



The Human Energy Crisis: What Leaders Can Do to Spark Engagement

The blunt force of disruption over the past few years has profoundly affected every aspect of life. Human energy in the workplace has been scattered, tattered, and strained.

In all corners of the globe, the effects of the changing present weigh heavily on leaders and managers. The uncertainty of the future of work and a trend of “quiet quitting” can overshadow the value of what we know about human energy and proven leadership skills.

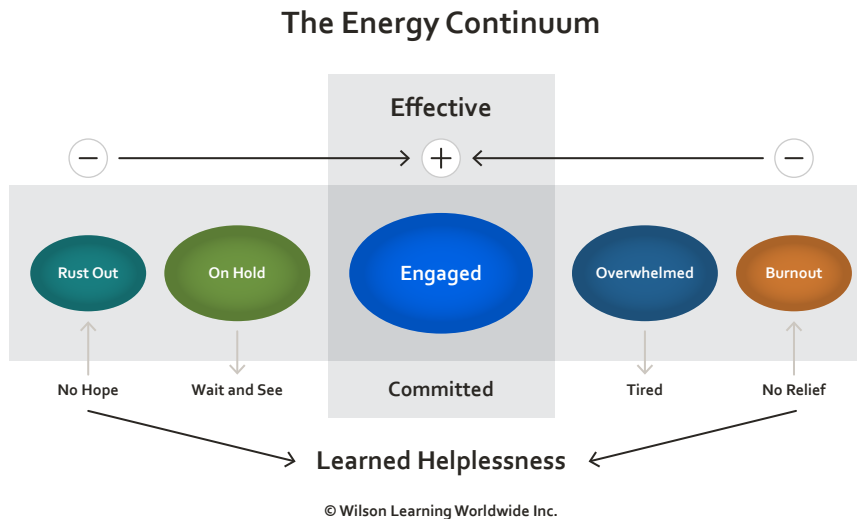
Let us revisit those valuable, actionable skills to give managers some immediate relief.

Think about change in your organization over the course of the past year. How did it feel?

Was it in crisis-level heaves and swells, or in small, relentless undulations of change and uncertainty?

What impact did those changes have on your team, your department, your organization?

The Energy Continuum provides a visual model of what can happen when people experience the ripple effects of continuous change, disruption, and uncertainty. The model describes various ways energy disperses and becomes consequential to an organization's effectiveness. Ideally, employees are clustered in the center of the model—where employees are engaged, effectiveness is at its peak, and commitment is high. However, during times when there is prolonged or frequent change, energy tends to disperse to the right or left of center and leads to ineffectiveness.



Energy can flow to the right since frequent change can often lead to a feeling of being overwhelmed. Often, employees feel like they have lost control of their “self.” The need to spend an inordinate amount of time meeting work demands takes precedent in their lives. If there is no relief from being overwhelmed, employees may begin to experience occupational burnout. Feeling burned out can lead an employee to put what energy he or she has on hold.

Energy flows to the left when employees put their energy on hold. Yes, they put in their time, but not their discretionary energy. Rust out occurs when employees psychologically unplug from the organization. They do only what is expected of them and no more. Employees use what energy they do have to remain undiscovered, to stay under the corporate radar.

Regardless of whether employees' energy flows toward burnout or rust out, if left unchecked it can lead to learned helplessness. Learned helplessness occurs when people are conditioned to believe that a bad situation is unchangeable or inescapable. Because of burnout or no relief, and rust out or no hope, the mindset shifts to choosing to take care only of oneself and to choose “inactivity”—choosing to do no more than the bare minimum, choosing to quietly quit.

With so much change going on, employees are legitimately asking themselves, “Do I have the energy to go through this again?” The perceptions employees have of the changes occurring are critical to their decision on how much energy to invest. The problem is that, in many organizations, the people who have a profound impact on the employees’ perceptions—managers and leaders—are asking the very same question themselves. Leaders do need to take stock of where they are personally on the Energy Continuum so they can manage their own energy and stay engaged. Just as importantly, managers need to ask themselves, “What specific actions can I take that will help my employees and me move forward in the context of opportunity while still acknowledging and validating our current reality?”

The Leadership Premise

Leadership has the greatest opportunity to influence the energy of an organization. To redistribute the energy dispersal from disengagement at the far ends of the Energy Continuum back into the Engaged center, leadership must be aware of the effects of learned helplessness and initiate tangible actions to energize the team, department, or organization.

How?

Moving Forward in the Context of Opportunity

Rather than being stuck in crisis or spinning in change and deterioration, leaders can gain real traction by instilling a hopeful perspective of a possible future and a concentrated dose of reality in their employees.

