

Energy Renewal

Take just 10 minutes a day.

By Susan J. Bethanis

Surveys show that anywhere from half to 80 percent of Americans are dissatisfied with their job, and two out of 10 employees expect to change jobs within a year. Burnout and fatigue are at all-time highs. Major depression, which is much more debilitating than a simple case of the blues, is more common than you might think: According to the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, about 15 percent of all Americans will suffer a major depression episode during their lifetime, and two thirds of those will not seek treatment. This means that at any given time, one or more of your people may be severely restricted in their ability to function on the job. Many more are likely to be suffering from milder forms of depression and other stress-related disorders, which will manifest in lower levels of energy, enthusiasm, initiative, and ultimately, productivity.

With all these dire statistics floating around, what is a leader to do? The first step is to know your limits. It's highly likely that you are suffering the effects of constant pressure and stress, whether you recognize it or not. To thrive, you must: 1) renew yourself throughout the day as well as over time; 2) showcase your personal efforts at renewal, so that you can serve as a model for others; and 3) be responsive to what will make your people happier in their jobs, with the aim of shifting your culture to be more conducive to energy renewal. Here are four tips for personal and professional renewal:

1. Resist the pressure to do everything at once. Just because technology allows you to multi-task, doesn't mean you should. Multitasking can be beneficial during the right circumstances, but it's not something that you should be doing all day long. When you can combine two or more relatively simple tasks—such as email, texting, and phone calls—to fill otherwise wasted time, such as waiting on hold or before a meeting, then switching between tasks can be very helpful. But multitasking often just gives the illusion that you are being more efficient than you really are.

Try tracking your time some day minute-by-minute, and you'll see how much time you are losing when you think you are racing at breakneck speed. This happens because you can't really do two things at once; you have to shift your attention back and forth rapidly between each activity. And each time you interrupt yourself to do something else, it can take several minutes before you re-orient to continue what you were doing. Optimal productivity comes from deep engagement, or "flow," which can only be properly harnessed one task at a time. Knowing that you need to slow down in order to go fast will help you break away from the multitasking habit. And by slowing down, you'll move from the anxiety-inducing flight or fight mode and become more relaxed, flexible, and ready for those times when you actually do need to react quickly.

2. Create routines. The start of your day sets the stage for how the rest of the day will go. Rather than setting your alarm clock for the latest possible time to wake up and still get to work on time, try working backwards. Identify the time of your first meeting or deadline and give yourself ample time to wake up, get dressed, exercise and/or meditate, and commute through unexpected traffic delays. If you get to work early, give

yourself credit and leave that much earlier; soon, leaving yourself enough time to create a relaxed pace will become a reward in itself.

Remember, too, that you are modeling behavior for your organization. If you continually stay late and answer email and text messages late into the night, your colleagues and employees will feel the need to do the same. Set yourself routine office hours and times for checking and returning email messages; when you feel the need to extend those times, ask yourself first, is it really necessary for me to respond right now or am I creating a false sense of urgency? If you can wait until your next “response hour,” often times the situation will resolve itself.

3. Take more breaks. Have you ever dreamed up a great idea while in the shower or on your morning jog? Psychologists have found that the most creative thinking comes when you’re not actively engaged in finding the solution. After a few hours of deep focus, get up, move a little, take a walk, even if it’s only down the hallway and back; allow yourself time to daydream. When you are stuck on a particular problem or you find yourself losing focus, put it away for awhile and do something else.

Make sure that your people take breaks as well. Whatever happened to the official coffee break, the lunch “hour,” the afternoon nap, the 5 o’clock siren? Resist the urge to squeeze every last minute of productivity out of your employees, and create a culture at work that is healthy and fun. You will be rewarded with renewed vigor and enthusiasm on the part of your employees, and may also increase retention.

4. Focus on your breathing in the moment. When you are stressed or moving at too fast of a pace, you tend not to notice aches and pains. One effective way to break out of that pattern and renew your energy is to get present with yourself, and particularly with your body. Merely focusing on your breath for a second will re-center you when you need a break, or when you are upset or angry.

Another technique is to stand facing a window, lift your arms away from your body, and turn your palms facing inward as you draw in a deep breath, then rotate your palms backward as you release the air with an audible sigh. Then do a quick check-in with each part of your body: how are your toes doing? Your knees? Your fingers? Are they sore from typing, do you need to shake them out? Are you hungry? From Descartes on, humans have held the belief that our minds are somehow separate from our body, but they are not. Set a timer for once each hour to loosen up, stretch, and breathe, and you’ll find that your ability to concentrate will increase. Over time, paying attention to your body will keep your whole self much healthier.

With every bit of renewal, the increased engagement you’ll experience will lead to greater creativity and innovation. It’s up to today’s leaders to implement, support, and maintain opportunities for themselves and their employees to renew at work. Ask yourself...“What will I do to renew myself and my team today?” **LE**



Susan J. Bethanis is Founder/CEO of Mariposa Leadership, a leadership coaching firm, and author of *Leadership Chronicles of a Corporate Sage* (Kaplan). Call 415-861-5900 or email sueb@mariposaleadership.com or visit www.mariposaleadership.com.