orchestrate the energies of those around you," he wrote.

Those leaders who thrive under pressure, and those organizations and teams that make things look easy while others falter, seem to know how to draw on extra energies. Not just exceptional physical stamina, but untapped reserves of imagination, passion, determination, and farsightedness. Today, from scientific fields that most business professionals know little about – such as neuroscience, work physiology, chronobiology, and performance psychology – we are learning important things about mobilizing the energies of body, heart, mind, and spirit, and we are acquiring practical tools to begin maximizing this critical aspect of leadership.

Recent scientific discoveries are demonstrating the truth of two things that many

of us have understood intuitively: first, that we not only make the most of our current capabilities but we also reach most deeply into our untapped potential when we keep our energy high; and second, that there are two very distinct kinds of energy – and many leaders are relying on the wrong kind.

Researchers contrast the two kinds of energy by calling one tense energy and the other calm energy. Most of us are ensnared by tense energy, a stress-driven state characterized by a nearly constant sense of pressure and anxiety. Fueled by emergency stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol, tense energy keeps you going because it engages your most ancient brain, the one that responds to any whiff of danger by kicking all your energies into gear so you can either stand and fight or run away. Although it is magnificently adapted for survival, that brain contains not an ounce of creativity, vision, or thoughtful reflection. All it can cause you to do is more of what you've always done – only faster, harder, longer, and louder.

You may awaken tired and stiff in the morning, but after several cups of coffee and some heavy tension – worrying about all the work you have to do, sweating over the latest news from the stock markets, cursing in rush-hour traffic – you may soon feel "energized." That kind of vigor compels you to push yourself toward one objective after another without pausing to rest or reflect. Minor irritations and small stumbles loom up as major frustrations. Your efforts also get infused with a moderate to severe level of physical tension which can eventually become only barely perceptible (or even pleasing) to you.

All that psychological and physical energy is costly: underneath the stress-hormone-induced buzz, the billions of messenger chemicals that connect your senses and heart

with your brain are being depleted. By the end of each relentless day they may be all but gone, leaving you with only the stamina required to collapse in front of the computer display or television.

In the longer run, you can find yourself aging prematurely, at the edge of burnout and exhaustion, or facing serious health disorders. As one cardiologist has put it, "Often the first indication of heart disease is sudden death."

What's more, it's hard to turn off tense energy, so you may bring increasingly rigid attitudes and irritability into your personal relationships and into pastimes that are supposed to "relax" you. Everything from family life to recreation to vacations can come to feel more like work than renewal.

Calm energy, on the other hand, stills the ancient brain and accesses many of your highest capabilities. The calm energy state is characterized by low muscle tension, an alert presence of mind, peaceful body feelings, increased creative intelligence, physical vitality, and a deep sense of well-being. It is essential to the extraordinarily focused and productive state known as "flow" or "the zone."

With calm energy, you make far more progress throughout the day because you can more clearly focus on the things that are important to you without becoming consumed by as many needless divergences or unessential details. You have the mental and physical equivalent of an overdrive gear in a car, still moving quickly and in your chosen direction but with far less strain.

When you develop the ability to enter and maintain a state of calm energy, you more effectively distance yourself from life's noise and distractions, its rushing and anger. You promote increased clear mindedness and sustained vitality. You discover more ingenuity – even fun – in the face of skyrocketing pressure, constant uncertainty, and wrenching change. The U.S. executive Thomas Watson once observed, "Within us there are dynamos of energy which are not suspected." He was right.

With a few simple adjustments in the way you manage your day, you can stop the gear-grinding effects of tense energy and shift into calm energy. Those practical changes fall into three categories:

1. Start the day right – without a bang;
2. Take science-based breaks and pauses during the day; and
3. Replenish your supply of calm energy at day's end.

Start the Day Right – Without a Bang

From the moment you get out of bed, your brain sets your body's metabolism to match current and anticipated physical, emotional, and mental demands. Researchers can predict how much energy you will have in late afternoon and evening by how you get up in the morning and what you do, or don't do, in the first few hours after arising. In a sense, your metabolism adjusts itself for the day, trying to anticipate how much energy, and what kinds of energy, will be needed.

