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Excerpt from the book FULL ENGAGEMENT, Jim Loehrer and Tony Schwartz

Q: What about spiritual energy. Isn't spirituality outside the box in business?

In working with athletes over the years, we discovered that we could not explain extraordinary performance simply in terms of physical, emotional or mental capacity. Every time that athletes achieved something extraordinary, they seemed to draw on another kind of energy entirely – one that we came to recognize as the energy of the human spirit. This source of fuel is most powerful, we found, when people align their actions and behaviors with their deepest values and beliefs. Spiritual energy is unleashed organizationally when we are able to align our personal values with the corporate mission. When we can make this connection, we truly become forces to be reckoned with – willing to fight harder, to persevere for longer and to deal more resiliently with setbacks.

Q: How does your work with athletes relate to average people who may not think of themselves as athletes at all?

Over the years we have worked with hundreds of top athletes, including many who were number one in the world in their respective sports. When we began applying our training principals to the corporate world, we were amazed to discover that executives and managers face demands each day that often vastly exceed those of any athlete we have ever trained.

Athletes typically train 90 per cent of the time in order to be able to perform 10 percent of the time. In the corporate world, most people spend almost no time training and yet they are expected to perform on demand 100 per cent of the time.

Professional athletes typically enjoy a three to six month off-season during which they can take time to heal, recover and rejuvenate themselves. For most of the rest of us, an "off season" amounts to two or three weeks at best.

Finally, athletes have an average career span of 5-7 years, after which they often retire financially secure for life. Most of us, by contrast, can expect to have a career span of at least 40-50 years. To stay fully engaged for that long, we must learn to train in the multifaceted way that athletes do. How else can we expect to sustain high performance without sacrificing our health and our happiness?

Q: Everyone understands what it means to strengthen a physical muscle such as a bicep or a triceps. What do you mean when you talk about building emotional, mental and spiritual "muscles"?

We know how a lot about how build strength and endurance physically. The key is to expend energy beyond normal limits and then allow time for recovery, which is when growth actually occurs. The same approach works in all dimensions of our lives. At the emotional level, patience, empathy and optimism all effectively operate as "muscles." Building patience, for example, depends on exercising that muscle repeatedly in challenging situations. At the mental level, logical thinking, focus and creativity are all muscles. Spiritually, character is a muscle. As Aristotle put it: "We are what we repeatedly do."

Q: You talk a lot about the importance of full engagement, but you also emphasize the value of

something you call “strategic disengagement.” What is the relationship between stress and recovery?

All great athletes understand the importance of “work-rest” ratios – the systematic balancing of energy expenditure with energy recovery. Unfortunately in business people are often measured by how relentlessly they push themselves. Taking time to rest and recover is viewed as a sign of weakness. In fact, full engagement depends on periodic disengagement. It is only when we fully shut down our energy systems that real healing, regeneration and renewal can occur. Without strategic disengagement, we eventually become energy bankrupt. This may show up as physical fatigue, negative emotions, poor focus and even lack of commitment. Overuse it, in short, and you lose it.

The opposite is also true. Too much recovery without sufficient energy expenditure leads to atrophy and weakness. Think about an arm placed in a cast for an extended period of time in order to protect it from the “stress” to which it is ordinarily subjected. In a very short time, the muscles of the arm begin to atrophy from disuse. Use it, we have learned, or you lose it.

The key is to learn to rhythmically balance stress and recovery. This is true not just physically, but also emotionally mentally and spiritually. We call this phenomenon “oscillation” and it represents the fundamental pulse of life.

Q: You write in your book about how the advances in technology that make it easier to be more connected also make it nearly impossible to disconnect. What do you mean by that?

We’ve lost the ability to create boundaries in our lives. We’re always juggling multiple priorities that bleed into one another. We celebrate breadth rather than depth, quantity over quality, quick reaction rather than considered reflection. Between cell phones and pagers, email and Blackberries, we never really give ourselves the opportunity to fully change channels or shut down.

Managing energy more skillfully requires learning to build boundaries back into our lives. In practical terms, that means operating not as marathoners, but as sprinters. Marathoners plug along with no finish line in sight, forever conserving energy but never fully engaging. Sprinters, by contrast, are able to see the finish line 100 or 200 yards away. They learn to push hard for short periods and then recover before fully engaging again.

Q: For all that you say about the importance of recovery, you also take the position that stress is critical to growth. Can you say more about that?

The things in life that push us the hardest also often prompt the most growth and the greatest rewards. Stress is the primary means by which we build functional capacity. The one caveat is that in order to grow from stress, we must take time to recover. The way to strengthen a muscle is to literally break it down first – voluntarily subject it to a storm – and then follow up with a 24-48 hour period of rest. We grow stronger in all dimensions of our lives by pushing past our current limits and then recovering.

Q: What are the biggest mistakes most of us make in managing our energy?

The first mistake is that we assume energy is our birthright and behave as our access to it is infinite. We pay almost no attention to systematically building and renewing energy capacity in the face of increased demand and of the loss of capacity associated with aging.

The second mistake we make is to assume that energy is one-dimensional. We fail to recognize that in order to fire on all cylinders we need not just a sufficient quantity of energy, but a certain quality, focus and force as well. The more physically energized we are, for example, the less prey we are to negative emotions and the better able we are to concentrate. The more spiritually energized we are,

the more we can use this fuel in the service of whatever we set out to accomplish physically, emotionally and mentally.

Q: Why are so-called “rituals” important to energy management?

We learned very quickly in our work with athletes that the best ones excel not by using conscious will and discipline, but rather by establishing rituals that become automatic in their lives. These highly precise routines help them to stay fully engaged even under severe competitive pressure. A growing body of research in a field known as “automaticity” has confirmed that human beings are deeply habitual and that conscious will and discipline are very limited resources. The trick, instead, is to make the right behaviors automatic as quickly as possible.

Positive rituals are every bit as important to high performance in Corporate Athletes as they are for professional athletes. Rituals turn out to be critical in every dimension of energy management, from how and when we eat, exercise and recover to how we manage our emotions under stress; from what sort of mental preparation routines we build to how we stay connected to our deepest values.

Q: What hard evidence do you have that full engagement improves productivity?

For 25 years, we have lived and died by the numbers with athletes. Sports represent a hard, unforgiving world. Fractions of seconds define success or failure. In all of our work, we measure everything that we can in order to establish baselines, set targets and hold our clients and ourselves accountable. Powerful evidence, much of it gathered by the Gallup Organization, suggests that people’s level of engagement can be directly correlated with performance, longevity in the job and even health care costs. These findings confirm our own conclusions: the more fully engaged people become, the more productive they are on the job. Our own measures include comprehensive physical testing to assess physical capacity as well as our four-dimensional Full Engagement Inventory, which can be used to measure both individual and organizational engagement.