

# Energize Others to Drive the Innovation Process

By Wayne Baker



**Y**ou've got a great idea—something with real potential to benefit your organization, not to mention your career as well. Now what? How do you develop the idea? How do you rally support for it? Once it's developed, how do you drive diffusion and adoption through the organization?

Research that I and others have done during the past two decades shows that the key is energizing others.<sup>1</sup> The innovation journey of discovery, development, diffusion, and disruption depends on many factors, but social capital—how people are connected to one another—is a critical one.<sup>2</sup> Network scientists have documented the importance of different types of connection. For example, cohesive connections within teams yields higher productivity, while bridging connections across teams or silos tap new and diverse information and yield more innovation.

But having the right connections is half of the story. Social capital is beneficial only when others are motivated to share

knowledge and information with you, to brainstorm ideas, to productively cooperate with one another, and to devote their discretionary time to your projects. To accomplish this, you must energize others, interacting in ways that create emotional energy.

Consider, for example, the role of emotional energy in the successful merger of CIGNA's retirement business with Prudential Retirement.<sup>3</sup> John Kim, then-president, was on the advisory board of the University of Michigan Ross School of Business when he first heard about the new field of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS), an innovative set of principles, concepts, and practices.<sup>4</sup> He decided that a culture based on POS would be the merged firm's competitive advantage.

A change management team was organized to lead and implement this cultural innovation. Being an energizer was an important consideration for membership on the team because energizers are influential change agents. An energy

survey was deployed to identify those who were perceived to be the most energizing (see How to Measure Energy below). Energy also was used to target interventions. Managers who expressed the most enthusiasm and support for POS were the first to receive training and assistance; these managers were the most likely to implement innovative POS practices, such as the then-new Reflected Best Self Exercise<sup>5</sup> and to spread these practices by energizing others.

This change team led the two-year transformation effort, starting with their own functional areas and then in other departments. Their activities were too numerous to describe here.<sup>3</sup> They included, for example, introductory sessions and workshops about POS that cascaded through the hierarchy and the integration of innovative POS practices into business processes. Evidence of the successful merger and creation of a positive culture included data from a pre/post climate survey, which showed widespread adoption of POS practices, higher employee morale, better relationships between bosses and subordinates, and higher employee retention. In addition,

the more business units implemented POS practices, the more they experienced significant increases in sales, customer retention, and assets.

