

Fixing the Plane While It's in the Air: Managing a Principal's Energy

Patricia Briscoe^a & Paul Wild^b

^aNiagara University, ^bBruce Grey Catholic District School Board

Abstract

In this case narrative, Peter, an experienced principal in a new school board and school, is struggling to keep up with the day-to-day challenges at his school and to achieve work–life balance. Challenges include: (a) small changes in the school can that demand some of his time; (b) daily unintended interruptions that are draining his time and energy; (c) feeling overwhelmed, which causes feelings of hopelessness and despair; and (d) the demands of long daily work hours that are affecting his family life and his ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle. The case includes teaching notes and two activities—exploring the difference between time and energy management, completing an energy management audit, and devising a plan and strategies to restore and replenish energy—that instructors can use in graduate-level courses and professional development workshops.

Keywords: work-life balance, time versus energy management, school principal

Case Narrative

Peter Williams hung up the phone after a courtesy call to his superintendent. He had called to inform her that a student had been physically restrained earlier that day (in case there were complaints from parents or community advocates). Peter's supervisory officer had walked him through a series of questions to discern whether or not the board's protocol had been followed correctly. Satisfied that it had, she thanked Peter for the heads-up and ended their conversation by saying, "Good job. Hang in there." Peter glanced at the clock.

"Crap," he said under his breath.

It was already 4:55 p.m. He needed to have left ten minutes earlier because it was his turn to prepare dinner for his daughters and whisk them off to their 6:30 p.m. gymnastics practice. As he packed up his computer and other belongings, he saw his lunch bag untouched again. He sighed and hoped the sandwich would still be good by tomorrow—he had already thrown out two lunches this week.

Peter started his drive home. As he saw the Tim Hortons looming in the distance, he glanced at the clock again. He was pushing it, but pulled in and grabbed a coffee from the drive-thru window. Years ago, he couldn't drink coffee after 3:00 p.m.; this year, he'd started getting coffee after work multiple days a week. As he pulled off the highway, he began driving along the peaceful, secluded roads that are common throughout rural Ontario. He sighed wearily as he sipped his coffee: This was his time to decompress. He began to reflect on his day—a type of day that had become increasingly familiar over the last year.

Peter was in his second year as principal of St. Maria de Torres Catholic School, a small, rural school with approximately 250 students from Kindergarten to Grade 8. The previous principal had retired after 12 years at the school and Peter took over as her successor. As he drove, he reflected on how she had initially

described the school to him: a quiet, stable school in which discipline issues were few and far between and academic achievement was consistently above the board and provincial averages. When he took over, Peter was a newcomer to both the school and the region. He and his wife had made the decision to leave suburban living and move with their two young daughters to a small town to enjoy a quieter lifestyle. At the end of the last school year, Peter had begun to feel as if he had found his groove in his new community, school, and board.

“But, that was before this year,” he thought, taking a long sip of his coffee.

The day had begun, like many, with a teacher sick and no supply teacher available. This meant he had had to juggle multiple schedules to cover the missing teacher’s schedule—familiar territory. After arriving at school, Peter had begun making a contingency plan by cancelling French classes and redeploying the French teacher to cover the absence. This meant some teachers would miss their planning time for the day and would need to make it up at a later date. Peter had visited the affected teachers personally and, with apologies, advised them of the change in schedule. The teachers had not been pleased, but the shortage of supply teachers had become a frequent reality across the district. Plans were being made at the board level to alleviate the problem by delaying regularly scheduled activities that required supply teachers, such as on-site school Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Peter had to quickly move on to the next task of the day, which was setting up the meeting room and materials for the PLC meeting at 9:30 a.m.

His plan had been to spend the morning leading a session on mathematical measurement with the junior division teachers, a focus for professional learning within the district but also an area of expertise for Peter. In his teaching days in his previous school board, he was always heavily involved with the math curriculum, becoming well-established in various roles, such as math curriculum coordinator and program department consultant. As he set up the chairs, Peter had mused on how much he enjoyed this type of work; doing curriculum work with teachers always felt familiar and comfortable.

