

## Let's Energize! Making Everyone Around Us Better

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*We must walk on in the days ahead with an audacious faith in the future...Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice. Martin Luther King Jr., 1967*

While basketball player Shane Battier produced only average individual stats over his thirteen seasons in the NBA, he was universally recognized as the “No-Stats All-Star”. One reason he earned this title was that every time he joined a new team, that team would win at least twenty more games than the previous year, and would make the NBA playoffs. One sports analyst summarized Battier’s career this way: “When he is on the court, his teammates get better, often a lot better, and his opponents get worse—often a lot worse... [he helps] his team in all sorts of subtle hard-to-measure ways that appear to violate his own personal interests” (Cameron, 2021, p. 39). People like Shane Battier may not be the most showy, the most talented, or even the most recognized, but they just make everyone around them better in subtle, hard-to-measure ways. Let’s call these people energizers.

There are also those that seem to bring everyone down and suck the life out of the team. One such individual was Cormac McLaggen, a quidditch player from the Harry Potter series. McLaggen came from a long line of all star quidditch players, and, in his own right, was a fairly skilled player. Harry did not choose McLaggen to be on the Gryffindor team, but due to the injury of another player, Harry was forced to play McLaggen for one game. During the week leading up to the game, McLaggen proved to be arrogant, bossy, critical, assertive, and insulting to the other players. The game turned out to be a total disaster with the Gryffindor quidditch team suffering its worst loss in history and Harry ending up in the hospital. Though individually skilled, McLaggen is what we might call a drainer; someone with the uncanny ability to bring everyone down and make the team worse.

Shane Battier or Cormac McLaggen? I know who I want on my team or leading my school? We’ve all worked with energizing Battiers and draining McLaggen in our careers as educators, and ample evidence suggests that people consistently exposed to energizers “perform significantly better... as well as experience higher levels of wellbeing than [those] not so exposed” (Cameron, 2021, p. viii). Let’s review a few specific things we as leaders can do to energize others.

### **Set an Optimistic Tone**

We as leaders set the tone for our schools. Ample research confirms that “the power to spark positive emotional contagion multiplies if you are in a leadership position” (George & Bettenhausen, 1990), or as one of my colleagues, Dr. Bryan Bowles, often says, “Leaders bring the weather.” The predominant attitudes and mindsets in our schools are likely reflections of the attitudes and mindsets we’ve adopted over time as leaders. Peter Block (2011) recommended: “Start measuring your work by the optimism and self-sufficiency you leave behind.” Mother Teresa similarly counseled, “Let no one ever come to you without coming away better and happier.” It’s often telling to observe the body language and listen to the comments of teachers after they’ve interacted with a school leader. Early in my tenure as principal I was eating lunch in the faculty room with my teachers, and one of my very best teachers eagerly shared her experience with an energizing leader: “He helped me to see all of the good that I already do, and then he filled me with hope and inspiration to be even better! My interactions with him always leave me optimistic and energized!” Her words really caused me to reflect. *What do others think and feel when I walk into the room? What is it like working with me? Do I leave others more hopeful and energized than before our interaction?*

### **Associate With Energizers**

Carol Ann Tomlinson observed, “We take on the attributes of those we hang out with... Develop friendships with colleagues who... provide both light and energy” (2011, p. 25). I distinctly remember sitting in the faculty room as a first-year teacher, listening to some drainers endlessly gossip, nit-pick, criticize, and complain. As I quietly munched on a peanut butter sandwich, they turned to me and asked what I thought about a particular initiative the principal was promoting. I didn’t realize that this was a test. I shared that I actually thought it was a good idea and that we ought to give it a try. A short time later I was surprised to learn that these same teachers were gossiping about me! Really? From then on I intentionally avoided the drainers and sought out energizers. It’s truly tragic when a bright-eyed, passionate, visionary newer teacher or leader falls in with a group of drainers, and slowly loses the passion and sparkle, eventually becoming a drainer as well. It is really hard to stay sweet when marinating in bitter vinegar all day. *Are we intentionally associating ourselves with drainers or energizers? How can we better ensure that our newer teachers and administrators are spending time with and being mentored by energizers?*

### **Express Hope Frequently and Publicly**

There are so many amazing things going on in our schools that go totally unnoticed or unshared, and unless we intentionally create time and space for energizers to share their positivity, drainers will happily fill the void, and negativity will become the predominant narrative throughout the school. It turns out that “the people who have the most power are the ones who are the most *expressive* of their mindset, positive or negative. The problem is that most systems have this huge class of people who are positive but are not expressing it, which means that the social script is largely being written by more vocal negative individuals” (Achor, 2018, p. 139). Let’s intentionally create an energizing narrative in our schools by providing public ways to express hope and celebrate success. Whether it’s a brag book in the faculty room, gratitude journals, teacher spotlights during faculty meeting, team celebrations in the weekly email, or

other forms of celebration, “genuine acts of caring, whether exhibited in dramatic gestures or simple actions, uplift people’s spirits and keep them motivated” (Kouzes & Posner, 2021, p. 16). While creating formal opportunities for building energy is important, perhaps more important is ensuring that the thousands of informal conversations, emails, and other interactions are lightly perfumed with authentic hope and energy. Eventually, that positive public narrative will contagiously spread, which in turn will make school a much healthier, happier, productive place. *How can we more proactively and publicly express hope in our daily communications and actions and provide a forum for others to do the same?*

