



# Tips for Being Engaged, Effective, and Enlivened

By Members of the Bureau staff\*

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## 1. Focus on managing your energy as well as your time.

In their book *The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, Is the Key to High Performance and Personal Renewal*, Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz look to the model of how elite athletes build their performance capacity to consider how others of us can manifest our potential for performance, health, and happiness. They contend that building our capacity – whether physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual – depends upon our working with natural cycles of stress and rest, intensity and renewal. They argue that when stress is punctuated by rest and renewal, stints of pushing beyond our usual limits promote our growth and development but that when stress is not followed by rest and renewal, we are vulnerable to depletion and exhaustion. Loehr and Schwartz present a chart in which they distinguish a time management paradigm from an energy management paradigm.

### The Power of Full Engagement

#### Old Paradigm

Manage time  
Avoid stress  
Life is a marathon  
Downtime is wasted time  
Rewards fuel performance  
Self-discipline rules  
The power of positive thinking

#### New Paradigm

Manage energy  
Seek stress  
Life is a series of sprints  
Downtime is productive time  
Purpose fuels performance  
Rituals rule  
The power of full engagement

(From J. Loehr and T. Schwartz, *The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, Is the Key to High Performance and Personal Renewal*. New York: Free Press, 2003, p. 6.)

## 2. Sharpen your saw.

Others, too, have recognized the link between effectiveness and vitality. Stephen Covey, in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, offers the following parable:

Suppose you were to come upon someone in the woods working feverishly to saw down a tree. 'What are you doing?' you ask. 'Can't you see?' comes the impatient reply. 'I'm sawing down this tree.' 'You look exhausted!' you exclaim. 'How long have you been at it?' 'Over five hours,' he returns, 'and I'm beat! This is hard work.' 'Well, why don't you take a break for a few minutes and sharpen the saw?' you inquire. 'I'm sure it would go a lot faster.' 'I don't have time to sharpen the saw,' the man says emphatically. 'I'm too busy sawing.'" (From S. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. New York: Free Press, 2004, p. 287.)

You understand the point. When you take the time to "sharpen your saw," you will find that your work goes better. For a student, sharpening your saw means getting enough sleep, eating well, exercising regularly, honing your study skills, and taking breaks to get re-oriented and re-energized. It means connecting, and reconnecting, to what is truly meaningful and enlivening to you. Making use of the resources at the Bureau of Study Counsel – participating in a workshop or discussion group, taking the Harvard Course in Reading and Study Strategies, meeting with a peer tutor, and/or consulting with an academic counselor – can help you to reflect on your approach to your studies (and your life) and to connect with what works best for you and what matters most to you. Far from slowing you down, these efforts enhance your productivity and your sense of well-being.

## 3. Know yourself.

To manage your energy well, you need to become aware of your own patterns, preferences, and tendencies in relation to time. **Notice when you work best** (what time of day), **under what conditions** (lighting, temperature, seating, company, sound). Check out various libraries and cafés to discover ones that suit you. Experiment to discover how your **state of rest and nutrition** affects your concentration (e.g., Do certain foods make you sleepy?)

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\* Item # 4 is taken from "A Procrastinator's Guide to Writing: Reconsidering Beliefs That Keep Us from Engaging with Our Work," by Sheila M. Reindl, Ed. D., Copyright © Sheila M. Reindl 1989, 2004, 2011, 2012, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018. The handout is available at the Bureau of Study Counsel, Harvard University, [bsc.harvard.edu](http://bsc.harvard.edu).

Do others help with focus and stamina? How long of a nap is "just right" for you, leaving you refreshed, not groggy?). Notice how your optimal work conditions depend upon the **type of work** you are doing (e.g., when you prefer to have others studying nearby, when you want the clatter of a café, and when you prefer solitude).

#### 4. Work out of order.

Focusing on energy rather than time has implications for how you engage with a project. Managing your energy well sometimes means working "out of order," i.e., working on a part of the piece that leaves you particularly engaged and energized in a given moment even if that part is not "next" in your work plan or in the final product. While completing any given project almost always involves devoting some time (and sometimes a lot of time) to more tedious or tiresome tasks, we can draw energy for those tasks from the energy that we generate for ourselves by working on the parts that enliven us.

The benefits of working out of order rather than strictly sequentially are akin to the benefits of having an electrical circuit wired in parallel rather than one wired in series. If you have a string of lights wired in series, when one light goes out (i.e., you stall on one part of a piece of writing), the whole string of lights goes out (i.e., you grind to a halt on your whole project). If you have a string of lights wired in parallel, when one light goes out, the others stay lit (i.e., the electricity still flows, and you can continue to work on another part of the project for which you have some energy and/or clarity).

#### 5. Pretend that you love whatever it is you are doing. (But keep a sense of the absurd.)

In a workshop on commitment and creativity, a middle school teacher shared a motivation strategy she teaches to her students when they are preparing for state-wide standardized tests. She urges them, when the test asks them to answer questions about a reading passage, to think to themselves, "Oh, I always wanted to read about whatever the topic is!" and then to read the passage as if they were genuinely interested to learn about this topic. For instance, "Oh, I always wanted to read about volcanoes in Iceland!" "Oh, I always wanted to read about synesthesia!" "Oh, I always wanted to read about growing hydroponic vegetables!" "Fake it 'til you make it" – a mantra used in twelve-step programs – turns out to have brain-based validity. That approach enables us to recruit the part of our brain that is wired to be good at positive emotions and link that part up with the part of our brain that is wired to be better at negative emotions. That linking changes our actual experience.

A student recalls having dreaded taking a course that was required for her concentration. But she could tell that the instructor was in love with the topic. So she decided to approach the course by being curious to know what he, and others like him who loved that stuff, found so engaging about it.

An instructor found herself dreading a course she had to teach. She had just been dumped by her boyfriend; her car had just been totaled; and it was a bitterly cold winter. With no car and not enough insurance money to buy a new car, she faced the prospect of walking a mile every morning in the cold to get to her classroom by 7:15 a.m. to set up for the course. She recalls thinking, "I can either hate every minute of this course, or I can decide to love it." It occurred to her that it would take as much energy to love the course as to hate it. So she asked herself, "If I did love it, what would I do?" Then she tried doing that. She was surprised to discover that in choosing to love the course, she made the course better – revamping lessons, making new handouts. In so doing, she generated energy and vitality for herself. It was still cold and dark in the mornings. She still had no boyfriend and no car. The course was still a lot of work. She was not happy about any of those things. But she could nevertheless change her experience in that cold, dark season by drawing upon her capacity to become curious and engaged.

The idea is not to be pollyannaish and deny our negative emotions, not to brainwash ourselves by relentlessly trumping the negative with the positive, not to be annoyingly cheerful or inauthentic about our actual experience of things. In fact, it's worth keeping a sense of the absurd when we are faced with a job that part of us resists, disdains, or dreads. The idea is to link up the positive and negative aspects of our experience so that the energies of both are included. When we link up our capacities to feel both beleaguered and bemused, the result is that we have more authenticity and vitality, not less, to bring to the endeavor.

#### Resources

Allen, D. 2001. *Getting things done: The art of stress-free productivity*. New York: Penguin.

Covey, S. 2004. *The 7 habits of highly effective people*. New York: Free Press.

Loehr, J. and Schwartz, T. 2003. *The power of full engagement: Managing energy, not time, is the key to high performance and personal renewal*. New York: Free Press (Simon and Schuster)

Tharp, T. 2003. *The creative habit: Learn it and use it for life*. New York: Simon and Schuster.