Lots of us set our alarm as late as possible and then leap out of bed in a last-minute rush to begin the day. The result is a tension-producing shock to the system: blood pressure soars as stress hormones pour into the bloodstream. You may feel awake, but it's a survival signal, not a sign of true vigor. A caffeine jolt boosts the brain and senses, but this unnatural energy only jazzes your system more. Add some hubbub over breakfast and a dash of rush hour anger and you have all the ingredients for the proverbial starting gun that begins the day for millions of people.

Try the following alternatives to start your day primed for increased calm energy.

1 *Awaken on the right side of the bed, without a jarring alarm.* Ease, don't leap, out of bed. Where possible, awaken to pleasant music, which tends to be much more invigorating and relaxing than the traditional alarm. Keep the volume low. Avoid jarring noises that shock your system. By easing out of sleep you retain more of its invigorating power.

While still in bed, take a few moments to breathe and release any tension you notice in the neck, jaw, shoulders, back, or arms. Remind yourself why you're getting out of bed, such as to provide for your loved ones, keep learning, and make more of a difference in the world. When you rise from the covers, do it slowly, giving your muscles a chance to ease into action. These start-the-day actions are generating calm energy.

2 *Turn on the lights.* On sunny mornings, do you step outside for some fresh air and to soak in the brightness? Many of us do this on vacations but not during the rest of the year. We should. The brain responds to many signals, but few are more powerful than light. The body has hundreds of biochemical and hormonal rhythms, all keyed to light and dark, and the mind and senses are powerfully affected by exposure to light with an intensity between 7,000 and 12,000 lux, which is comparable to daylight just after dawn. There is a neurological link between the retina of the eye and the suprachiasmatic nuclei in your brain, which play an important role in attention-focus and energy production. In most cases, the more light, the more focus and calm energy.

Test this tomorrow when you step out of bed: Progressively turn on three or four times the number of lights you'd usually turn on. Leave those lights on for the first 15 minutes that you're awake. Or step outside for a minute or so to flood your eyes with daylight. Feel the difference in energy. For many people, the added light boosts mood and triggers an instantaneous alertness signal in the brain that shifts physiology away from sleep and toward calm energy.

3 *Get at least five minutes of relaxed physical activity.* No, pulling your clothes on doesn't count as enough physical activity, in case you're wondering. However, even just a few minutes of moderate exercise can increase your vitality and reduce tension.

Go through a gentle warm-up and then do a few minutes of light physical activity such as a walk, slowly climbing and descending a few flights of stairs, or pedaling at a relaxed, moderate pace on a stationary bike or outdoor

cycle. For variety you might do some moderate muscle-toning exercises. Any of these activities send a signal to the brain to increase alertness and calm energy.

4 *Enjoy several bites of a great-tasting breakfast.* More than any other meal, breakfast may matter most. When you eat a small serving of a healthy breakfast – say a bowl of oatmeal with low-fat or skim milk and a piece of fruit, or a slice of whole-grain bread with nonfat cream cheese and all-fruit preserves – you switch on, and turn up, your energy. When this food reaches the stomach it triggers responses in the brain and senses that are essential to alertness and calm energy.

Even a small but balanced breakfast stimulates the sympathetic nervous system, revving up hormones and neurotransmitters in the brain for a prolonged period of activity. In fact, a light breakfast helps set your energy level for the entire day.

Take Strategic Pauses and Essential Breaks

Dozens of scientific studies demonstrate that introducing short breaks throughout the day actually speeds up work and increases energy, yielding greater total accomplishment with less distress and fatigue. Because of this, it is important to make use of strategic pauses, which require just a minute or less, and essential breaks of two to five minutes.

Each strategic pause or essential break stimulates natural, significant rises in calm energy. However, if you skip the next break, your energy level will fall unavoidably. So, you should take a brief strategic pause every half hour, and a slightly longer essential break at mid-morning and mid-afternoon. These pauses and breaks have the following six elements in common.

1 *Deepen and relax your breathing.* How you breathe has a lot to do with how much energy and attentiveness you can generate and sustain all day long. Oxygen interruption – frequent brief halts in breathing, or chronic under-breathing – is a common

contributing factor to tension and tiredness. Conversely, every time you deepen your breathing, you increase calmness and alertness. Take a moment right now to take a breath in and let it expand your lungs more than usual. Do you notice your posture lift slightly or your senses sharpen? Breathe out fully and then take another lung-expanding breath. That's the idea.

2 *Change your view and catch some light.* Eyestrain can be a significant cause of tension and fatigue, especially late in the day. Hour after hour, the tiny muscles in the human eye use more energy than any other muscle fibers in the body. More than half of your body's sense receptors are clustered in the eyes. Without a brief rest every half hour or so, they become tired and produce headaches, fatigue, and tension in the neck and shoulders.

