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Meet the MasterMinds: Jim Loehr—Are You Fully Engaged?

At one time or another, we've all experienced unwanted drops in our energy. It may happen at a client meeting, a family event or when writing a proposal. It's at moments like these that we wish we could squeeze out just a little bit more energy.

Jim Loehr can show us how.

Drawing from the lessons of professional athletics, Loehr's prescription for improved performance, called Full Engagement, topples conventional wisdom while providing a comprehensive and understandable set of strategies for getting all you can from what you've got.

Loehr is a leader in the field of performance psychology and a founder of LGE Performance Systems, where he co-developed the Corporate Athlete Training System. He is the author or co-author of twelve books, including ***Stress for Success***. His most recent book with co-author Tony Schwartz, ***The Power of Full Engagement***, argues for a shift in focus from time management to energy management.

Loehr has appeared on NBC's ***Today***, ***Nightline with Ted Koppel*** and the ***CBS Evening News with Dan Rather***. He has also been featured on CNN, ESPN, ***60 Minutes***, ***48 Hours***, ***Inside Edition*** and many other programs worldwide.

For over twenty-five years, Loehr has worked with top performers in business, sports, law enforcement and medicine. He talked to MCNews about how consultants can maximize their performance without sacrificing health or happiness.

MCNews: Many people believe that managing time is the key to high performance in their work and in their personal lives. In your view, are time management techniques really sufficient to meet those objectives?

Loehr: Well, this is where my co-author and I diverge the most from traditional thinking. There is no question that time is an important commodity in our lives. But we have found that time, by itself, is fundamentally valueless unless it intersects with our best energy. That's because it's our best energy that enables us to be extraordinary.

So we feel people have really missed something here: the fundamental unit that must be managed is energy, not time. We thought it was time but it's really not. It's also not money, although money is important. The fundamental resource—the currency that makes everything happen—is energy.

It's not the amount of time I spend with my children, my spouse or friends, or the amount of time I spend on the job that's important. If you think about your life, it's not how much time you are going to spend on the planet that will define your success; it's the energy you bring to the time that you have.

We need to use time management techniques as a vehicle to manage our energy, which is the most precious resource we have, individually and organizationally.

MCNews: Why have people overlooked the importance of managing energy?

Loehr: It's so interesting. We are all over the other resources we believe are important in our lives. For instance, we manage money maniacally. We recognize money as a vital resource in our lives, and so we have built an entire industry around financial management.

The same is true for time. We have recognized that time is sacred in our lives. We have been lead to believe that to achieve great success, we must manage our time more efficiently and effectively. So we have created an entire industry around time management as well. That has helped us to be more diligent in how we invest our time and to hold ourselves accountable for it.

And yet, if you ask people about energy management, they have no idea what you are talking about. In fact, the physical body is considered to be irrelevant to business. There's no industry around the energy resource. Energy is the capacity to do work, and if you take energy out of the equation, no work or business can ever complete its mission.

MCNews: How well do most people manage their energy?

Loehr: Good data on that has been collected worldwide. Probably the best source is The Gallup Organization, which has published over forty-two studies on the subject. Gallup's data, which is completely consistent with ours, shows that only one in four people are what we call "fully engaged," meaning they bring their best energy to work.

Full engagement is the pathway to extraordinary performance. But seventy-five percent of people in the workforce are not bringing their full energy to their mission.

Of even more concern, nineteen percent of people in the workforce across all industries are actively "disengaged," which means they are working against the mission: they are on the payroll, but their energy is negative; they are not working in concert with the organization's goals. And not incidentally, the corporate costs, just for the actively disengaged, have been estimated to be as high as \$250 billion.

MCNews: Is the lack of full engagement a result of people not devoting their energy to work or are they are not managing energy effectively?

Loehr: It's both. First of all, they don't have enough energy capacity to meet all the demands that are placed on their energy, both in their personal and professional lives. It's like having more bills to pay than you have money in the bank. You make partial payments because if you emptied the account, you would be bankrupt.