### **Find and Foster Talent**

While one of our most important roles as leaders is hiring, rarely do we get to entirely hand-pick our faculty. Rather, we have the opportunity to optimize the hand we’ve been dealt. Fortunately, every faculty is brimming with underutilized talent and capacity. There is likely already more strength, talent, and possibility in our schools than we realize, and it’s just waiting to be discovered, developed, and unleashed! Every school has a lot of native genius scattered throughout the building: great instructors, savvy organizers, reflective listeners, brave innovators, safe trust builders, polished speakers, and terrific techies. If we’ll actively look for talent, we’ll find it. Then we can intentionally connect people with opportunities well suited to their talents and shine a spotlight on their accomplishments as they use those opportunities to bless the school (Wiseman et al., 2013). One teacher I worked with had a bit of a prickly personality, was somewhat of a drainer, and did not check many of the boxes on the ideal teacher list. Initially I wasn’t sure how to energize this teacher. Eventually I realized that she was a talented event planner, and soon she was put in charge of one of our largest annual events. We provided her with the support she needed and were thrilled by the outcome. We recognized her for her good work and she felt much more needed and energized at our school. As Charles M. Schulz wisely observed, “Life is like a ten speed bicycle. Most of us have gears we never use.” *How can we better find and foster the many untapped talents that already exist at our school?*

### **Make School Joyful and Fun!**

One principal I worked for was a master at finding “ways for students, teachers, and administrators to take a break from the sometimes emotional, tense, and serious school day to have some fun together” (Wolk, 2008, p. 14). One of his favorite sayings was, “Childhood is a short season,” and he preached and lived the Fish Philosophy: play, be there, make their day, and choose your attitude (Lundin et al., 2020). Everyone in the school worked hard and played hard, and while we experienced the regular ups and downs of any school, the school was filled with the magic that comes from high-trust relationships, regularly expressed appreciation, and joyful times as a faculty. We played music in the hallways, held basketball tournaments with students, celebrated birthdays, went on retreats, had talent shows, did faculty dress-up days, read books and articles together, had frequent faculty parties, attended extra-curricular activities, and took care of each other in times of distress. No surprises, but there is ample evidence that we perform at much higher levels when we feel good (see Cameron, 2012). This principal certainly created the “conditions for people to do their best work” (Pink, 2011, p. 86), and as a result, students and teachers flourished. *How has your school made school joyful and fun for students and adults?*

### **Focus on Strengths and Opportunities**

You may have heard the story of two-shoe salesman that visited a poor rural area in the 1800s. They wired separate telegrams back to their boss. One read: "Situation hopeless. They don't wear shoes." The other read: "Glorious opportunity! They don't have shoes yet!" (Achor, 2010, p. 118). The ways we frame our reality can substantially impact our work. Let's explore two common tools used for framing our current reality.

*SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats).* In a SWOT analysis the organization identifies current strengths and weaknesses while anticipating opportunities and threats to progress. This is a potentially powerful approach to strategic planning, especially if you can keep it emotion neutral. However, as humans we are emotional creatures, and those using a SWOT often end up spending the bulk of their time and energy emotionally focused on weaknesses and threats. This may heighten anxiety, shut down creativity, limit problem solving, and leave people feeling drained and weighed down by all of the potential obstacles, rather than with energy and hope.

*SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspiration, Response).* In a SOAR analysis the organization identifies current strengths, envisions aspirations for the future, explores a wide range of opportunities, and creates a response or plan. The main difference in a SOAR is that while not ignored, problems, threats, and weaknesses are positively addressed through the hopeful exploration of opportunities and aspirations. When using a strengths-based approach, neural pathways open up, ideas flourish, solutions abound, and we usually leave feeling energized and empowered to move forward productively on our plans. A SOAR can be used to kick start and energize our improvement and coaching efforts with large groups, teams, or even individuals (Cooperrider, 2015). *How might we better energize our improvement efforts by framing our work with a strengths-based approach?*

### **Acknowledge Challenges and Commit to Problem Solve**

All this focus on positivity is not to say that we as leaders resort to irrational optimism, superficial sweetness, or obnoxious cheeriness, while turning a blind eye to difficult situations. We're still going to lock our school doors at night, create safety plans, hold crucial conversations, and acknowledge the very real challenges that exist. Unempathetic optimism can unintentionally cause your faculty to "wonder if you have lost your tether to reality and are lost in space. Or worse, you might be sending an unintentional message that mistakes and failure are not an option" (Wiseman, 2013, p. 142). In order to improve things, we need safe spaces to openly and candidly address the hard issues and admit mistakes. The most innovative and effective organizations have high levels of both psychological safety and candid honesty (Dyer et al., 2023). We need to feel safe enough to let our hair down, and to be real and candid with each other; however that candor need not be all doom, gloom, and despair, accompanied by hand wringing frustration or shoulder shrugging surrender. I was recently in a school that had the following norm: "Problem solve 95/5." When I asked the principal about it, he said, "We all need time to vent our frustrations, but we want to spend the bulk of our energy finding solutions. 95/5 means we allow ourselves to vent for 5% of the time, but we try to spend the

remaining 95% of the time in problem solving mode.” Love it! *How can we appropriately acknowledge challenges while focusing primarily on problem solving and finding solutions?*

## **Conclusion**

Our leadership has a very real impact on the performance and wellbeing of faculty, staff, and students, and, for good or ill, that influence even seeps into the family lives of students and employees (Cameron, 2012). What a cool opportunity for us to positively influence an entire community for good! Like Shane Battier, our leadership does not need to be that of a showy superstar, but it can definitely elevate everyone around us. Let’s energize by doing the following:

- Set an optimistic tone
- Associate with energizers
- Express hope publicly and frequently
- Find and foster talent
- Make school joyful and fun
- Focus on strengths and opportunities
- Acknowledge challenges and commit to problem solve

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