If you've been doing close-up work, take a few moments to blink your eyes and look at more distant objects; if you've been looking farther away, switch to focusing on something nearby. These easy actions provide a brief and vital rest for the most active eye muscles.

During each strategic pause or essential break, step to a window or glance at a bright indoor light. Many people report a lasting sense of calmness followed by a surge of energy after looking at a bright outdoor scene or glancing at indoor light, even at the intensity level of normal room lamps.

3 *Loosen up and re-balance your posture.* The longer you sit still, the less energy you have to get up and get going. In this step, begin by standing up – tall, loose, and at ease. For those of us who spend long periods of the day sitting down, there is evidence that simply standing up every half hour or so increases alertness and energy by up to 30 percent.

If you're already standing a lot during the day, check your posture. Poor posture – even a slight slumping of the shoulders – depletes lung capacity by as much as 30 percent. According to researchers, the key to ideal posture begins with frequent awareness check-ins about the position of your neck – the goal is to keep your chin slightly in, head high. It's a very relaxed feeling of being taller.

Imagine a beanbag on top of your head and gently lift your muscles to push it toward the ceiling. Next, loosen and re-align your shoulders so that they are as relaxed and wide as they can be. This immediately increases oxygen flow to the brain and senses.

Physical movement is another key to your vigor and focus power. Every time you get up and move, you increase your energy and alertness. Every time. A few seconds here. A half-minute there. You get an energy boost and, as a bonus, increased clear mindedness. Therefore, make it a point if you have a sit-down job to get up often, to stand while you talk on the phone, for example. How about walking around for a minute or two every hour? Or going up and down a flight of stairs or heading outside for some fresh air?

4 *Sip ice water.* One of the most overlooked reasons for lack of energy is a lack of water. Water provides the medium for nerve impulse conduction, for the transmission of other biochemical processes, and for the muscle contractions that stimulate metabolism and generate energy.

Even a slight dehydration – not enough to make you thirsty – can measurably deplete energy. What causes this invisible fluid loss? Dry, energy-efficient homes and workplaces. Stress. Caffeine. Alcohol.

By sipping extra water at your breaks and pauses, or even more often, you not only improve your overall health and resistance to illness but also provide a repeated signal to your metabolism to keep your energy and attentiveness levels higher. This effect may be even more pronounced when the water is ice-cold; because when ice-cold water reaches the stomach it stimulates increased energy-production throughout the body and raises alertness in the brain and senses.

5 *Enjoy a moment of humor.* By pushing nonstop and staying relatively gum and intense about work or life, we lose out in a number of ways. Every time you have a hearty laugh, a whole series of beneficial biochemical events occurs – including reduced tension and increased creative intelligence and energy. In many situations, the best light-heartedness is

known as "cosmic humor" – finding the funny things that arise in the midst of life's paradoxes, difficulties, and uncertainties, and also being able to laugh at yourself.

6 *Add a bit of inspiration.* Steal a glimpse of where you're headed. Remember one of the mentors or teachers who had a great influence in shaping what you have become. Recall a genuinely supportive word or note you have received lately. Or stop to gaze into a photo of your loved ones, for whom your sustained energy may matter the most of all.

7 When you take essential breaks at mid-morning and mid-afternoon, add a seventh element: *Eat a smart snack.* Millions of Americans have learned to starve themselves between meals. But whenever you skip between – meal snacks, blood sugar falls and you are likely to experience increased fatigue and tension. Eating low-fat snacks between meals can actually increase your energy and metabolism. Eating smaller, nutritious meals and snacks helps to stabilize blood-sugar levels, which in turn optimizes memory, learning, and performance.

Bring Your Best Self Home

When you start your day with calm energy and then sustain that exceptional kind of vigor and attentiveness with breaks and pauses, you can also bring more of your best self home at night. Then you can replenish your calm energy instead of drooping from the fatigue of stress and tension. Here are three ways to enjoy yourself more and not only keep your own calm energy flowing, but also add to the calm energy of your loved ones.

1 *Change the way you walk through the door.* No matter what your job, the rhythm of your work efforts is considerably different and probably more intense than the rhythm of being at home. Yet many of us rush home and never let go of our work intensity. Instead, we hurry to prepare dinner, flip through the newspaper, eat quickly, and then either collapse in front of the TV or plunge into another round of scheduled responsibilities? nightly errands, parental duties, catching up on paperwork, preparing reports, or paying bills.

