

Developing Leaders

Quarterly

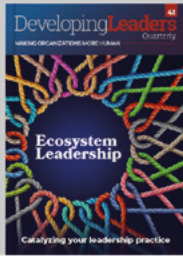
MAKING ORGANIZATIONS MORE HUMAN



Energizing Organizations

Catalyzing your leadership practice

Edited by Roland Deiser and Roddy Millar



Thinking imprinted.

The first step in leadership development is creating space for reflection on your practice.

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By Dr Martina Muttke

Energizing Leadership

Neuroscience at Work

Why Leaders Need Energy Now

Let's start with an honest question: How often do you hear the word “energy” at work? We are told to “bring positive energy to meetings,” energize our teams, and keep morale high—yet rarely does anyone explain what energy really is, let alone how a leader can generate it.

In today's fast-paced, post-pandemic, purpose-hungry world, energy is not just a soft skill—it is the foundation of motivation, focus, trust, and performance. The old leadership playbooks—iron discipline, mysterious charisma, or checklist management—are relics in a new era, where people crave meaning and connection more than just a paycheck.

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Luckily, science is finally catching up to the art of leadership. Neuroscience gives us the tools to see, measure, and influence energy in ways we could only guess at before. We can now pin down the invisible forces that shape cultures, drive motivation, and unlock the long-term potential of teams. Let's explore how you can use biology's breakthroughs—literally, what goes on in the brains, hearts, and guts of your people—to build energy, trust, and results.

Energy: More Than a Buzzword

In business, “energy” is one of those words that seems to mean everything and nothing at once. The energetic boss. The team with a positive vibe. A lack of energy in a project, or an energy surge when a new idea is born.

But what are we really talking about? At the biological level, “energy” means how your nervous system processes threat and reward, how your neurochemistry (think: dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, noradrena-

line, and cortisol) shapes your feelings, your focus, your willingness to take risks—or just get you out of bed in the morning.

Leaders must become, in a way, practical neuroscientists—using both observation and evidence, blending art and science, to cultivate the right energy in themselves and their teams.

The Neurochemistry of Motivation

Let's get a bit technical, but just enough to arm you for the real world. In every workplace, neurochemical messengers are at work, quietly orchestrating moods, motivation, attention, and trust.

- Dopamine is your brain's “reward fuel.” It gets produced when a goal feels meaningful, when we anticipate a satisfying outcome. It is also generated by praise, progress, novelty, and movement toward purpose. Every Facebook “like” or notification, for example, gives us a mini rush of dopamine—which can become addictive, causing people to seek continuous hits and risk getting trapped in cycles of distraction.
- Serotonin is linked to wellbeing, mood balance, and feeling valued in social contexts. Social belonging, positive recognition, and a sense of status in the team all help generate serotonin.

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- Oxytocin—in my view, the most underrated of all the “neurothings”—is crucial for collaboration, empathy, and trust. Often called the “bonding hormone,” oxytocin is what transforms a loose group of individuals into a team that genuinely collaborates, supports one another, and builds a foundation for collective motivation and positive energy. When oxytocin is released through positive interactions and shared purpose, people work together more openly, communicate better, and ultimately feel connected—a prerequisite for motivation and resilience.
- Noradrenaline (and its partner, adrenaline) are your body’s “go” chemicals. Moderate amounts help with alertness and action; too much, and we tip into stress or anxiety.

- Cortisol is the stress hormone. Some is vital—we need that gentle pressure to push through obstacles—but cortisol is also the body’s most powerful immunosuppressant. In small doses, it helps us respond to challenges, but if cortisol is present too long or in too high a dose, it becomes your enemy, bombarding your brain and body and eroding both health and performance.

Imagine your team not as a couple of professionals or digital chess pieces, but as a living neural network—an interactive ecosystem where the chemistry and individual settings of each person’s brain influences the group’s collective output. As a leader, you tune the energy, shift the conditions, and help balance the neurochemicals so people thrive.

Updating Maslow: Safety, Trust, Purpose

Back in the mid-20th century, Abraham Maslow provided a useful map for motivation: physiological needs and safety at the bottom, self-actualization and purpose at the top. Today, those basics—food, shelter, employment—are usually covered for most people in the developed world. The battleground is not survival, it is significance.

What would the new pyramid look like? At its foundation lie psychological safety and trust; at its apex, purpose.

At its foundation lie psychological safety and trust; at its apex, purpose.

- People need to feel safe enough to be themselves, experiment, fail, and try again.
- They need to trust their leaders and feel that decisions are made with transparency and humanity.
- They want work to matter—to themselves and to the world.

Neuroscience reveals that trust is not just a nice-to-have, but a measurable state (there is a spike in oxytocin in environments rated “high-trust”). Purpose, meanwhile, lights up the brain’s reward system and helps protect us against stress.