The meeting had begun as planned at 9:30 a.m., but 45 minutes into the session, the walkie-talkie on his hip had suddenly crackled to life.

“Mr. Williams, we need your help in the workroom, please.”

A knot of anxiety had formed in his stomach immediately as he read between the lines of the message.

“There goes my day,” he thought.

Peter had known that this meant one of his new students was having another meltdown—a violent physical and verbal outburst. Peter had apologetically excused himself from the session and asked his instructional coach to take over. As expected, he had arrived at the workroom to find Marcus, a kindergarten student, in crisis. Physical intervention had already been initiated as a means to protect the physical safety of the student, his classmates, and the educational assistant. Although this was not the first time this process had been required to support this student’s safety, and the staff and students were more familiar with the protocol, this did not mean that the situation was any less demanding physically, emotionally, and mentally; it still involved a student in crisis, required a workplace violence investigation, and required phone calls to parents and related paperwork. The situation would require a lot of time investment before it was resolved.

Two weeks into the school year, Peter’s work life and the work lives of his staff had been sent into a whirlwind. Three students, all siblings, had moved to their small, rural community after having been removed from the care of their parent. All three siblings had been involved with the Children’s Aid Society and, upon arrival, each of them had required significantly different programming and supports than their classmates. Although all of the siblings had struggled with self-control issues and being able to demonstrate positive behaviours in school, Marcus, the six-year-old kindergarten student, was the most physically violent. Planning for the entry of these students had taken a great deal of time and effort over several months, with multiple meetings involving the school resource teacher, classroom teams, board consultants, child and youth workers, social workers, and the new guardians—the grandparents. This process had been a steep learning curve for everyone in the school. Team meetings had become a weekly occurrence, which, like everything else, took time and planning.

The staff at Peter’s school had been unfamiliar with how to deal with the verbally and physically violent behaviours these new students were demonstrating; it was something neither they nor Peter had ever experienced before. The team directly involved with supporting the students had known that things were going according to plan but progressing slowly. Teachers who did not have direct contact had simply been seeing and hearing the outbursts without knowing the full context or recognizing the small gains that were

slowly coming to improve the students' behavioural and mental health issues. A few days earlier, Peter had overheard some grumblings from his teachers.

"When did it become okay to swear in school?" one teacher had asked a colleague.

"I know!" she had replied, "Or to hit a resource worker?"

This conversation had signalled to Peter that something had to be done soon. Keeping his staff informed was important regardless of whether it involved them directly or indirectly, but he had had no idea when he would be able to find time and energy to pull an intervention together.

"Maybe tomorrow I can get this intervention plan started. I will call my superintendent to request an emergency early release of the school day so that I can hold an information session for my staff; then, I can call the Mental Health Consultant at Social Services to arrange a time when she can come to the school to provide information to the staff," he had thought.

As he turned his car onto another quiet road, he reflected on how that meeting had gone. He felt it was definitely the first step toward changing the school culture. His staff has been receptive, but he knew their frustration had not been completely assuaged.

"I just don't know how much longer I can handle being on the receiving end," he thought as he drained the last of his coffee.

He knew that his staff were feeling drained, and many of them could not understand why the three students should be allowed in the school, especially as they had become a major drain on resources—human and otherwise. If he was honest with himself, Peter could understand their frustration: feeling frustrated, drained, and exhausted had become a feature of his daily life.

"My plans for the day are routinely hijacked, and I have to put everything on hold to deal with these outbursts—not to mention the paperwork that follows," he thought grimly. He immediately felt guilty and reminded himself that these students did not choose this life.

"They're part of my school family. I need to be able to hold it together for the sake of these children, and demonstrate to my staff that we must be willing to help them, as our school may be the only space in which they can deal with their behavioural challenges."

He felt bolstered by his own resolve, but a small voice in his head interjected:

"But this isn't what you signed up for, is it?"