Managers can combat learned helplessness with a skillful approach for creating realistic optimism—simply defined as working positively toward a desired outcome or solution. Realistic optimism enables managers and their teams to be firmly rooted in reality while standing in the future potential.

Realistic Optimism

The key to refocusing organizational energy and increasing or regaining effectiveness is to establish a positive and realistic belief in future potential among your team.

Leadership needs to create a message that moves the focus away from problems and creates a sense of optimism about the organization’s future direction or leadership’s goals and vision. The spine of the story is opportunity and growth, or in other words, how good can we get?

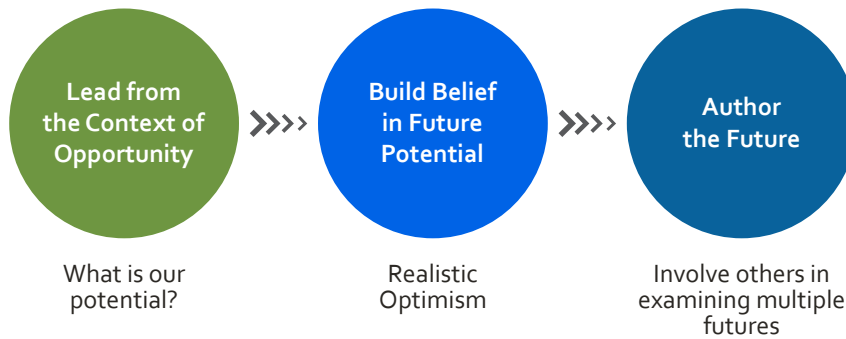
A Brief but Spectacular Thought About Leadership

Leadership has the greatest opportunity to influence the energy of an organization.

Leaders either give energy to or take energy from an organization.

The Power of Realistic Optimism

The ability to balance current reality and future potential is the power of realistic optimism. It shifts the focus from “problems” to going forward in the context of opportunity and breaks down the challenge of making progress in the face of uncertainty into manageable actions. The very managerial acts of asking and listening to employees demonstrate authenticity and transparency. The shared responsibility of authoring the future allows for a multiplicity of future potentials.



Recognize and understand the story you are telling:

- Lead from the context of opportunity and growth—a context focused on potential and how good we can be.
- Initiate individual opportunity dialogue with your constituents.
- Share your perspective of opportunity.

Build belief in the potential:

- Establish a positive and realistic belief in the future potential.
- Avoid becoming a “foolish cheerleader” by positioning or trying to spin a false narrative.

Involve others in Authoring the Future:

- Prepare a statement of Realistic Optimism.
- Involve others in creating the future potential.
- Move forward in the context of opportunity.

Checklist: Realistic Optimism and Strategy Development

When exploring a strategy for moving the company forward, realistic optimism must meet certain criteria. We would like to leave you with a checklist to help guide strategy development based on your tactical inputs gathered from your statement of realistic optimism.

Preparing a Statement of Realistic Optimism

It is crucial that employees are included in the process of creating a vision of realistic optimism by their leaders.

Considering your organization and current situation, have employees respond to the following questions:

- Looking forward, what worries you the most?
- Looking forward, what excites you the most?

Using the information from the two questions, you can:

- Write a simple statement of realistic optimism that describes a vision of the future.

The three criteria from the employee's perspective are as follows

1. Is the strategy believable?
 - Employees need to "buy in."
 - Without buy-in, employees resist or stay in "wait and see."
2. Is the strategy doable? Believable, but . . .
 - Do we have the time, required expertise, complexity, etc.?
 - If seen as not doable, you get compliance at best.
3. Is the strategy feasible? Believable and doable, but . . .
 - There is a lack of money or resources.
 - It prevents execution.

Let's Meet Again

Our decades of research and experience enable us to appreciate that every age and generation thinks its own time is extraordinary and, inside its limited context, tends to exaggerate its own virtues or vices. We know that being overwhelmed and putting energy "on hold" are natural responses to change and disruption. Recently, this knowledge has been validated by a workforce experiencing a global pandemic. However, if you remain overwhelmed or on hold rather than resolving the causes of overwhelm and moving forward, this stagnation becomes detrimental to the implementation of growth and change strategies.

Let us meet again and explore how your leadership can bring energy to your organization in the context of opportunity and growth and how you can skillfully manage from realistic optimism.

To learn more, contact Wilson Learning at 1.800.328.7937 or visit our website at [WilsonLearning.com](https://www.WilsonLearning.com).

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