From Social Science to Biology: Why This Matters

Leaders used to rely mostly on social science models—personality tests, management fads, the latest hot acronym. But these only take us halfway. When you see leadership as a direct, adaptive function of biology, everything changes:



- You recognize that a derogatory email or public criticism is not just a “feedback moment”—it activates the brain’s threat system, releasing cortisol and shutting down our creative thinking.
- Team rituals and positive recognition are not fluffy—they are the social glue that releases oxytocin, making people reliable, trustful, and motivated.
- Purpose is not soft; it is tangible. Engaged, purpose-driven teams show more dopamine, less burnout, and higher innovation.
- Trust is not an abstract value—it is built behaviourally, neurochemically, one interaction at a time.

Practical Tool: The Energy Audit

So how can a leader actually measure and cultivate energy? Try an exercise which can be called “the energy audit”—a hands-on approach to mapping and managing the flows of positive and negative energy in your team.

What is an energy audit?

It is a structured conversation and reflection where team members identify:

- The activities and situations that energize them (“green zone”)
- Those that annoy, exhaust and drain them (“red zone”)

Why does it matter?

As humans, our motivation and energy are intimately linked. If energy is low, motivation decreases; if energy flows, motivation grows continuously. Neuroscience shows that we need to develop individualized methods to generate energy and motivation for our teams, since different people respond to different triggers. Some are fuelled by intrinsic motivators—purpose, feedback, encouragement, opportunities for growth. Others receive powerful energy from extrinsic motivators such as a raise, bonus, or a company car. Leaders

who ignore these distinctions risk creating “one-size-fits-all” solutions that do not fit their people’s brains—or their needs.

- Energetically mismatched tasks create frustration and disengagement, which activate the brain’s “threat” circuits, impairing learning and collaboration. In contrast, tasks that drive meaning, purpose, or connection release dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin, supporting wellbeing and top performance.

How to run an energy audit:

1. Ask each team member to list their common tasks, meetings, and responsibilities.
2. Have them rate each one: Is this a green (+), yellow (neutral), or red (-) activity for you?
3. Encourage and facilitate a conversation about why these tasks feel energizing or draining:
 - › Is it the task itself, or the way it is done?
 - › Does it trigger stress (high cortisol), or reward (dopamine/serotonin/oxytocin)?
 - › What kind of motivators—intrinsic or extrinsic—would increase energy for each person? For some, it might be public recognition; for others, more autonomy; for a third group, a specific bonus or development opportunity.

We “catch” feelings not by careful analysis, but by super-fast, subconscious detection of others’ moods, body language, and tone.

4. Encourage open discussions to adjust workloads or routines to increase energizing activities and reduce depleting ones, employing different methods for different individuals based on what drives their energy and motivation.
5. Review regularly: Energy flows can shift with external factors and circumstances, new projects, or changing roles.

Teams who experiment with energy audits often report increases in motivation, trust, and performance—because you are aligning work with people’s brains, not just their job descriptions.

The Leader as Energy Source: Emotional Contagion in Action

To unlock true team energy, leaders must understand the biology of emotional contagion. Here, the limbic system—our old, emotional brain—takes centre stage. This ancient part of the brain reacts with instinct and

speed, without waiting for the logical, newer prefrontal cortex (which is responsible for rational thought and slower decision-making) to catch up. It is this limbic instinctiveness that makes emotion so contagious in teams: we “catch” feelings not by careful analysis, but by super-fast, subconscious detection of others’ moods, body language, and tone.

This is not just about charisma. It is about one person’s nervous system influencing the group’s collective mood. Optimism, calm, clarity, and encouragement send signals of trust and reward, cascading into oxytocin and dopamine boosts. Anxiety, rumination, cynicism, or unpredictability trigger the threat response, raising cortisol and shrinking the group’s creative problem-solving.

Showcasing energy means:

- Being conscious of your own emotional status and managing it intentionally.
- Bringing visible passion, presence, and attention to interactions—zooming in, not checking out.
- Using small rituals—like gratitude, positive feedback, shared meals, or even walking meetings—to literally shift your team’s neurochemistry toward the “reward” state.
- Telling stories and sharing purpose: Why are we here, who do we help, and how will we know we have succeeded?

The bottom line: If you want people to feel motivated and trust you, use your awareness and instincts to read their perceptions and let your own energy set the tone. Great leaders know—and science confirms—that your brainy presence is a powerful tool.

Trust, Motivation, and the Brain

A culture of “high-energy” is not possible without deep trust. Neuroscientist Paul Zak’s experiments found that teams with high trust (and higher measured oxytocin) are:

- More productive
- More collaborative
- More resilient to setbacks

How do you build trust at the chemical and behavioural level?

- **Transparency:** Share what you know, admit what you don’t.
- **Recognition:** Celebrate wins and unique contributions; praise in public, correct kindly in private.
- **Vulnerability:** Model healthy risk-taking, show ordinary human emotion (yes, even a little anxiety or doubt), and ask for ideas and feedback.
- **Physical and emotional safety:** Be mindful of how power is perceived. A “boss tone” can activate stress, even if unintentional.



Remind the team—frequently and informally—about the bigger picture.

Photo by Héctor Achautla on Unsplash.

All these practices activate oxytocin, which then triggers the dopamine reward system—a powerful engine for motivation and positive performance.

