

Using the Concept of Energy to Understand and Engage with an Organisation

By

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Abstract

There are four ways that this OD practitioner has used energy in organisational contexts: to get a preliminary feel of organisations, to understand why something is happening or not happening inside the organisation, as a way of representing the nature of daily life of the organisation, and finally, to explore, along with the members of the organisation, what does the lack or presence of energy indicate about how different organisational processes are actually working in the organisation. Energy is seen as a proxy for organisational health.

The author recognizes energy through behavioral cues; and indirectly in the way the organisation (or a program) is performing.

The author also finds it worthwhile to use the concept of energy in conjunction with various organisational frameworks. In particular the author has found it useful to use it along with the Weisbord Six Box Model.

Finally, there are at least 2 different methods that the author has tried to represent energy. Both these ways use colour to represent energy. One of the methods is to represent the nature of energy existing on a daily basis for organisational members. The other is a method of surveying the extent of energy present in an individual and uses a combination of colours and numbers to indicate the level of energy.

Introduction

There are at least 3 inter-related challenges that I face while working with organisations - mostly as an OD practitioner, but at times also in other capacities (e.g., as a trainer or as a documenter). The first is that even though there are a multiplicity of tools and frameworks to understand an organisational functioning, is there a tool that will give me a quick and rough picture of the organisation? The second challenge is about having a simple tool for starting explorations on organisational reality with organisational members. The third challenge is about trying to represent, as simply as possible, current or past organisational reality - as recognized at the end of the diagnostic process.

Interestingly, I find that organisational energy - the way I have begun to see it - ticks all the above three boxes.

An Intuitive Sensing of Energy

Energy is the first thing that I note in an organisation. Let me start off by talking about one of the first such experiences I had in this regard. An organisation named XD, had engaged me to write the history of a project that XD had been instrumental in implementing about 2 decades ago. XD is an NGO that was formed in the mid-80s. I had known about XD's through the people who worked there. Over time, I kept on hearing about XD's work: it was a well-known organisation in the social development field.

When I went to the XD office for my assignment, the thing that struck me was the utter silence in there. The CEO sat in an enclosed cabin next to the open office. I had to pass this office in order to reach the CEO's cabin, there must have been at least 20 people working, but the only human sound that I heard was a whispered conversation between some people. When I emerged after half an hour of discussion with the CEO, back into that room, it seemed that nothing had changed; no one had moved, and there was still no sound. The impression that I gained was that talking between people was being frowned upon.

This impression of deadened energy fitted with my subsequent experience with the organisation. When I asked for relevant information about the two-decade-old program that I had to research about, the only information I got was about the key contact person of a partner organisation - and nothing else. There were no reports to be had; no nothing. All subsequent research and writing got done thanks to the support of the past partner of XD - the current staff of XD had nothing to offer.

Later, when the assignment got over - and I got paid for it, there was no other response from the XD. There were no comments about the quality of the report, no questions to be asked. Later, I heard that the organisation had conducted some kind of event celebrating its history. I wasn't called for that event. The sense I got was that my report was just a tick mark activity - there was no energy, no excitement. It was all rather surprising because the project that I had been asked to document had been quite a revolutionary one and had resulted in major state level transformation benefiting the rural communities there. The lack of excitement about its own successful history, within the organisation was therefore rather surprising for me.

Looking back, I could connect some dots. In the 80s and 90s, XD's work had captured the attention of people in the social sector: their work was interesting and path breaking. Now, it seemed that XD was nowhere to be seen or heard. Intuitively, I connected the lack of energy in XD's outputs with the lack of visible energy inside the organisation, and the total absence of energy with its own project to celebrate its history.

There is a more recent example that I would like to talk about. Ang is a fifty-year-old organisation providing exemplary service for little children. Lot of Ang's work takes place in the field, but there are about twenty or so people also working in the Head office of the organisation. The office is an open one, and all those working in the Head office - starting from the CEO of the organisation, sit on similar tables and chairs. Here, there is no deathly still, but nonetheless, whatever loud discussions that are taking place only seem to be taking place at the CEO's desk. Whatever energy is there in that office, seems to be with the CEO, not with the others.