No, he thought. He had not known that he would be challenged in every possible way. He had not known how much his work would intensify as a result of these three new students. He had not known he would struggle to keep up with his roles and responsibilities, let alone develop any of his new ideas and initiatives. He began thinking about all of the other problems at the school that did not get addressed in the last few days. The new Grade 4/5 teacher was struggling with classroom management. After fielding a number of calls from concerned parents, he had begun a few intervention strategies with her. He realized that it had been over two weeks since he had had time to check in with her and visit her class. He knew things were not getting better, as he had received a bunch of messages from parents, and multiple students were being sent to his office from her class daily.

With a jolt, Peter remembered the professional learning course that was supposed to start the following week. When he arrived at his new school board, his superintendent had encouraged him to seek professional learning opportunities. At the end of last school year, he had signed up for professional development offered by the Ministry of Education for school administrators. At the time, he had thought it was the perfect career opportunity; if he decided to move from principalship to a ministerial position later on, the course would come in handy. However, he was now facing eight two-day sessions throughout the year that would require him to travel into the city overnight and complete additional work between sessions. Peter wondered how his superintendent expected him to sleep, let alone deal with work that would pile up during his absence and explain to his family that he had even less time to spend with them.

"I need about 30 hours in a day," he said out loud to himself.

Peter glanced at his watch. He realized there was no time to cook dinner and swerved into the nearest fast food drive-thru.

He sighed and thought, "God, this is the third time this week."

Peter's wife had recently taken a local management position and was dealing with her own work-related stress and long hours. His text message alert went off: she would not be home until late. Anxiety ballooned in his chest as he looked at the little red bubble on his email icon. He had not even checked email yet that day, and he still had inbox items from the previous day. He also had a newsletter to write and

work to prepare for the upcoming Ministry PL sessions. He knew it was going to be another long night. Healthy eating and exercise had effectively been crowded out of his and his family's daily schedules. In the last year, he gained weight, started sleeping poorly, and he now dreaded the sound of the alarm clock in the morning.

As he pulled into the driveway and turned off the car, he made a quick mental list of the tasks that had to be completed before tomorrow. He sighed heavily. June seemed a long way off.

"I feel like I'm trying to fix the plane while it's in the air," he thought. "Something needs to change soon. I need to land this plane and do some maintenance. Otherwise, I don't know how I'm going to make it to the end of the year."

Teaching Notes

This case narrative demonstrates the daily routines, role expectations, frequent unintended disruptive events, subsequent follow-up (e.g., paperwork, phone calls, etc.), and feelings of hopelessness that some school leaders experience while trying to cope with their work demands. Many studies in Canada have reported that principals have overwhelming workloads. For example, in their recent study conducted in Southwestern Ontario, Pollock, Wang, and Hauseman (2014) reported that, on average, principals spend approximately 59 hours per week on their work. Other global reports (Phillips & Sen, 2011; Riley, 2019) have reported a similar number of hours. As well, the increasing unpredictability associated with the nature of the daily tasks, actions, and activities is influencing principals' work and their ability to feel in control. In Pollock et al.'s report, 44% of principals said the nature of their work can vary widely from one day to the next. As Peter demonstrated in this case, these unintended interruptive events can create challenging situations where advanced planning is difficult and unplanned events take up a large portion of a principal's time.