If you make a partial payment with your energy, that's disengagement. So one of the reasons that people are disengaged is that they simply don't have enough in their energy bank to meet all of the demands.

The second reason is that they have very poor energy management skills. People don't know how to renew their energy. They are not very judicious in shepherding the resources they have, and they waste a lot of energy on things that take them nowhere near where they want to go. At the end of the day, they are exhausted from fighting purposeless battles.

That leaves them even less energy for their families and their communities. Their energy is either very low or is contaminated by negativity, which in our vernacular is very low octane energy. Energy can be very toxic as well as very positive. If you don't manage it well, it's like the worst gas-guzzling auto.

MCNews: How can we realize the benefits of full engagement in the workplace and in our personal lives?

Loehr: The generic principle is the one we just covered—that the pathway from ordinary to extraordinary is managing energy, not just time, more skillfully. We have many specific principles, but I will give you the CliffsNotes version of the four that are most important.

The first is that full engagement requires us to draw from four distinct, but connected dimensions of energy: physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. We humans are complex beings and to get the power of full engagement, we've got to recruit the full measure of all the multi-dimensional energy potential we have, and focus it right here, right now.

The next principle is very basic: we can't be fully engaged all of the time because our energy has to be renewed. People who try to be fully engaged all of the time eventually become energy bankrupt—they just can't do it.

The third principle is that you have to train in the same deliberate way that elite athletes do. The energy demands on people in business exceed anything we have ever seen in sports in all the years we have worked with professional athletes. And yet most people don't train for those demands. The number of hours that business people have to focus and concentrate during any given day is remarkable, and that continues week after week, year after year with no off-season.

The last principle of full engagement is not achieved by conscious will and discipline, but by the use of what we call positive rituals. We are basically creatures of habit, and the way we manage our energy reflects the routines we have gotten into in our lives, for better or for worse.

If you have bad routines with regard to eating, sleeping, exercising, mental focusing or time management, or poor routines for getting in touch with your deepest values—your character, honesty and integrity—those routines are what will run your life.

MCNews: Turning to the second principle you mentioned, any advice for how people can build effective recovery periods into their daily lives?

Loehr: If you want to be extraordinary in life, you have to find ways to renew your energy—physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. The system works best when you turn it on as bright as you can, and then turn it off. And you do this frequently.

We use ninety-minute intervals we call oscillation—bouts of energy expenditure followed by bouts of energy recovery. To be fully engaged at the most important times, you have to oscillate. We are oscillatory creatures in an oscillatory universe. That's how we work best and can be the most productive.

Every living thing needs recovery—energy deposited and renewed in the system. If you are fit, that makes you stronger and you need less time to recover, but everyone needs some recovery time. And if we don't do that physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually, we cannot sustain this extraordinary energy expenditure.

For example, you need to find ways to transition from work to home. During your commute, turn off your cell phone and anything that keeps you in the on position mentally and emotionally. Instead, maybe listen to some relaxing music. This prepares you, much like an athlete would prepare prior to an important event, to change gears and be ready to receive your children or your spouse and give them 100% of your best energy.

MCNews: The concept of oscillation seems to be the reverse of the conventional wisdom that work, your career, is a marathon. Are you saying that the best performance comes from a sprint, not a marathon?

Loehr: Absolutely. If you are going to be extraordinary, there have to be times when you put the pedal all the way to the floor. That's when you get the greatest return on your energy investment. You've got to give 100% of your energy to get your genius to surface.

To visualize the difference between a 100-meter sprinter and a marathoner, think about their energy before and after a race. At the end, the marathoner looks like a train wreck, while the sprinter looks excited and energized.

The reason sprinters are so excited and full of energy is that they can see the goal line right in front of them. I could give 100% of my energy to reach that clear a goal. But the marathoner can't see twenty-six miles. And our work lives aren't twenty-six miles, but thirty or forty years. So it's no surprise that most people are not fully engaged in their jobs or home lives. They are afraid to give too much because they will run out of steam. And once you run out, you are dead.