I had been asked to do an OD diagnosis of the organisation. What I heard in many of the OD interviews, corresponded with what I had picked up. While the CEO had the habit of calling people, loudly, over to her desk for discussion; if she noted any other person starting a discussion, she would want to know later what were the discussions about - and why had person 'A' come over to meet person 'B'. My interviewees revealed that they had stopped having any discussions at their desk because they disliked the sense of being suspected: as if they were holding some discussion against the CEO! The interviewees talked about feeling depressed and low in the office; they said that they continued to work with Ang because they appreciated the kind of work that Ang engaged in. It is during these interviewees it emerged that over the last couple of years there had been extensive turnover of the middle managers - all those who were expected to be sitting in this open office!

In contrast to my experience with XD and Ang is my recent experience with Har. Har too is an old organisation - it has been in existence for about 30 years. I got to meet their entire leadership team of about 12 people. My usual experience with leadership teams is that it is only one or at most two people who really speak - others generally keep quiet. They may have their thoughts but in the presence of outsiders these are rarely stated. Talking to the group as an outsider I frequently get the feeling that people other than the top leaders are bored - very frequently, one or the other would get up and leave; some would be sitting with their laptops on; still others would be doing something with their mobiles.

But in case of Har, I had the extraordinary experience of seeing all speaking one by one, with each sharing her or his original thinking. And every one spoke. As the discussion went on - apart from the break for lunch - throughout the day, every once in a while, a comment from someone would draw out genuine, deep laughter from within the group.

And at lunch, away from the formal discussion, most were sitting around a lunch table - cracking jokes, sharing laughs.

Here too, the internal energy of Har seems to correspond with its work that the organisation is doing - after working for 15 years, in a uni-dimensional way, the organisation transformed into working in multiple sectors and multiple locations. In many ways the organisation is working at the cutting edge of social sector work.

In short, I have found it useful to use Organisational Energy as a proxy representation of organisational health and productivity.

Using Energy for exploring Organisational Reality

When I first started to use this concept, it was from the perspective of an outsider. What, after all, is one of the first things that an outsider may note about an organisation, if not the workplace? To an outsider, the energy of the workplace is highly visible. People are either talking animatedly, and with intent; or there is a lackadaisical manner - people chitchat, but without energy.

Over time, I thought of extending the concept to the insiders of an organisation. Do insiders also perceive energy the way I am as an outsider? In the case of Ang and XD what I had perceived about the organisation did seem to conform to some internal reality of energy. Nonetheless, the question remains. Are there other elements that I was missing out? And, in any case, is the concept of energy useful at all for the organisational insiders?

As I discussed energy with various organisations, the following concept emerged. Energy could be seen from two lenses: a positive one and a negative one. The positive energy (or green energy) had to do with excitement, taking initiative, solving problems. Negative energy (red energy) on the other hand was about cribbing, complaining, engaging in groupism and politicking - about not doing things, or doing things in a way that was ineffective. As I played with the idea in my mind, I created the following survey instrument. (see Figure 1 on page 9 below.)

	0to10	11to20	21to30	31to40	41to50	51to60	61to70	71to80	81to90	91to100	
Green Energy	Work as told		Checking before taking initiative		Taking initiative		Taking initiative & Motivating Others		Taking initiative & Motivating others, forgetting home & food		TOTAL
Red Energy	Cribbing		Complaining		Politicking		Intense Politicking		Open Conflict		
Total											

Figure 1 Energy survey Questionnaire

The energy survey questionnaire that I created was expected to be filled by an individual with respect to a specific person (about self or somebody else). The way to score energy would be how much time an individual spends in any of the green or red shaded boxes. At a particular point in time the person may exhibit a high intensity of energy or a low intensity of it. For instance, a person may be in the low intensity energy (green) area: as low as 0-10, when the person works, but only when told to. A person with a bit more energy wants to take initiatives but checks before taking initiatives. At a still higher level of energy, the person goes ahead and takes initiatives without waiting for permission. At the next level of energy intensity, the person not only takes initiative but she may also motivate others to take initiative. At the highest level of green energy, the individual not only takes initiative and motivates others, but the level of involvement is so high that the individual forgets the need for food, or the need to go home.

The intensity of red energy may also be identified at different levels. The person would spend time in low level cribbing (0-10) or slightly higher level cribbing (10-10). The person may move to a state of higher level energy use - in the form of complaining. The complaining may get transformed into still higher level of energy use: politicking or groupism. This groupism may get transformed into a still higher level of intense politicking (energy intensity from 61 to 80). Or, it may reach the highest level of open conflict (open abuse or physically beating up someone).