Moreover, working long hours with minimal control over their workdays is resulting in principals struggling with work–life balance (The Institute for Educational Leadership, 2008). Pollock et al. (2014) found that 35.7% of Ontario principals *rarely* felt that they could effectively balance work responsibilities and their personal lives, while 13.2% responded *never*. Unfortunately, there are few research studies examining *how* principals find solutions or build positive coping strategies to deal with work intensification or establish better work–life balance. These findings are not surprising, given that such a high percentage of principals—and other leaders in high-intensity work places—feel pressured to work long hours and still never have enough time to complete all of their work (Pollock & Hauseman, 2015). Overall, Peter's situation reflects this reality. He is struggling to cope—to keep up with the pace, intensity, and volume of his work—and is negatively coping by engaging in more work, which is leading to conflict in his personal and family life. He is having difficulty managing his time and energy to keep up with the day-to-day demands of the job while also trying to keep a harmonious balance between his work and home life. He described how: (a) small changes in a school can be a game changer in the workplace and demand all his time; (b) daily unintended interruptions and the resulting work can drain his time and energy; (c) feelings of being overwhelmed and underperforming can take over his thought patterns and promote feelings of hopelessness and despair; and (d) work demands and long hours can result in him continuously making sacrifices with family and a healthy lifestyle. All of these challenges accurately represent the reality of work intensification.

The activities provided in the following section are designed to promote healthy coping strategies that can lead to more self-regulated work–life balance. This case would be best used in settings where current and emerging school- or district-level leaders—such as superintendents, school principals, teacher leaders, and department heads—are engaging in leadership preparation or graduate education coursework in the area of educational leadership and administration or professional learning and development in school boards. For example, the case and accompanying teaching activities allow participants who are currently in leadership positions or are aspiring to enter initial leadership or senior leadership positions to develop different perspectives on work intensification and strategies to approach their work with renewed feelings of control and hopefulness. Workshop facilitators for professional learning opportunities delivered at the district level, or by professional associations, may also find the alternative perspectives in these activities to be beneficial for both novice and experienced leaders.

These case activities are designed to encourage participants to reflect on the case details, and, in doing so, adopt a growth mindset and willingness to embrace conceptual change and try alternative approaches.

Specifically, participants are encouraged to reflect upon and articulate how reframing one's perspective can help them reduce the feelings of being overwhelmed by work intensification, which can help them work toward better work–life balance and find more energy and joy in their professional and personal lives. The various teaching activities are inspired by a sport psychologist, Dr. Peter Jensen, who works with high performance athletes who train and perform effectively and efficiently in high pressure and demanding situations daily (www.performancecoaching.ca/en/about-us/dr-peter-jensen-founder/). Each of the teaching activities stems from solutions connected to perspective and energy management. Each activity is grounded in research-based evidence and practical, self-autonomous skills. If used in a course, the exercises will likely need to be spread over multiple classes; if used in a professional learning setting, all activities could be conducted over a couple of days.

The first exercise involves participants exploring the difference between time and energy management. The second exercise is divided into two parts: the first part is an energy management audit, and the second part involves devising an energy management renewal and restoration plan.

Activity 1: Exploring Time Management Versus Energy Management

This first activity introduces students and leaders to conceptualizing work–life balance as an energy management issue as opposed to a time management issue. Jensen (2015) suggested that combining diverse approaches to athlete training concepts with organizational leadership problems and issues can lead to fresh ideas and approaches to achieving effective leadership with tangible applications.

The basic premise of improving or having better time management is sound: arrange your schedule so you can effectively and efficiently reach your goals (which can be personal, professional, or both). However, all the calendars, to-do lists, and bullet journals are useless if you are too fatigued to accomplish the tasks on those lists—or worse, tackle them when you are emotionally, mentally, and cognitively exhausted. Many people think that if they manage their time well (or better), then they will perform better or become more accomplished. Jensen (2015) argued, however, that although we do not have control over time, we do have control over our energy. Jensen presented the idea of managing your energy as a thermostat: “Knowing when to minimize the drain on your energy and strike a balance” (p. 15). In his work with elite athletes and leaders alike, he confirmed that leaders are consistently expending huge amounts of energy on various tasks and wondering why they are always feeling drained or struggling to stay sharp. When it becomes difficult to get things done, stay healthy, and do good work, it is crucial for leaders to be aware of how they are managing their energy and how they are going to replenish or regain it to “fill up their tank” (Jensen, 2015).

To begin the activity, instructors or facilitators have students view the following introductory three-minute video on the difference between time and energy management.