Practical Tools for Leaders: From Theory to Everyday Practice

1. Daily Energy Checks

Start or end meetings by checking the energy in the (virtual or real) room.

- Quick round: “What’s giving you energy today? What’s draining you?”
- Listen for patterns, don’t rush to fix.

Leaders need to be self-aware, willing to learn, and committed to self-care. Without regular pauses, reflection, and conscious replenishment, even the most vibrant leader will burn out.

2. Purpose “Mini-Doses”

Remind the team—frequently and informally—about the bigger picture.

- Link everyday work to the company’s vision, mission and purpose, ideally with a real customer story.
- When people remember their “why” (purpose), you activate their reward circuits.

3. Rituals for Resetting

Use micro-breaks, storytelling, personal check-ins, laughter, or even a minute of mindful breathing to reduce stress and restore focus.

4. Expressions of Appreciation

Peer-to-peer appreciation moments, written thank-yous, compliments or small rewards can powerfully lift serotonin and dopamine for both giver and receiver.

5. Design for Authentic Connection

Replace some regular check-ins with walk-and-talks, shared lunches, or open feedback sessions. Authentic, human connection boosts the feel-good neurochemistry that drives teams forward.

6. Review and Redesign (Regular Energy Audits)

Once per quarter, run a mini energy audit as described above. This ensures the team’s structure evolves with new challenges and opportunities, keeping energy and motivation high.

The Neuroscience of Leadership Growth—Yours and Theirs

True energy is contagious—but only if the source is real. Leaders need to be self-aware, willing to learn, and committed to self-care. Without regular pauses, reflection, and conscious replenishment, even the most vibrant leader will burn out. Modern neuroscience supports this: chronic stress (unrelieved high cortisol) literally shrinks parts of the brain responsible for memory, creativity, and empathy.

What does this mean in practice?

- Prioritize sleep, exercise, and breaks—not just for your team, but for yourself. Good leaders know

The best teams are not just well-organized or well-directed—they are well-tuned, energized, and purpose-driven.

that cognitive health is the essence of growth and resilience. Healthy sleep cycles, small movement breaks, and real time to relax are not luxuries, they are the brain's reset buttons.

- Take mindful “energy check-ins” with trusted peers or mentors. Use reflective exercises—journalling, gratitude lists, or even a simple walk to clear your mind. These tools, supported by neuroscience, optimize your neural networks for learning, adaptability, and emotional regulation.
- Model personal growth—try new routines, ask for honest feedback, and be willing to change your habits in public. Show your team that learning is a lifelong process, and that mistakes are part of building better brains.
- Normalize and protect rest and renewal for everyone. Encourage your team to make use of vacation time, short daily pauses, or even company “digital detox moments”. Just as the brain requires sleep to consolidate memory, organizations need renewal to foster creativity and engagement.



- And finally, remember that your ability as a leader to manage stress—by consciously calming the “threat” response and activating the reward systems in your own brain—will help your whole team access their best thinking and emotional resources.

Pulling It Together: The GMC Model—Wearing Different Leadership Hats

In my work I have discovered that all of us are able to leverage innate leadership styles and behaviours—“hats”—that bring out particular strengths. I have labelled these as the Gardener, the Magician, and the Captain (GMC). These hats are very different, and each has

The difference is between ‘being the leader’ and ‘taking a lead’.

a unique way of building and balancing team energy. Ideally, as a leader, you learn to adapt your hat to fit both the situation and the individual—or, even better, you construct a team whose members each wear a different hat, complementing and enriching one another.

- The Gardener creates conditions for others to grow—a focus on environment, psychological safety, and gentle feedback. They foster serotonin and oxytocin.
- The Magician generates vision and inspiration, uses storytelling, and helps people imagine bolder futures—boosting dopamine, making work feel magical, not mechanical.
- The Captain shows the path, makes decisive calls, and creates clarity—stabilizing the system, utilising noradrenaline without tipping into threat mode.

You do not need to be all three at once, and you do not have to do it alone. The secret is to know your own preferences and bring together a team or leadership circle in which the different hats are all represented—supporting, challenging, and completing each other in a continuous learning loop.

Epilogue: Your Leadership, Their Brains, Our Future

Science tells us what many wise leaders have long sensed: Leadership is a biological process as much as a strategic one. The best teams are not just well-organized or well-directed—they are well-tuned, energized, and purpose-driven.

You do not need to become a neuroscientist, but you do need to embrace curiosity.

- See energy—from the inside out and the outside in.
- Design with the brain in mind.
- Check in more often on wellbeing than on hours worked.
- Build rituals and habits that spread trust and renew motivation.

And—perhaps most important—remember that as a leader, you are the primary architect of your team’s collective brain. The way you think, feel, and connect shapes the invisible architecture of motivation, trust, and growth. Choose your hat wisely and build an environment where every brain—and every heart—can thrive.

Dr Martina Muttke is a Swiss- and Spain-based physician, senior pharma leader with 25+ years of global leadership experience, neuroscience author (Build Better Brains – A Leader’s Guide to the World of Neuroscience, available on Amazon), and executive coach advising boards, biotech companies, and senior executives.

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