The way to use this questionnaire is to look at the time a person is spending in any of these cells. This way the total numbers filled in of the 20 cells (10 cells under green, and 10 under red) should always be 100.

The filled in questionnaire could be used to make some further observations:

- How much of the time is the person spending in the green as compared to the red area? Is the ratio of green to red high (4: 1 or 5: 1) or low?
- When inside the red area, which cell does the person inhabit: the ones with the lower intensity (0-40, cribbing or complaining), or does the person tend to spend time in the 41+ intensity area (politicking and above?)

One way to look at whether the person is inhabiting the healthy zones is that when the person is in the green zone, the person inhabits the 41+ area, and when in the red zone, the person inhabits the 0-40 area (in particular the 21-40 area). After all, some degree of complaining can be effective to energize a system to deal with problems. Similarly, it is perhaps too much to expect that people will not crib - when things don't work out, people naturally need to vent (the cribbing zone at the beginning of the red zone.)

Meshing the Concept of Energy with Other Frameworks

I have used the above framework to start conversations about the state of the organisation. Some of the points that have emerged through these conversations have included the following:

- In which part of the organisation is there a greater concentration of green energy, in which part is the concentration red?
- What are the causes of green or red energy? Is it just because of the individuals involved or are there other organisation related causes for the same?

It is at this stage that I find it advantageous to introduce frameworks to understand an organisation.

One framework that I have frequently used at this stage is the Weisbord Model. As per this model, organisational processes may be represented in the form of a dashboard with 6 distinct boxes: Purpose, Leadership, Structure, Rewards and Punishment, Relationship and Helpful Mechanisms. The question that I pose after presenting the framework is: if red energy is becoming relatively stronger, is there some organisational reason for this to have happened? In which box does the cause of red energy or green energy lie?

Some of the answers that have emerged in the context of different organisations have included the following:

- Vada works with victims of trafficking. The interesting thing about Vada is that a majority of those who work in the organisation had themselves been victims of trafficking. Despite having had to tackle various organisational challenges in its twelve-year history, its members retain a high level of vitality and energy. This vitality is seen in the way their members engage with other trafficking victims (the beneficiaries of Vada), and the way they design and innovate programs for these victims. What comes through the interviews is that despite all kind of challenges, people love working in Vada because of the profound satisfaction they achieve for working for people who remind them of their own past. In short, the high level of engagement and agreement with the purpose of the organisation with its members is what pushes a high majority of members in the high (or dark) green energy zone.
- Tant is a ten-year-old organisation working in the area of culture. A few years back, it tragically lost its founder and charismatic head of the organisation. Subsequently, the organisation has been led by a small senior management team. Though the organisation has secured funding for the next few years, there are troubling indicators of low energy in the organisation. The senior management team is not making any effort to diversify its funding; no new programs have been started; there is no one within the organisation now writing anything in the cultural magazine - all writings have been contributed by outsiders (the founder had been a regular contributor); and the magazine is frequently delayed in its publication. The cause of the low energy seems to be

the inability of the senior managers to look at the 'Relationship' part of the senior management team (i.e., look at how they recognize and deal with Conflict). All of the senior team managers were those who had been personally recruited by the founder; each of them gets along with the other at a personal level. However, each of them has a different view of what needs to be done in the organisation, and each is unhappy with the others for doing or not doing certain things. Unfortunately, these team members prefer to maintain a surface harmony rather than confronting the others, and themselves.

- A woman-centered organisation that I was working with, Taro, decided to adopt an ad-hoc structure. The ten-year-old organisation had always been led by its founder director, but the founder director wanted to expand in a way that would lead to greater decentralization and greater ownership by the second line leadership. She constantly complained about how a surfeit of roles as the head of the organisation was leading to her loss of energy.
- However, when the process of transformation started to take hold, it is the founder director who suffered a great loss of energy: so much so that she not only walked off from the organisation's annual retreat - blaming everyone else for the problems facing the organisation - she actually became ill and went off on indefinite leave. Though her walking off suddenly was a big shock, the second line leadership - that had been slowly getting ready to take on greater roles in the new ad-hoc structure, decided to divide up all the roles that had been handled previously by the founder director. Over the next few months, despite facing a high level of stress (at having to take on so many roles that individuals did not know much about), the six members of the organisational leadership team started taking much greater ownership than before, and successfully started managing the organisation. Though it would have been quite possible for a few of them to have quit at this stage, the group not only managed to stay together, but also managed to achieve a far greater level of bonding.
- In the above case the high level of energy that the senior management group achieved can be seen to have come about because of two reasons. One, that it was the possibility of working in a new structure that gave high energy to the