We encourage people to understand how it feels to be a sprinter versus a marathoner. We show them how to divide up their lives into manageable sprints by beginning with physical exercise. You start with interval exercise—walk fast and then walk slow. And every time you step into what we call the hot zone and then go back voluntarily on your own terms to recovery, you confirm that it was okay to go to the hot zone.

If you've eaten properly and have worked in sprints during the day, when you head for home you will still have energy left over so that you can do a big sprint with your family. And then maybe you seek some time alone, or you go out and work in the garden or hit some golf balls—whatever it is that helps you renew yourself. We are trying to get people to understand the value of oscillation, and not simply get through one more day, grinding it out until it's over.

MCNews: The concept of full engagement draws many of its principles from sports. How are those principles relevant to consultants and others in the business world?

Loehr: In fact, we are the ultimate athletes. The span of a professional athlete's career is five to seven years, while in corporate America a career is thirty to forty years. And the consequences for failure in business are so much more devastating. It's not a game, and so the demands in energy are that much greater.

We don't think of ourselves as athletes and we don't train our energy. We think we don't have work to protect our energy systems, while athletes understand that is the whole key to their success.

Like athletes, we need to understand that training to achieve full engagement is about building positive rituals that help us manage energy more skillfully. These rituals are consciously acquired but eventually become automatic over time, and they are fueled by deeply held values.

It's like an automatic sprinkler system in your yard: you know that the things that are really important are going to get nourished. Building positive rituals is a process that takes thirty to sixty days. We focus on just a few routines at a time, maybe one or two. Over the course of a year, you might get six or seven positive rituals locked into your DNA.

Positive rituals can completely change the way you navigate in the world in terms of energy and can bring about profound changes.

MCNews: What is a common barrier to achieving full engagement?

Loehr: There are many enemies to full engagement.

Enemy number one is multi-tasking; it's the antithesis of full engagement.

We celebrate our ability to tend to multiple balls in the air. But doing so just means that you are not fully engaged in anything and that you are partially disengaged in everything. You will never be extraordinary in things that you do while multi-tasking. So, if you care about something, never do it with other things.

If it's not important, multi-tasking is fine. For example, you may want to watch TV and read the newspaper at the same time. But if it's something that really matters, multi-tasking will insure that, at best, you will be normal or below, never extraordinary.

Think about a surgeon who is operating on you. Do you want the surgeon multi-tasking during that critical procedure—checking email, talking on a cell phone or having a bite to eat?

The brain is only capable of focusing on one thing at a time. If you split the signal to the brain, you are bouncing around and while you are not there something critical can happen.

MCNews: When you start to work with people, what's the most common area of improvement that you see right away?

Loehr: The return on energy. Many people think that they have as much energy as they can possibly get until we show them how to get a thirty to fifty percent return on their energy. They are stunned. They can't believe how life changes when they go from being tired or moderately energized to being fully charged when they get up in the morning and still ignited until 10:30 at night. We get that process started very quickly and people get excited because they realize they can have more energy.

MCNews: One last question: if someone wanted to focus on just one thing to improve their energy, which one would you recommend?

Loehr: The answer is simpler than you might think. We need to take care of the basic energy systems first. That's where we always begin. Energy comes into the system through consumption of food, and we have found that stabilizing blood sugar is probably the single most important thing we can do. Eating small meals, and eating often, actually has the most profound effect over time of almost anything that we see.

Then exercising would be right alongside of that. Interval exercise, whether it's walking, running, cycling or anything else, even if only for fifteen to twenty minutes, has a huge impact. Those two— eating and exercising—can profoundly change the dynamics of energy in a person's life to such an extent that it means the difference between being successful and just ordinary.

MCNews: Thanks for your time.

Find out more about Dr. Jim Loehr, his books and services at www.fullengagement.com.