Activity Resource

Manage your energy, not your time. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEedKdi1UOc>

1. Once students have viewed the video, instructors separate them into small groups of five or six, and have them discuss and take notes on the differences between time and energy management for approximately 15 minutes using the following discussion questions:
 - a. What are your thoughts about the concept of time versus energy management? Do you agree or disagree that both are different and why?
 - b. Complete a Venn diagram with the similarities and differences between time and energy management.
2. Next, instructors will have the students debate the time versus energy management idea.
 - a. Divide the class into two groups. One group will argue that managing time is more important than energy management and the other group will argue the opposite. As well, assign two or three students to be debate notetakers; they will keep track of the arguments and be responsible for giving concluding remarks about the points made in the debate by each side.
 - b. Instructors will give each side 10 minutes of preparation time before beginning the debate. At this point, instructors will encourage students to share their Venn diagrams with their

- debate teams.
- c. To begin the debate, instructors will have each debate team present their arguments (five minutes) and then begin with counterarguments.
 - d. Instructors will limit the debate time according to the amount of allowable class time; however, each side should be encouraged to make at least three to four arguments for and against.
3. Whole group discussion
 - a. Instructors will have the notetakers present each side of the argument made during the debate to the group.
 - b. Instructors will then open up the discussion for the whole group to make final comments and conclusions.

Closing Activity Comments: Moving from a time management to an energy management philosophy means encouraging behaviours and actions that systematically expand your capacity to work. For example, this switch may be as simple as motivating yourself to take full lunch entitlement. The next activity encourages participants to develop some strategies and devise an energy management plan to adjust and restore energy throughout the day and contribute to a better work–life balance.

Reading Resources

Jensen, P. (2015). *Thriving in a 24-7 world: An energizing tale about growing through pressure*. Bloomington, IN: iUniverse.

Pollock, K., & Hauseman, D. C. (2015). *Principals' work in contemporary times: Final report* [PDF]. Retrieved from <https://www.edu.uwo.ca/faculty-profiles/docs/other/pollock/OME-Report-Principals-Work-Contemporary-Times.pdf>

Pollock, K., Wang, F., & Hauseman, D. C. (2014). *The changing nature of principals' work: Final report* [PDF]. Retrieved from <https://www.edu.uwo.ca/faculty-profiles/docs/other/pollock/OPC-Principals-Work-Report.pdf>

Activity 2: Achieving Energy Management

This activity is divided into two parts: Activity 2.1 has participants complete an energy management audit, and Activity 2.2 has them devise how to consciously adjust and restore energy levels. The purpose of both activities is to encourage more self-regulating coping skills and strategies for personal and professional energy renewal, to promote more sustainable performance levels, and to help facilitate work–life balance. As described earlier, leaders are experiencing increased demands in their roles and responsibilities in contemporary school environments. Many school leaders have responded by putting in longer work hours, which over time is taking a toll on their physical, mental, and emotional energy levels. As demonstrated in the case narrative, unintended interruptions in the work day consume time and deplete energy (emotional, physical, and mental); moreover, these frequent and demanding interruptions result in increased tasks in an already overloaded work day. Over time, the resulting stress, disengagement, and exhaustion become the new normal for many school principals, both new and experienced. Finding a solution is not easy. The first step is a conceptual change: shifting emphasis from getting more out of yourself to investing more in yourself. The next step is recognizing energy-depleting behaviours and taking responsibility for changing them. This step is a challenging activity that requires conscious effort and commitment to changing personal and professional practices and behaviours. This two-part activity is designed to help current and potential leaders make and execute a plan to regulate and restore their energy levels.