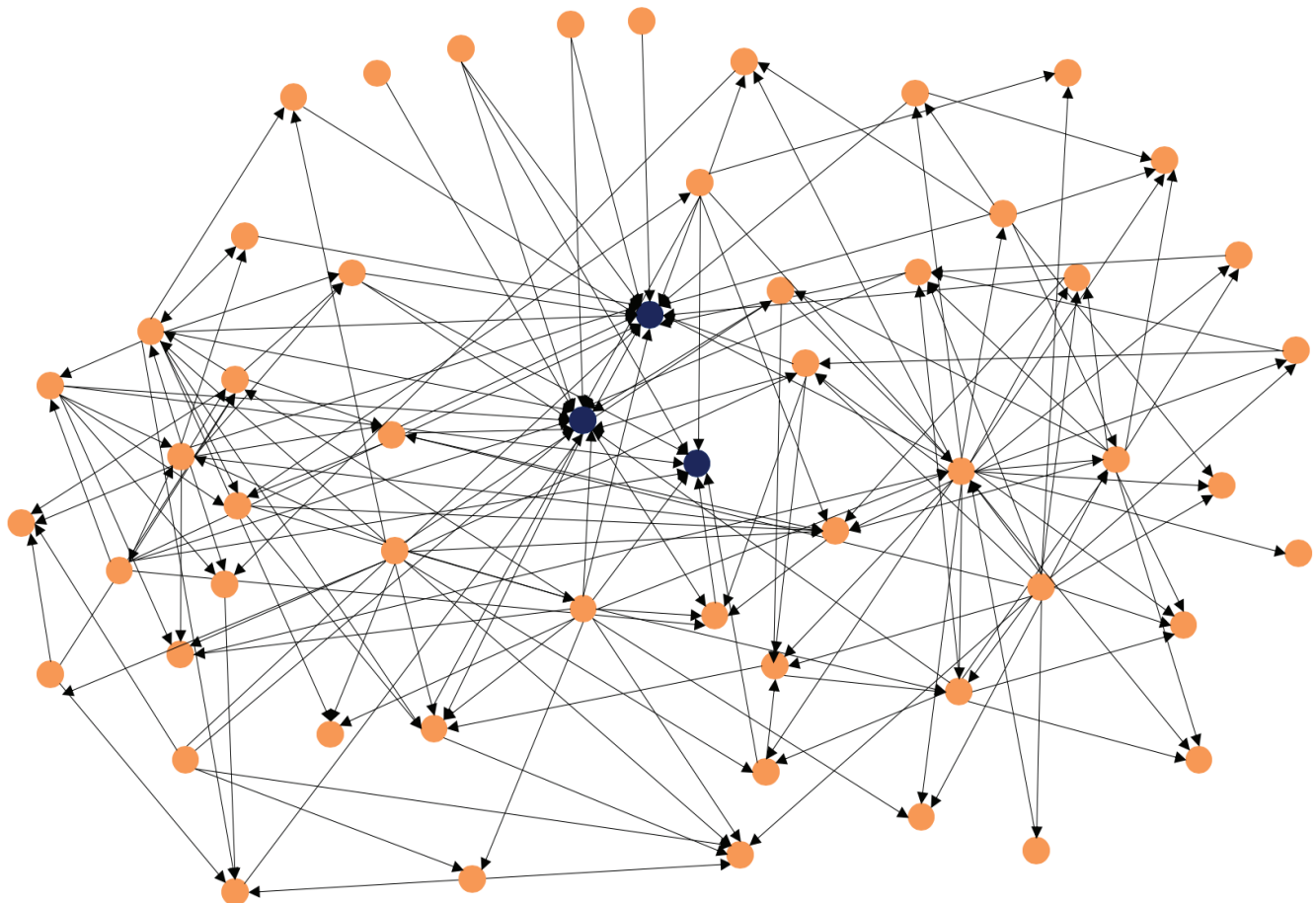
### Emotional, Relational, and Organizational Energy

Human energy exists in several forms.<sup>1</sup> Physical energy is the capacity to do work. It is stored in the human body as potential energy in the form of glucose and adenosine triphosphate. Emotional energy also contributes to the capacity to do work, but it exists as emotions. Emotional energy varies on a “continuum from enthusiasm, confidence, and initiative at the high end, down to passivity and depression at the low end.”<sup>6</sup> Emotional energy is not the same as motivation or effort, but it can be related to them.<sup>1</sup> A person might feel high emotional energy but be unmotivated to use it; another might feel low emotional energy and still be motivated.

Emotional energy isn’t just about personality. It is partly related to the personality traits of extraversion, conscientiousness, and neuroticism,<sup>7</sup> but it is also under voluntary control.

**Figure 1. Energizing Network Among Leaders and Staff in a Government Agency**

Hierarchy: ● Leaders ● Staff



Notes: Each line represents an energizing tie. Arrowheads indicate direction (from the energized to the energizer). Data from an organizational network survey.<sup>22</sup>

For example, one can choose to engage in activities that elevate emotional energy, such as physical exercise, breaks, learning something new, setting a new goal, and focusing on what brings joy at work.<sup>8, 9, 10</sup>

An important source of emotional energy is relational energy—the emotional energy we derive from our interactions with others.<sup>11</sup> Relational energy varies on a continuum from positive to neutral to negative. Positive relational energy creates emotional energy in others; negative relational energy depletes emotional energy in others.

