

Energy as A Way of Life

A Personal Journey

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This is my personal journey, how I came from seeing organizations as static objects, to seeing them as interacting energy fields. It began six years ago, when I was the owner of a 16-person organization development and training firm. We helped companies with strategic visioning, culture change projects, coaching programs, and project effectiveness. I built the business from a \$25.00 a day practice in 1969 to over \$2.5 million in annual revenues in 1993, with the promise of continued doubling in growth.

I didn't sleep very well during those years. My company had several very talented, star-quality people whose view of what the business should be doing was not the same as mine. I would sell something for one million dollars, design it, do the first piece of work, and it would be very successful in my own terms. Then others would take over, supposedly to extend what had been started and bring it to fulfillment throughout a client company. But that isn't what happened. My intention was that everything we did would be brilliant, meaning that clients would come away from working with us cooperating and working together toward the same future. And while a lot of what went on was great, it did not meet my own standards of brilliance. Some clients were very satisfied; others were satisfied some of the time. But the experience over time was too harsh and divisive for me.

I had also hired people to run the company that had their own agenda and actually undermined my relationships with many of the key employees. They wanted to turn it into the kind of company they wanted, rather than what I wanted. So, the company was going in many different directions and there were lots of disputes and talking behind people's backs. I became increasingly deflated and didn't have either the presence of mind or the courage to make a radical change, to take the bull by the horns and make it into something that I really wanted.

As my energy and inspiration waned, the company was still successful, but became less and less effective. I was the leader and without my inspiration, many things began to fall apart. I began to get the idea that companies and people succeed when they have a lot of energy, assuming they know what they are doing, have talent, and have a good product or service to sell. And they began to fail when they ran out of energy. At the time, this wasn't a clearly articulated thought, but a background awareness that things were good when you felt great, when your personal and team spirit was strong, and things didn't work so well when team spirit and personal energy was down.

I was lucky at that time to meet a Native American Indian medicine man, Lorin Smith, on the Pomo Reservation in northern California. He was a short, balding, chubby fellow, with a very pleasant expression on his face and very soft-spoken manner. I met him in a “round house,” an enormous round building that he had built to do his work as the tribal healer. I had no idea what that meant. I thought it had some remote association with medical doctors.

I spent about two hours with him and asked questions. He talked about how hard it was to be a healer, how a healer heals himself or herself first, and that life really was all about energy. Life was all about maintaining, preserving, and increasing the energy you have. Life was all about gaining access to the infinite amount of energy that was available from the sun and the moon and the water and the stars and the wind and the earth. And that was what was most missing and most needed in the world – an improved relationship to one’s own energy and to the energy of others. He told me his people call this energy by the name of “Weya”, and I found that Weya was pretty hard to define. It was everywhere. It was contained in all living and inanimate things. It seemed to have a spiritual quality, and he and his people sang songs about it and were always attending to their relationship with Weya, with energy. He taught that when one was in harmony with the energy, life worked. And when one ignored the energy, life didn’t work.

I didn’t begin to understand what he was saying or where he was really coming from. But I knew, both from his words and the calm way he was being about it, that he was representing something I had not seen before: that living in a world in which my harmonious relationship with my own energy and the energy of others was possible. I saw that healing was getting energy to be where it was missing and needed. Lorin Smith had developed his own healing practice based on massage, singing, dance, telling stories. As I came to know him over time, I saw he could look at a person, individual, or look at a group, and see exactly what kind of energy was missing. He could see where the joy was missing, or where the relationship was missing. He could see whether people didn’t mean what they said. He could see how their bodies were contracted or turned against themselves or twisted out of shape. He had an ability to see what I was not trained to see. I could already sense some of this in my work with groups, but I was not really construing it in any kind of energetic framework as he did. And what he was able to produce, in terms of sick people getting better or groups going from non-directed to focused, was very fast and remarkable. It was as though he was breathing life – breathing energy – into them. And he would do whatever he needed to do, whatever he could think of to do, given his particular talent, culture, and repertoire.

I came back to my company and said, “What’s missing here is harmony. What’s missing here is people going in the same direction. What’s missing here is alignment. What’s missing here is focus”. I started talking to people about being aligned, about really being on the same page about what we were doing and the methods we were using, and the focus of the company. I told them I had come to a place where I was no longer going to put up with a company that was not aligned, and I meant it. It was a dedicated, heartfelt statement. And in the next months, half of the people left the company or I fired them. Those who left didn’t really want to align with me. My commitment to increasing my own energy and the energy of the company seemed to be the cause of many people’s departure.

It was my own lack of energy, my own burnout, and my own unwillingness to put up with that situation that caused me to sell the company and move with my family away from Washington, D.C. to the vast, empty desert of northern New Mexico. During this transition, there really was a contextual shift in my life. There was a shift in framework from hard-hitting, "Let's get it done, let's make the money, let's get as big as we can," to something that Lorin Smith had represented -- a world in which the expansion of energy was the senior commitment. And with it came a new sense of hope, a new possibility.