Pre-Reading

Kelley, J. (January 2012). *Forget time management...are you managing your energy?* Retrieved from <http://jeankelley.com/forget-time-management-are-you-managing-your-energy/>

Activity 2.1: An Energy Management Audit

In Activity 2.1, instructors will have participants complete an energy audit by reflecting on their daily routines and the associated energy levels in various situations. This step involves participants completing an energy management journal using an *Energy Management Journal* chart prior to class (see Appendix A). The journal can be for one day or up to five days. The journal asks the participants to note how their

physical, emotional, and mental energy levels are throughout the day. Prior to coming to class, participants review their journals and identify any patterns or interesting observations.

In-class:

1. During class time, instructors will give participants time to discuss their energy management audit journals in groups of four. The instructor will also ask them to identify concerning areas that need to be addressed.
2. Next, instructors will ask participants to reflect on the following 12 questions in coordination with their journal and based on general consensus. These questions should highlight some of the students' current needs and will help them devise an energy management plan.
 1. Do you get at least eight hours of restful sleep each night?
 2. Do you have a tendency to skip meals (e.g., breakfast and lunch)?
 3. Do you get a minimum of 30 minutes of physical activity each day where your heart rate is elevated more than your resting heart rate for an extended period of time?
 4. Do you take at least two 15-minute breaks of uninterrupted time during your workday?
 5. Do you drink at least a litre of water per day?
 6. Do you express gratitude and appreciation for others more frequently than not throughout the day?
 7. Do you practice any breathing exercises throughout your day?
 8. Do you focus on one thing at a time?
 9. Do you spend most of your day multitasking?
 10. Do you frequently do tasks during the day that give you a sense of purpose?
 11. Do you engage in one pleasurable activity a day for at least 15 minutes that you enjoy?
 12. Do you currently have coping skills for energy recovery: physical, mental, and emotional?
3. In small groups, instructors will have students discuss their key takeaways before each group presents their key learnings. This step leads into Activity 2.2: devising an energy management plan.

Activity 2.2: Preparing an Energy Management Plan to Restore and Replenish Your Energy Levels

This activity involves devising a plan that enables participants to strike a balance between moments of high performance and periods of rest and renewal. As well, participants learn how to minimize drains on their energy so that they can perform effectively (i.e., complete their required work tasks and be well). The most important aspect of this activity is cultivating the understanding that a conceptual change is necessary. If participants truly desire work–life balance, they must start with a change in their thinking—with the right thinking and behavior, energy can be created and renewed. The key to engaging a person's capacity for energy renewal is to balance out the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual sides of the human psyche (Schwartz & McCarthy, 2007), which takes conscious effort and desire.

To begin, instructors present these concepts from Jensen's (2015) work to participants before they devise their energy management plan:

- People are conditioned to think that working longer, harder hours yields better results. This belief is a fallacy. Jensen's (2015) work with elite athletes attests to this: it is not just their training and work ethic that make them better; it is also their ability to stick to rest-and-recover programs. As he suggested, the best car in the world does not run well without gas, and neither do we.
- Energy management, by contrast to time management, values your downtime as well as your work time. While you sleep, relax, or play, your body reinvigorates itself. This renewal gives you the energy reserves you need to achieve your goals during the day. Learning how to set your energy to your desired level is the purpose of this activity. Learn how to energize yourself when you are feeling flat and unmotivated and how to lower your arousal level when your energy is too high. As mentioned earlier, Jensen (2015) suggested that we need to think of ourselves as a thermostat, not a thermometer. Do not let the environment control your energy level—set your energy levels and make environmental adjustments.
- Most people think that energy management is about finding more energy, but it is just as much about moderating arousal levels or setting the thermostat. Minimizing the drain on your energy involves the way you think about things, especially things outside of your control. Often, people

apply great effort to things when no amount of effort will change the situation, which includes feelings and emotions such as worry, doubt, and concern—feelings that deplete energy.

- As people, the way we think about our problems greatly affects us. The perspectives we hold have a huge impact on our energy levels and ultimately on our performance, happiness, and sense of satisfaction. Therefore, changing the stories that we tell ourselves is important and should be an important aspect of your plan.
- Most people do not understand how much rest time they need and they do not understand what real rest is. The old expression “a change is as good as a rest” might work for people who are bored and need to be energized but it does not work with those who are fatigued.