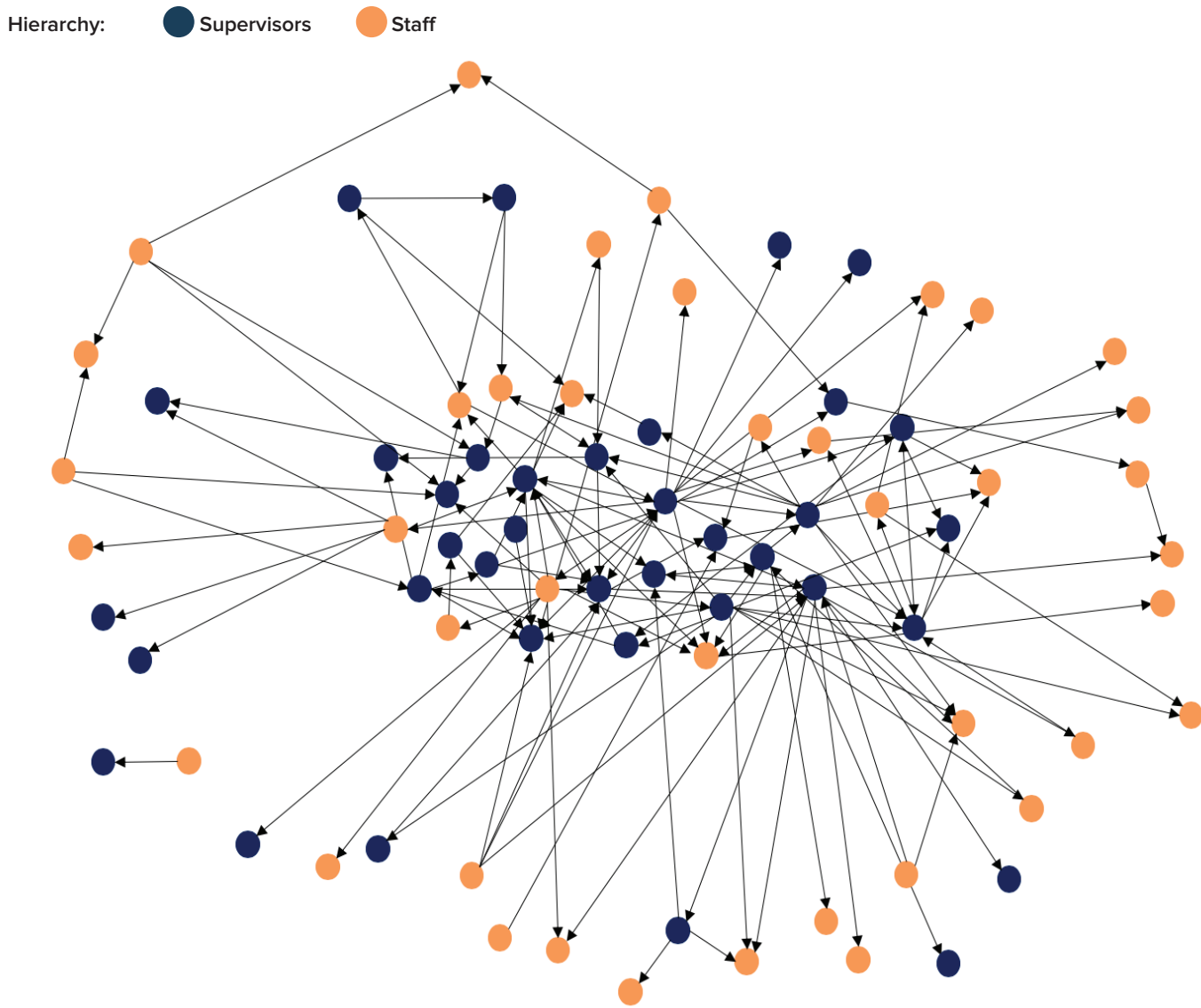
Relational energy is mildly related to personality traits.<sup>1</sup> Mostly, however, it is a set of learned behaviors that generate (or deplete) emotional energy in others.<sup>12</sup> For example, high-quality connections—characterized by respectful engagement, task enabling, trust, and play—elevate emotional ener-

gy, while low-quality interactions decrease it.<sup>13, 14</sup> High-quality connections between managers and subordinates are critical because managers account for 70 percent of the variation in employee engagement.<sup>15</sup> When managers energize their employees, employees are more engaged at work and their job performance improves.<sup>11</sup>

Energizers—those who create emotional energy in others—attract talent. People are motivated to share information with and devote discretionary time to those who energize them.<sup>1, 16</sup> The opposite is also true. People avoid interacting with de-energizers—even at the cost of failing to acquire needed information.<sup>16, 17</sup> Further, de-energizing connections impair job performance because they add stress, interfere with cognitive functioning, and reduce motivation.<sup>18</sup>