In the desert, it is easy to see the world in energetic terms. Someone wrote that, "every new word begins in the desert" – that vast, empty place where all creation happens. There is nothing between you and the world. I've since come to think that, for the most part, the wilderness is the real world and that what people have constructed isn't the real world. What if the real world was the sky, the wind, the trees, the water and the land? It was as though somebody had taken a vacuum cleaner to my mind and opened up my heart. My whole self and being filled the place. I felt so alive, with the high plains desert and the mountains, the pinon pine and the stars at night that stretch in a 360 degree horizon and shine bright in the crystal clear air. I had a continuing experience of having no barriers in between me and the real world. And I referred that experience back to most of the companies I've been in, where that kind of aliveness, energy and vitality was rare. I'd see it once in awhile in a hot project, a great relationship, or an exciting startup. But for the most part, the more organized a group was, the deader it was, the more people looked like zombies and developed these incredible rationalizations for how their lives were and how they worked.

What was so present in the desert was the opposite of this deadness – it was simple energy and lightness. For four years now, I've been going back and forth between this wilderness and the work I do consulting to companies. And I continue to be amazed that the energy that's available in the wilderness is so absent in organized, corporate life. At the same time, however, some of the best that has been created through technology and productivity is missing in the wilderness. It's not just a one-way street and I'm not speaking at all against the best of modern life. What I'm speaking against is anything that drains energy, anything that takes vitality away.

During the second year in my transition from a static world to an energetic-based point of view, I took a training program with a Mexican teacher, Victor Sanchez, who had studied and lived with the Toltec Indians in northern Mexico. Victor had developed a coherent conceptual framework that was very much based on energy. Lorin Smith didn't have a lot of explanation for what he did. He just did it, and I saw that he was working with fundamental energies. Victor Sanchez, in contrast, was a scholar as well as a teacher. He said that the Toltec Indians believed that the world does not consist of objects. Rather, they believe the world consists of interacting energy fields and that the systems with greatest available energy will prevail. This made a lot of sense to me. You know, if you go too close to the sun, you'll burn to a crisp. People with money and power usually prevail over people without money and power. In times of effective revolution, the disenfranchised gather their collective energy, which becomes greater than the establishment, and thus prevail. Companies with the most committed, purposeful, concerned people, with the best products, tend to dominate the market. Having good ideas

and strong intentions are important, but what's essential is the available energy. Sanchez's argument was that human beings are double beings. Part of us is purely energetic -- the energy of the sun; the heat, the vitality, the spirit in us, the part that can fly. And the other part of us is careful, survival-bent, linear, and prone to organization, power, and control.

In the background was my fascination with Albert Einstein's formula ($E=MC^2$, energy equals mass times the speed of light squared). Einstein changed a world-view based on the notion that the output was energy. I've spent a long time looking for a similar formulation because I could see that most people in organizations treat each other like things, like objects. One deals with human resources, not human beings. It seemed to me that if organizations could be construed in energetic terms -- the way Einstein did it for physics -- a shift could be produced of equal magnitude as that which occurred from Newton's mechanical system to one that had far more flexibility and power. The more mechanical, the more procedural, the more non-human a system was, the less energy there appeared to be.

Energy Flows Where the Attention Goes

Also of great influence in my thinking was a book titled, *The Urban Shaman*, by Serge Kahlili King. One of his assertions was that "energy flows where the attention goes." My work was always shaped by where the CEO or the leader was putting his or her attention. My life is shaped by where I'm putting my attention. And with everybody I knew, their lives were affected by where they placed their attention. What I hadn't seen before was that energy accompanied attention and that certain kinds of attention enhanced energy. In organizations, outward results can be directly linked to the energy created from where the attention flows.

I then started to work with a musician and a poet, a Taos Pueblo Indian named Robert Mirabal. He and I became fast friends and we started doing training programs and other community work together. We developed a conversation based on the contrast between the linear and the metaphorical. Robert would say that his Tiwa language was metaphorical; the way his people thought was metaphorical, and what they were interested in was metaphorical, including their religion. And metaphorical thinking isn't very good for business. "English," he said, "was a language made up to do business in," and was far more linear, goal-oriented, and time bound. Out of our engagement with one another, and experiencing the difference between him and his people and me (a mainstream guy), I came to see that there were really profound, existential differences between how they related to time, music, and dance versus results, productivity, and money. It was radically different. My immersion with Robert in metaphorical conversation and metaphorical experience -- whether through drumming, walks in the woods, or asking a stone what to do with one's life -- demonstrated that there were effects that were surprising, remarkable, insightful, and that gave energy, vitality, and new life to old situations. I also saw that introducing linear thought and the English language tended to suppress that particular kind of energy. On the other hand, the kind of energy that produces penicillin, airplanes, and computers isn't available to the metaphorical mind in its pure form. I came to see that in a world in which everything is profane and nothing is sacred, energy and human vitality are suppressed.