Step 1. Although each participant’s energy management plan will be individual, participants should first brainstorm to share ideas and possible energy management strategies prior to and while completing their individual plans. Instructors should ask participants to research strategies prior to class, which is an important step. These plans should be completed based on the following focus areas: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual energy.

Table 1

Physical, Emotional, Mental, and Spiritual Energy Control Markers

<p>Physical Energy Control:</p> <p>Intermittent breaks for renewal result in higher and more sustainable performance. The length of renewal is less important than the quality; it is possible to get a great deal of recovery in a short time—as little as several minutes—if it involves a ritual that allows you to disengage from work and truly change channels. Although breaks are countercultural in most organizations and counterintuitive for many high achievers, their value is multifaceted.</p> <p>Fact: “Ultradian rhythms” refer to 90- to 120-minute cycles during which our bodies slowly move from a high-energy state into a physiological trough. Toward the end of each cycle, the body begins to crave a period of recovery. The signals include physical restlessness, yawning, hunger, and difficulty concentrating, but many of us ignore them and keep working. The consequence is that our energy reservoir—our remaining capacity—burns down as the day wears on.</p>
<p>Emotional Energy Control:</p> <p>Emotional control can improve the quality of your energy, regardless of the external pressures you are facing. To employ this control, you have to be more aware of how you feel at various points during the workday and of the impact these emotions have on your job effectiveness. Most people realize that they tend to perform best when they are feeling positive. What they find surprising is that they are not able to perform well or to lead effectively when they are feeling any other way. Unfortunately, without intermittent recovery, we are not physiologically capable of sustaining highly positive emotions for long periods. Confronted with relentless demands and unexpected challenges, people tend to slip into negative emotions—the <i>fight-or-flight</i> mode—often multiple times a day. They become irritable and impatient, or anxious and insecure. Such states of mind drain people’s energy and cause friction in their relationships. Fight-or-flight emotions also make it impossible to think clearly, logically, and reflectively. When you learn to recognize what kinds of events trigger negative emotions, you gain a greater capacity to take control of your reactions.</p>

The Mind: Focus of Energy

Many people view multitasking as a necessity in the face of all the demands they juggle, but it actually undermines productivity.

Distractions are costly because a temporary shift in attention from one task to another—stopping to answer an email message or take a phone call, for instance—increases the amount of time necessary to finish the primary task by as much as 25%. This phenomenon is known as switching time. It is far more efficient to fully focus for 90 to 120 minutes, take a true break, and then fully focus on the next activity. These are ultradian sprints. Once you realize you are struggling to concentrate, you can create rituals to reduce the relentless interruptions—for example, the interruptions that technology has introduced in your life.

The Human Spirit: Energy of Meaning and Purpose

People tap into the energy of the human spirit when their everyday work and activities are consistent with what they value most and with what gives them a sense of meaning and purpose. If the work you are doing really matters to you, then you typically feel more positive energy, focus better, and demonstrate greater perseverance. Regrettably, high demands and work intensification do not leave people much time to pay attention to these issues, and many do not even recognize meaning and purpose as potential sources of energy. To access the energy of the human spirit, you need to clarify priorities and establish accompanying rituals in three categories: doing what you do best and enjoy most at work; consciously allocating time and energy to the areas of your life—work, family, health, service to others—you deem most important; and living your core values in your daily behaviours. When you are attempting to discover what you do best and what you enjoy most, it is important to realize that these two things are not necessarily mutually inclusive. You may get ample positive feedback about something you are very good at but not truly enjoy it. Conversely, you can love doing something but have no gift for it, which means achieving success requires much more energy than it makes sense to invest.