Emotional energy and relational energy play key roles in

**Figure 2. De-energizing Network Among Supervisors and Staff in a Petrochemical Company**



Notes: Each line represents a de-energizing tie. Arrowheads indicate direction (from the de-energized to the de-energizer). Data from an organizational network survey.<sup>22</sup>



When people are energized, they are more likely to seek out new technologies, techniques, and processes at work, and to generate more creative ideas.



the innovation process. Employees are more involved in creative work, such as generating novel work-related ideas, when their emotional energies have been elevated by high-quality interactions with their bosses and peers.<sup>19</sup> When people are energized, they are more likely to seek out new technologies, techniques, and processes at work, and to generate more creative ideas.<sup>20</sup> Energizers rally people to support their innovations, and they spread their innovations—and energy—through an organization’s network.<sup>2,21</sup> Other energizers are called “challengers”—they provoke changes in an organization and constructively critique and improve new ideas.

Organizational energy is the next level. It is the collective energetic state of a workplace and can be represented by and analyzed as a network of relational energy (see Measuring Energy in Organizations below). Leaders influence organizational energy. Consider, for example, Figure 1, which represents the network of positive relational energy among leaders (blue) and staff (orange) in a government agency.<sup>16, 22</sup> This agency had been in disarray. Three new leaders were brought in to revitalize the organization around new priorities; Figure 1 is evidence that they were successful. Qualitative interviews showed that they generated emotional energy through their interactions with the staff and energy spread through the network.

In contrast, leaders can sap organizational energy. Figure 2 illustrates the network of negative relational energy (de-energizing connections) among supervisors and staff in a petrochemical company.<sup>16, 22</sup> As shown, the leaders are in the center of this de-energized network. Qualitative interviews revealed that the leaders depleted staff emotional energies by micro-

managing, forcing conformity to outdated bureaucratic rules, and employing an authoritarian management style. Seeing Figure 1 had a big impact on the leaders, who embarked on a culture change initiative. They were able to replace their de-energizing behaviors with new behaviors that created emotional energy in others.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the main points of their stories. Of course, there were some de-energizing connections in the energized organization, and some energizing connections in the de-energized organization. A key metric is the ratio of energizing to de-energizing ties in a network. The ratio in a thriving organization is 3:1 or higher; the ratio in a languishing organization is below 3:1. The 3:1 ratio is a tipping point or threshold. Upward spirals occur when an organization is above the tipping point; downward spirals occur when an organization is below it. Fortunately, survey methods exist to measure emotional energy, relational energy, and energy networks in an organization.

### Measuring Energy in Organizations

Energy can be measured as emotional energy, relational energy, or energy networks. Atwater and Carmeli’s<sup>19</sup> feelings of energy at work scale is a validated measure of individual-level emotional energy. It can be aggregated to the group level as an average, and the variability of emotional energy in a group can be measured as the homogeneity or heterogeneity of emotional energy. A high average level of emotional energy in a group or organization is one indicator of collective thriving and the potential for innovation. High variability, however, indicates that individuals’ emotional experiences in a group or organization are different, with some thriving and others not.

Relational energy can be measured with a validated five-item scale developed by Owens et al.<sup>11</sup> Here, a respondent rates how energizing other people are. However, using the five-item scale is practical only in a group or organization with fewer than 50 people. In a group of 50, a respondent must answer 245 questions (five items X 49 people). For large groups, a single item is used, which greatly reduces survey burden. This single item could be one of the items from the scale. A variation that is often used is: “Typically, when you interact with this person, how does it affect your energy level?” with a 5-point response scale, where 1=very de-energizing, 3=neutral, and 5=very energizing.<sup>1</sup>

If you’ve measured relational energy among all members of a group or organization, then you have the data you need to analyze and map an energy network (e.g., Figures 1 and 2). Network science provides a wealth of measures and software programs.<sup>23</sup> Network analysis can be used to evaluate the current energy state of an organization, measure the impact of organizational interventions, and monitor change over time.