group. Secondly, it was the need to respond to a crisis that gave energy. What is more likely is that the high energy came from a combination of the two factors.

Anxiety as Blocked or Negative Energy

There is another form of negative energy that can have an effect on organisational functioning, and that is anxiety. While some amount of anxiety can be productive, excessive anxiety can cause individuals and groups to clamp up, stop thinking creatively, or even learning. I had this experience with a forty-year-old organisation, Gha that had asked me to train their staff on how to understand the community.

Gha has been engaged in an unconventional livelihood project. Unlike most livelihood projects, where the focus is on coverage and providing benefits, here the focus was on generating insights about what makes a program click or fail. The focus was to understand what the community members - the beneficiaries of the project - actually thought about it.

However, as Gha has a long track record of implementing projects qua projects, the senior management team of Gha got in touch with me to help the project team design new ways of interacting with, and understanding the community.

Subsequently, the project manager of that particular project asked me to first train the project team, and, in parallel, help re-design the steps of project implementation.

The key concept of my training was that unlike normal implementation programs, in which the implementing team comes to the community, explains and starts implementing a program, here the team needed to go slow. It needed to spend time, in-situ, with individual beneficiaries - while following the participant observer approach.

I conducted the workshop in a way that ensured high level of discussion and involvement of the Gha project team; I used examples from studies conducted in similar communities with similar complexities, and showed how such approaches

have generated remarkable insights about the thinking and approach of so-called beneficiaries. I conducted the workshop in Hindi - the language the program team members were most comfortable with.

Overall, the workshop highlighted that a) poor people living in communities have far more complex responses and thinking with respect to the livelihood challenges they face than outsiders expect or assume; b) that we can only get to know the thinking of these community members if we are willing to invest time to build a relationship where we are listeners (rather than tellers); and we actually respect the thinking the community members have.

My experience of running such workshops is that thanks to the methodology I follow, people have little difficulty in understanding the key point being made. To my amazement, at the end of the workshop, I had the experience, that leaving apart the project manager, the others really hadn't understood the crux of what I was trying to highlight!

Parallely, my suggestions to appoint a couple of project people to take on the role of participant observers never got implemented. During all my communications with the project manager, he sounded hassled and was forever busy.

A few months down the line, I had given up hope that the project would actually do anything towards investing in learning about the community. The only way I could make sense of what had happened was that there was a high level of anxiety in the project manager to complete the various milestone activities of the project. The anxiety of the project manager was transmitted to the entire team, and the team, collectively developed incompetence in understanding what I had to say. Anxiety became a form of high negative energy that blocked learning and change in the program.

Is There an Overall Colour for the Organisation

Is there an overall colour that represents what the organisation feels like for its participants? I did an organisational assessment of an organisation called Swar. Swar

is a decade old organisation that provides mental health related services. While Swar has been lauded for its work and innovativeness of its programs, the fact remains that its daily work involves a lot of 'boring' and exhausting documentation. This essential work is expected to be done, on a daily basis, once the work of actual interaction with the beneficiaries gets over.

According to some people this daily grind has the effect of turning its workers into robots - there is a certain bleakness about the daily work that seems to impact all.

This bleakness has its result. Most people who join the organisation join it because they are looking forward to providing this socially useful service. However, the day in day out having to fill in forms and write case histories has led to a relatively high turnover over the past few years.

At the same time, there is a small devoted core of Swar who has been with the organisation right from its inception. This core continues to be full of energy, and interested in engaging with whatever new gets thrown up. This core is also a bit dismissive about the newer set of people who do not show the same level of commitment that the older ones exhibit. It is not surprising that because the older people are both clearer about Swar's work, and the fact that they are more committed, they invariably get to move into newer, more exciting (or at least different) programs. Consequently, there is no bleakness or boredom for them. In short, while it is possible to think of a small core of people as being full of high green energy, it is also possible to visualize a larger percentage of people having to endure a relatively boring or bleak nature of work.

