The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, Is the Key to High Performance and Personal Renewal
A Conversation with James Loehr

Interview conducted by Agnes Mura and Christine McDougall

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“...We are multi-dimensional energy systems and we perform best when we have a clearly defined mission that really matters (spiritual), when we are laser focused on the mission (mental), when we truly believe that the mission is possible (emotional) and when we have ample physical energy reserves to fuel whatever must be done (physical). This is the power of full engagement.” This is a statement from James Loehr, author of The Power of Full Engagement, who is interviewed for IJCO by Agnes Mura and Christine McDougall.

A.M.: Would you please tell us how you began working on exceptional human performance, particularly in a business context?

J.L.: Business is a world of high pressure very similar to that of professional sport. Of particular surprise, however, was our finding that the demands on people in business exceed anything we ever saw in professional sport, in terms of numbers of years of service, consequences for failure, and the energy demands that must be met every single day. The average workday for a professional athlete is 4-5 hours and for an executive can be up to 10 to 14 hours.

All the dynamics that we learned so vividly in the professional world of sports performance turned out to apply directly to the business executive. The only difference was that the demands were greater for the executive. Executives rarely think of themselves as elite athletes that must be constantly training to marshal the resources and energy necessary to complete the mission and complete it safely, to complete it with extraordinary precision and effectiveness. The research that has been done in the world of competitive sport can be brilliantly applied to the challenges that every executive faces in trying to navigate through his or her performance day.

C.McD.: Given my background in sport and coaching, I have observed some people with incredible talent, who can’t maintain performance consistency. I have observed this in athletes as well as in my coaching clients.

J.L.: We all have a certain amount of God-given talent and acquired skill. The challenge is to ignite that talent and skill under conditions of pressure – in spite of the obstacles and barriers that we face in our lives. The 100 million dollar question for all of us is simply this: “How do we as ordinary people become extraordinary under extraordinary conditions?” Or put another way, “How can we as ordinary people fully ignite our talent and skill when it really matters?” My obsession in life has been to develop a training system that would bring the ignition of talent and skill under more direct voluntary control. That quest was the driving force behind the development of the Full Engagement technology.

C.McD.: In my coaching experience with clients, one of the critical issues to consider has been where clients’ natural talents are, because if they are in the wrong place doing the wrong thing relative to their talents, the spark will certainly not be there. Is that your experience?

J.L.: It’s an interesting issue. It’s really getting the right people on the right bus, getting them in the right seats.
and getting the bus going in the right direction. But even having all the right people with all the right talents on a team does not guarantee success. It’s very possible for the individual’s talent never to really find expression. The personal and professional storms that disengage people from their talent and skills can be daunting. In my judgement, coaching is about helping people to face those storms and train to develop the capacity necessary to fully ignite what’s inside of them in spite of the conditions. This is what Full Engagement is all about.

An important element in any training is to focus on things that are controllable and let go of things that aren’t. When people give the reasons for why they are disengaged and why they can’t bring their talent or skill to life, many of these obstacles are outside of their control: bad managers, bad bosses, ugly office politics, not getting the support they need. But eliminating all those obstacles will only take a person from disengaged to neutral. So even if one could eliminate all the toxic storms that breed disengagement, full engagement would not be the consequence. Getting fully engaged in life is a great adventure that begins by taking full responsibility for the process – regardless of the harshness of conditions one might have to face. Full engagement is deeply personal and that’s why coaching is such an important part of helping others reach their potential.

C.McD.: In your book, *The Power of Full Engagement*, one of the fundamental methods that you recommend is that of building rituals around crucial life priorities. Can you say more about that?

J.L.: We found that in sport an athlete’s professionalism and the likelihood that they would withstand the brutality of their world was directly related to the rituals and routines that they adhered to during their careers. We are creatures of habit and we fundamentally operate our lives on the basis of what we do automatically. That’s what rituals are: consciously acquired habits that help pull us to do the right thing at the right time, no matter what we are facing.

World-class athletes are constantly honing new rituals that serve to enhance success of the mission. They have rituals for sleeping, eating, hydrating, exercising, concentrating, mistake management, confidence control and on and on. Such routines are the cornerstones of their success and keep them on track to be extraordinary. We found this to be true in every high performance venue that we have gone into, whether it’s the military, special forces, surgeons, pilots, all the way to successful businesses leaders. Wherever there is a critical process that must be adhered to for success to occur, rituals must be put in place to support the process both personally and organizationally.

C.McD.: My approach in coaching has been to take away the negative rituals that don’t support the client, replacing them with rituals that do support them.

J.L.: A big part of this is not so much eliminating bad habits but rather creating positive rituals that serve the mission. Let’s say someone doesn’t eat breakfast regularly. Rather than focusing on breaking the habit of not eating breakfast, it is much more effective to build a new ritual for eating breakfast. The focus of the training should be on what you want to have happen rather than what you don’t want to have happen.

Instead of focusing on not being impatient with colleagues or with direct reports, the high performing individual would focus on building rituals that will generate more patience, more compassion, better listening skills.
A.M.: Speaking of energy building and energy depleting habits, I remember an assignment I had in Los Angeles. I was working with a female executive who was doing three people's jobs and was exhibiting extreme impatience and irritation with her staff and colleagues. We first streamlined her job and delegated a lot of things out so she wouldn't be overwhelmed. But next, she weaned herself of coffee and three months later, we weaned her of cigarettes, with excellent results.

Do people come to your Full Engagement Training Center mostly at times of crisis? Or what types of catalysts tend to wake people up to the need of managing their diets, their health, their sleep patterns and their mental patterns?