During the same period I read that in the Kaballah, the ancient Jewish mystical tradition, a person's life works best when they are able to continuously integrate intellectual, physical, spiritual, and emotional energies. That seemed to be the key to the contextual shift I was experiencing: energy in its purest form is in the background of everything. But it gets expressed concretely in objects, results and money. It gets expressed emotionally in relationship and caring, love and generous listening. It gets expressed intellectually in creative thinking and inquiry; in the asking of good questions and the invention of new answers. And it gets expressed spiritually in those representations that we hold sacred; our highest principles. I saw that in companies, when things started to go awry, one of these energies was always missing. People were either not paying attention to measurement (so there were no results) and/or they weren't paying attention to relationships (so projects got undermined). Sometimes they weren't paying attention to principles, and the fundamental meaning went out of the whole thing and people became demoralized. Other times there was no innovation – just people saying and thinking the same things over and over again. Whatever energetic expression prevailed in a company was reinforced by the culture. Other thoughts were forbidden and people who most represented the culture became the CEO or the most important vice-presidents. People representing the type of energy most absent were often dismissed.

Some years ago I saw a video of Red Auerbach – the famous Boston Celtics basketball coach – speaking about what it means to be a coach. One of the things he said was that his job was all about team spirit. It was all about watching the level of team spirit and whenever the level of team spirit went down, his job was to pump it up any way he could through challenge, hard work, practice, counseling, affection, or whatever it took to get that team spirit up. I saw then that energy is the same as team spirit in an organization. That's what we are fundamentally dealing with -- an organization whose team spirit is high, whose energy is high, will prevail, other things being equal

On Suppressing Energy

Over the years, I have seen and recognized the enormous effect of the CEO's personality and way of being on the energy of a company. All personalities have limitations and drawbacks. But when somebody has the top position in a system, the effect of what they focus on and what they suppress is immense. Whatever a CEO's automatic way of relating to the world, whatever their way of dealing with relationships, or with conflict, or with results and measurement, or with finances or thinking, gets reflected throughout the organization. Too many CEOs only allow real creative thinking in the areas that interest them and simply avoid those areas that appear more threatening. Now this is human nature, and it's to be expected. But if CEOs could begin to see the world in energetic terms, they would see the suppressive affect of some of their behavior on the energy of their company and people's power to execute the very things they most want implemented.

In my experience, this is not always the case. Sometimes there are leaders, CEOs and others, who have a certain integrity about balancing energy and really pay attention or try to pay attention to all of it -- to results, good thinking, relationships, and to principles. In those situations things seem to work better. But it comes from a high level of integrity. They are willing to risk activity in areas that really make them uncomfortable. They might not like it, but are willing to do it because they stand for the integrity of

each type of energy being represented. The results are always phenomenal. Untold millions of dollars are saved, and money is made for the company. Manufacturing plants are preserved that would have been lost because of higher costs. All because they have the integrity and are willing to bring forward integrity in a balanced way.

Over time, I came to see that there was a probable relationship between energy as I defined it and integrity. In the absence of that integrity, the energy is absent. The person doesn't feel bad; they simply do not recognize that anything is missing for them. I have known some terribly ineffective people, and they just did not see what was missing for them. I have seen people in nonprofit organizations and in business for whom measurement and results are missing – but they don't even know it. Once people start to notice which kind of energy is missing or absent, then they can take it upon themselves to generate it for themselves and get what they want and need.

There are really two things going on at the same time. There is a physical world with concrete properties. For instance, when I touch my car, it is both metal hard and cushion soft. And yet, when I look at my car in terms of all of the energies that were brought together to create it, and how it carries me forward and lifts my spirits, I can see my car as if it were a wave of energy. As in physics, there are particles (concrete) and there are waves (intangible and in motion). Both seem to be true. But if you want to move forward and develop effectively in an organization, people need to start seeing what's happening not just from a concrete perspective but also from a wave-like, energetic point of view.

In many organizations, force and coercion are often relied upon to make things work. In the end, however, force can only be effective for short periods of time – and all the while it drains energy away. Using force and fear, most product developments don't produce products that work. Most company mergers do not succeed by their own standards. When people deal with each other and with problems as concrete things, they create an abstract conceptual relationship, which automatically suppresses energy. The more people can see each other and the challenges surrounding them energetically, the more compelling situations become, and the more energy is unleashed.

Conclusion

A new framework is available in which one comes to accept that the world, including an organization and the people in it, consist of interacting energy fields. The people and systems with the most energy will prevail. Our job here is to be responsible for seeing what kinds of energy are missing and needed, and providing just that. Whether it's the energy of measurement and results, relationship and emotion, good thinking and innovation, inventiveness, creating possibility and inquiry, or the energy of standing up for and acting on principles (whatever you hold dear). Ultimately, this is a matter of individual responsibility and a shift in point of view. This shift is equivalent to Einstein's formula, where your overall available energy equals your relationship to these various kinds of integrity – in performance, relationship, innovation, and principles.

Each kind of integrity and energy is already there – it is simply a question of naming it and claiming it.