What's missing is a brief "time out" period to shake-off stress and tension and start the evening with a dose of extra energy and excitement.

Many families are in the habit of meeting at day's end and sharing their rendition of "Here's the bad stuff that happened to me today." As an alternative, negotiate in advance with family members to give each other a different kind of greeting, in which you each express your pleasure in seeing the others in a warm, caring way but limit your first comment to about 25 words or less, such as: "What a hectic day! It's great to be home"; or "Things were crazy at work, but I'm really glad to see you!" And then, without ignoring your partner or other family members, delay talking about your day until you have put it into perspective.

This is a crucial moment to choose a few minutes of "personal wind-down time" to change clothes and go through whatever brief, relatively quiet interlude helps you put your work day to rest and get your life back in proper perspective. A hot shower might do it, or a relaxing set of exercises, or a calm moment when you enjoy a beverage and favorite snack. The key is to make sure that, even if it's only for a few minutes, you make a clear shift away from work. You might, for example, go for a stroll with your partner, sit for a few minutes out on the balcony or deck, turn on some great music, or sip your favorite cup of tea. Then you're far better prepared to be positive and interested in discussing what happened today.

2 *Renew your evening energy.* What you do or don't do in the half hour following your evening meal sets the stage for how much vigor and fun you will have throughout the evening and how well you will sleep that night. A few minutes of light physical activity at this time of the day elevates your energy level and metabolic rate just as it's winding down. Researchers report that walking after a meal may speed up energy-boosting and fat-burning heat production by up to 50 percent.

Test how this works for you. Push back from the table after tonight's meal and go for a brief walk. Encourage other household members to join you so you have a chance for some good

old-fashioned talk and light-hearted fun – the kind that keeps you closer together rather than drifting apart. Make it a point to talk about the funniest thing that happened today. Sleep researchers at the Mayo Clinic say a light evening exercise session can also measurably deepen sleep. "If you can increase your body temperature with exercise from three to five hours before going to bed," explains Peter Hauri, director of the clinic's insomnia program, "the temperature then will drop most as you are ready to go to sleep...and sleep becomes deeper, with fewer awakenings."

3 *From time to time, do nothing, guilt-free.* Here and there throughout every day, the brain and senses must do less than just shift gears – they must stop pushing altogether. If these crucial breakaways are not planned, they will occur randomly, causing the space-outs that wreak so much havoc in work and personal relationships. It was Kierkegaard who observed, "Most people pursue success and happiness with such breathless haste that they hurry right past them."

Many of us feel there's nothing we can't do – except, of course, doing nothing. Could ten well-chosen minutes of delightful non-doing be more valuable than ten minutes of pushing hard at day's end or in traffic? Yes. If not, the pushing itself can do us in.

As leaders, we have dedicated our lives to doing, and yet we're falling farther behind. The illusion that by working nonstop we will "catch up" is just that, an illusion. By one estimate, each of us will have at least 35 hours of unfinished work in front of us our entire life.

"Just as soon as I catch up on my work, then I'll relax," we say. Then I'll be there for you. Then I'll enjoy some simple daily pleasures. Then I'll show you how much I love you. Another time, another place, a different environment, a better situation, a more golden opportunity. Just as soon as...

Years ago, I lost part of my extended family in an airline crash. When search teams found the five bodies in the wreckage, the two parents had their arms around the three little ones. The passengers who had survived the crash itself must have quickly realized that the

smoke and flames sweeping through the aircraft gave them no chance to survive. Trapped, the parents held the little ones until the end. "Just as soon as..." got taken away.

As Emerson put it, "We're always getting ready to live but we never truly live." Instead, do what star performers do: They develop the awareness and specific skills to increase their energy and attentiveness under pressure. They see opportunities others miss. They shine even during the most difficult times. They have more fun along the way. In sum, they capture the rare advantage that's within reach of every one of us – If only we could see it and seize it.

With the help of modern science, we can all begin mastering the seeming paradoxes that determine true success at leadership and at life: to get ahead, you have to be able to pull back; to be more present, you have to be able to withdraw; and to accomplish more, you just have to take more of the right breaks. It was Goethe who said, "The miracle of doing something exceptional in this world depends on energy." Calm energy, that is.

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