J.L.: Most people come to our center because the energy demands in their lives have become unmanageable. Most recognize that somehow they must expand their energy capacity or they will start coming apart, piece-by-piece.

A.M.: What motivates people to shift their long ingrained habits?

J.L.: The biggest mover is pain. When people recognize that things are not working in their life, when their happiness, health or productivity is in serious peril, they are much more open to change.

A.M.: Can you tell us what the core of the Full Engagement Training System is? How does the training work?

J.L.: The training is fundamentally about energy management. The most important understanding that we came to in our work spanning almost 30 years was that managing energy, not time, was the key to achieving extraordinary outcomes. The pathway from ordinary to extraordinary is extraordinary energy. It is the quantity, quality, focus and force of energy you bring to any situation that drives extraordinary performance. Full engagement is the recruitment of the full spectrum of energy potentials we possess as human beings, invested right here, right now. Full engagement is the sweet spot in our energy and is the holy grail of extraordinary performance. To be fully engaged means you are physically energized, emotionally connected, mentally focused and spiritually aligned with the mission.

The training process begins by facing the truth about your current levels of engagement. Who and what is getting your full engagement now? We use a number of instruments to help answer these questions as thoroughly as possible. We also look at the truth relative to your energy management skills. What kind of job are you currently doing managing your physical, emotional, mental and spiritual energy?

Next we explore the issue of how engaged you want to be. Consistent with your deepest values and beliefs, who or what should be getting your full engagement? We have found that aligning people's energy investment with their values is the single most important thing people can do to create power and force in their lives.

The final step in the training process involves designing energy management rituals that will create alignment and ensure success of the mission. This is how extraordinary happens. It is a gradual process of self-transformation.

A.M.: How does one build and sustain rituals most effectively?

J.L.: We have learned in our laboratory that the length of time it takes to acquire a positive ritual is generally between 30 and 60 days and there are some important
things that have to happen for that acquisition to occur. Number one, you have to be careful not to take on too many rituals at once and you have to link that ritual to a core value that will really sustain you. For example, you may not be able to commit to exercise regularly in your life if you link it to just being buff or looking good, but if you link exercise to having more energy so you can be more fully engaged with your children, you are completely anchored in a different way. Chances are, you will be much more successful. A part of the sustainability resides in the power of the value that you link the ritual to. In the ritual acquisition process, it is tactically also very important that you do your ritual at a same time, consistently.

When you invest extraordinary energy in that ritual during that first 30 to 60 day period, it starts taking on a life of its own and it starts pulling you, as opposed to you pushing it. Occasionally there is a need to re-build the ritual if you find that you are in a situation that changes many of your established routines, like relocating to a new city. Coaching and support are also very helpful in the acquisition period, as is a clear and enforceable accountability system. Keeping track of your behavior, just like athletes do with training logs, is critical to success.

C.McD.: There is almost a paradox here. Many times what people are looking for is a greater sense of freedom, especially in the work environment. What I have found in my own life is that the structure and rituals actually increase our freedom.

J.L.: That is precisely our finding. What we have found is that in both our personal and professional lives, rituals allow us to be completely free and spontaneous. All the energy that you once needed to rally self-discipline and conscious willpower can now be used to be completely creative and instinctive in the workplace, to be free ... because you have engineered the system to ensure you will do the right thing at the right time when it really matters. You might drink alcohol and have fun and but you never over-drink because boundaries are built into your rituals.

C.McD.: People often look at rituals as prohibitive.

J.L.: Too machine like, too much like a robot or military training! We hear a lot of that, but when individuals begin to actually experience what happens inside, they feel just the opposite. You define your mission consistent with your deepest values and beliefs and then design automatic rituals that will take you there.

C.McD.: Finally Jim, is there anything you would like to speak to that we haven't asked about?

J.L.: We are all looking for the understanding of how to become extraordinary in the things that really matter to us. Perhaps I could conclude with our four-step formula for achieving extraordinary results:

*Step 1: Engage your spirit.* Extraordinary clarity on the mission to be accomplished and its link to your core personal values. Without this you probably are not going to make it happen.

*Step 2: Engage the mind.* Extraordinary precision in the focus of your energy. Tough decisions have to be made about your energy: not multi-tasking, not getting distracted. With whom, over what, when and where must your energy be invested to achieve the results?

*Step 3: Engage the heart.* Extraordinary effort to recruit hope-filled, opportunity-based emotions in all
aspects of the mission. You must believe in the mission.

Step 4: Engage the body. Extraordinary effort to ensure ample energy reserves are available for the mission. Extraordinary will never happen when you are tired. You diligently train to support the extraordinary energy demands of the mission.

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“From the dawn of his existence, man has been held up as a spectacle to himself. Indeed for tens of centuries he has looked at nothing but himself. Yet he has only just begun to take scientific view of his own significance in the physical world. There is no need to be surprised at this slow awakening. It often happens that what stares us in the face is the most difficult to perceive. . . . For man to discover man and take his measure, a whole series of “senses” have been necessary, whose gradual acquisition . . . covers and punctuates the whole history of the struggle of the mind: a sense of spatial immensity . . . a sense of depth . . . a sense of number . . . a sense of proportion . . . a sense of quality . . . a sense of movement . . . a sense, lastly, of the organic. . . . Man is unable to see himself entirely unrelated to mankind, neither is he able to see mankind unrelated to life, nor life unrelated to the universe . . . a single and continuing trajectory, the curve of the phenomenon of man.”

— Teilhard de Chardin, The Phenomenon of Man
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