### How to Create Energy in Others

Energizing others helps to rally support for an innovation and aids the diffusion of an innovation in an organization.<sup>2</sup> In the case of the successful merger of CIGNA and Prudential Retirement, the innovation was cultural—the principles, concepts, and practices of POS.<sup>3</sup> Generally, creating emotion-

al energy in others elevates employee engagement and job performance.<sup>11</sup>

Research shows that emotional energy is created when people have an inspiring vision, make progress toward meaningful goals, and build high-quality connections.<sup>12, 21</sup>

### Atwater & Carmeli's Feelings of Energy at Work Scale

*"I feel active and energetic at work."*

*"I have high energy to complete my work."*

*"During the work day, I feel I am full of energy."*

*"I have the energy to successfully do my job."*

*"When I get to work in the morning, I have energy for the new day."*

*"I feel enthusiastic when I am doing my work."*

*"The work in this organization gives me positive energy."*

*"When I am at work I feel vital and alive."*

5-point Likert scale, where 1 = not at all and 5 = to a large extent.

### Owens, Baker, Sumpter, & Cameron's Relational Energy Scale

*"I feel invigorated when I interact with this person."*

*"After interacting with this person, I feel more energy to do my work."*

*"I feel increased vitality when I interact with this person."*

*"I would go to this person when I need to be 'pepped up.'"*

*"After an exchange with this person, I feel more stamina to do my work."*

7-point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree.

**Develop an inspiring vision.** A vision is an inspiring, strategically sound picture of what success looks like at a specified time in the future. One method is called Preferred Futuring, with an eight-step model for developing a vision.<sup>24</sup> This method was first developed as an alternative to conventional group problem solving. The conventional approach was to list and prioritize current problems, understand root causes, devise an action plan, implement it, and evaluate it. This approach de-energized participants. The alternative started with a list of what works as well as what does not work, determines the desired future state, and develops an action plan to achieve it. This alternative approach created emotional energy in the participants, which empowered them to make progress toward the vision.

**Create positive everyday interactions.** Every interaction is an opportunity to create (or destroy) emotional energy in others. Interactions that increase energy are characterized by respectful engagement (your words and deeds convey a sense of the other person's value and worth), task enabling (you provide resources that help another person be successful at



their work), trust (you communicate in your words and deeds that you believe the other person is reliable and dependable), and play (you celebrate successes and achievements and find ways to inject fun into the workday).<sup>13</sup>

**Implement the principle of generalized reciprocity.** This form of reciprocity is more than a simple exchange between two people ("I help you and you help me"). Generalized reciprocity means that you help anyone in your group or community without expectations of return and freely ask for what

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you need, knowing that the group will be there to help you. Large-scale organizational research shows that generalized reciprocity raises emotional energy in two ways: the warm glow of giving to others and gratitude for help received.<sup>25</sup>

There are several tools and practices that implement this principle. The daily standup at innovative technology firms<sup>26</sup> is a routine that could be adopted in any group in any industry.



Taking turns round-robin style, members of a group or team describe what they worked on yesterday, what they are working on today, and ask for help and assistance if they need it. This is a task-enabling activity that makes it psychologically safe to ask for help (and, of course, give it).

Two tools I helped to develop—Reciprocity Ring and Givitas—implement the principle of generalized reciprocity. The Reciprocity Ring is a facilitated face-to-face activity for teams and groups. Givitas is a digital platform based on the Reciprocity Ring. Whether you use these tools or others, such as daily standups, they all work because they implement the principle of generalized reciprocity, enabling people to ask for what they need, while the group taps its collective resources, knowledge, and networks to respond to requests.

## Embrace Energy

Emotional energy, relational energy, and organizational energy are vital factors of production. Individuals, teams, and organizations perform better when they are energized than when they are not. Positive energy shapes cultures, increases employee engagement, and boosts the innovation process.

Yet it is easy to overlook the role of energy, especially if one thinks of it as an invisible resource. Measuring all three types of energy, using the methods introduced here, makes energy visible. Once it is visible, it is manageable. HR can promote the understanding of energy in the workplace, support its measurement, and play a key role in elevating it. Individuals can assess their own emotional energy and relational energy, making decisions and taking actions to improve both. And, leaders can assess the state of energy in their organizations, implementing strategies, tools, and practices to improve it. ■■

*In the interest of transparency, the University of Michigan and I have financial interests in Give and Take, Inc., the company that owns the Reciprocity Ring and Givitas. I am a cofounder of the company and a member of the board of directors.*

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