Having understood the energy reality of Swar, I tried to represent the same with the help of the diagram shown in Figure 2

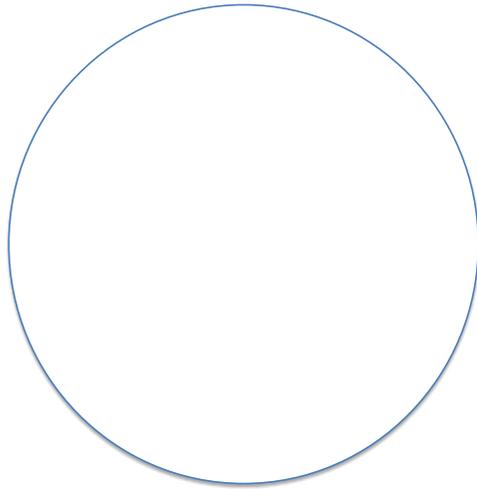


Figure 2 Representing an Organisation's Daily Energy State

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, understanding Organisational Energy is not represented as a panacea for all OD challenges. At the same time, it is seen as an interesting way of using it at different stages of an OD process to both understand and represent a critical aspect of the organisation.

One aspect of Energy that comes through is that it is a useful proxy for organisational or departmental health and productivity. XD's overall energy was low - so was its overall productivity. In case of Ang, the organisational ill health was concentrated in the middle management: this was the area of maximum dis-satisfaction, and this was the place where the maximum turnover took place. Here too, the low energy was visible in a specific location - the head office.

Low energy may not always be visible to the outsider. In case of Swar the sense of how both greenness and bleakness may simultaneously exist in the organisation (with its founder members and the recent additions respectively) was conveyed during the interviews conducted as part of organisational assessment.

High or low energy may be seen in a team, across different categories of people, or in a specific individual. In case of Taro, the low energy got concentrated in the founder CEO of the organisation - even as the founder struggled with taking on too many roles (and not delegating enough to others). In contrast to the CEO, the leadership team of Taro, (the second line leaders) displayed a huge level of energy to ensure the continued functioning of TARO when the CEO went off on a sudden and indefinite leave.

Various behaviors can represent positive or negative energy. Hushed conversations or no conversations can represent low energy; free laughter can represent high energy. High anxiety experienced through an inability to learn may represent negative energy.

The question about how to represent energy is interesting. I have explored three ways of understanding & representing energy. One is to use general metaphors, particularly when it comes to getting an initial feel of an organisation. An office space - representing the organisation at large - can be quiet as a mouse, or like a coffee house 'adda' (think Kolkata of the 70s!), or somewhere in between. Similarly, when people are talking to each other, is it in a hushed fashion, or are they talking freely, openly, in their normal voices? When there is a hush that has been enjoined, it somewhere speaks of an underlying fear, of a need to repress one's energies; of behaving only in a certain way.

The second way is through the use of a table: the colour-coded table of a questionnaire that distinguishes between green and red colours. In this table, an individual can rate self or another individual in the usual mix of green and red energies existing within the individual. Such questionnaires can easily be modified to get individuals to explore situations where their energy is the strongest (green) or weakest (red)!

The third way of representing is to summarize the state of energy for the entire organisation in a globe: with the globe coloured in different shades of green and red, representing how much of it is green and how much is red.

Care needs to be taken to consider that the observations are only indicative about an organisational energy: these are assumptions that need to be checked. The observations need to be qualified. Perhaps everybody is quiet because they are totally absorbed in some work, and do not have time to discuss anything with others. A number of counter questions can arise here: what is the nature of work of the organisation? Does it require people to work totally on their own, without needing to interact with others? Is it like the office of an insurance company where individuals do not need to share their success or difficulties with anybody else but their bosses? If there is a lot of energy in the discussions, are the discussions about work, or are they about the upcoming cricket world cup?

But once due care has been taken to ask the counter questions - observations and representations of energy may not only be useful to understand an organisation, they can subsequently help design and track interventions in the same organisations. While this paper has focused on using energy in the early diagnostic phase, the author suspects that other different forms of energy related frameworks could also be developed subsequently.