Note: This table was created based on the following resource:

Schwartz, T., & McCarthy, C. (2007). Manage your energy, not your time. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2007/10/manage-your-energy-not-your-time>

Instructors may want to share the following list of examples as possible energy management strategies:

- practicing deep breathing;
- expressing appreciation for others, which can be as beneficial to the giver as to the receiver;
- learning to change the stories you tell yourself about the events in your life;
- becoming aware of the difference between the facts in a given situation and the way we interpret those facts;
- reflecting on two work experiences in the past month in which you found yourself in your “sweet spot”—feeling effective, effortlessly absorbed, inspired, and fulfilled;
- identifying the most important challenge for the next day and making it your very first priority when you arrive in the morning; and
- create a “renewal room” where people can regularly go to relax and refuel (Schwartz & McCarthy, 2007).

Step 2. Based on participants’ brainstorming and the above table, instructors will have participants devise an energy management plan based on their energy audit from Activity 2.1. This plan should involve inserting energy management strategies in their daily work.

Step 3. Instructors are encouraged to ask participants to implement and test their plans over a period of time. Participants will keep a journal of their energy management strategies and the outcomes they experience using the same energy management journal as in Activity 2.1. Instructors will schedule a target date for students to report back to the class on their challenges and successes.

Final Comments: Suggestions for Changing the School Environment

Addressing physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual sources of energy can help people achieve a greater sense of alignment, satisfaction, and well-being in their lives on and off the job. In addition to self-autonomy of energy management, however, changes need to be made at the structural level. Organizational expectations need to change, which will entail shifts in policies, practices, and cultural messages (e.g., expecting longer work hours) that truly support work–life balance. For example, one organization has built “renewal rooms” where people can regularly go to relax and refuel. Another example is organizing on-site midday mini-physical workouts. One organization instituted a no-disturb zone between 8:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. to ensure that people had at least one hour absolutely free. As well, in one organization, leaders collectively agreed to stop checking email during meetings as a way to make the meetings more focused and efficient. At this point, instructors should engage students in a final discussion about reasonable policies and expectations of schools, principals, and teachers, particularly in relation to the specific topics raised in this case.

Reading Resources

- Jensen, P. (2015). *Thriving in a 24-7 world: An energizing tale about growing through pressure*. Bloomington, IN: iUniverse.
- Ontario Principals’ Council. (2017). *International symposium white paper: Principal work–life balance and well-being matters*. Toronto, ON.

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- Riley, P. (2019). *The Australian principal occupational health, safety and wellbeing survey: 2018 data*. Retrieved from Analysis and Policy Observatory Website: <https://apo.org.au/node/222071>
- The Institute for Education Leadership. (2008). *Putting Ontario’s leadership framework into action: A guide for school and system leaders* [PDF]. Retrieved from <http://www.education-leadershipontario.ca/files/FrameworkAction.pdf>

Appendix A

Energy Management Journal

Date:					
Rating 1 – 5 1 = Exhausted 5 = Feeling Great	Physical Feeling	Emotional Feeling	Mental Feeling	Spiritual Feeling	Additional Comments
Wake up time:					
Day Preparations: Time:					
Breakfast: Describe what you ate. Time:					
Travelling to school Time:					
School Entry: Time:					
1 st A.M. Activity: Time:					
2 nd A.M. Activity: Time:					
A.M. Break time Time:					
3 rd A.M. Activity: Time:					
4 th A.M. Activity: Time:					
Lunch: Describe what you ate. Time:					
1 st P.M. Activity: Time:					
2 nd P.M. Activity: Time:					
P.M. Break time Time:					

3 rd P.M. Activity: Time:					
Rating 1 – 5 1 = Exhausted 5 = Feeling Great	Physical Feeling	Emotional Feeling	Mental Feeling	Spiritual Feeling	Additional Comments
4 th P.M. Activity: Time:					
Leaving school Time:					
Travelling to other places from school					
Travelling home					
Arrive home Time:					
Evening Activities Time frame					
Dinner: Describe what you ate. Time:					
Time to bed					
Number of hours of sleep					
Rate your sleep 1 = sleepless 5 = restful -great sleep					