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Energetic Leaders Good for Business, Expert Says

May 15, 2006 - Cari McLean, Associate Editor
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An ongoing study by eePulse, a consultancy that delivers Web-based leadership tools and research for continuous improvement and change management, found that leaders' energy levels have generally increased since December 2005. According to Theresa Welbourne, CEO and president of eePulse and adjunct professor of executive education at the University of Michigan Business School, leaders' energy levels can influence the energy levels of the rest of an organization's employee population, thereby affecting productivity and the bottom line. Furthermore, leadership energy levels can impact absenteeism, turnover and customer satisfaction.

The Leadership Pulse Study tracks organizational change, leadership energy and confidence from a sample of 4,500 worldwide, senior executives in various industries every two months. Study participants answer short questions online and rate their current energy levels and rate where they are most productive on zero to 10 scales (zero being resting, bored and not engaged, and 10 being burnt out and overwhelmed).

"We have been tracking leadership energy levels for the last few years. The energy levels had been escalating downward over the last two years, and this is the first time that we have seen their energy levels go up," Welbourne said. "If you look at my data from about four years ago, most leaders were always above where they were most productive."

Welbourne said that the previous decline in leadership energy levels was due to both leaders' personal problems and business issues. Business issues included increased workloads after lay-offs, greater competition and tighter budgets. However, the recent increase in energy levels, according to Welbourne, was imminent. "What is compelling about the data is that it had been going down during the last two years, and it did go down again in December, and I thought this was maybe because of a holiday effect. But this normally doesn't happen for leaders. The increase has been slow and coming. During client interviews, I am seeing that slowly but surely leadership energy levels are picking up for people, and I think that organizations are starting to hire again, free up some budgets and leaders are generally feeling more confident," she said.

The study found that most of the 13 industries previously indicating low energy in June 2005 are now reporting higher energy levels. Specifically leadership energy levels in the construction, transportation and public utilities industries increased, while they declined in retail trade, wholesale trade, engineering and consulting. The study found that industries including finance, insurance, real estate, manufacturing, information technology and health care are moving closer to their optimal energy zones.

"From industry to industry, from large to small firms, from U.S.-based to non U.S.-based companies, we have been tracking leaders' energy levels for the past few years," Welbourne explained. "Compared to the last two years, the mean went way up. A couple of industries are in their zones. They are where they are most productive, and none of them are more than one point below the zone. The March 2006 data looks much better than what we have seen in a long time."

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Because leadership energy levels can be directly tied to customer satisfaction, absenteeism, turnover, employee energy levels, bottom-line results and more, it is critical that organizations track and benchmark their leadership's performance. "The real issue is that there is a real cascading effect—leadership energy impacts employee energy, employee energy affects bottom-line front performance members, energy levels affect things like productivity, absenteeism and turnover in organizations," she said. "Organizations need to want to get energy at a level where it is most productive and minimize variance—especially in workload. Workload variance is not good for people's energy levels. It is similar to machinery and the total quality movement. So you take your machinery, you get it to a point where it is running optimally and you minimize the variance."

According to Welbourne, many leaders try to observe their own energy levels and aggressively try to improve their energy scores single-handedly. "Some leaders have said to me, 'I am going to take charge, and I am improving my energy levels.' They are not relying on an external factor, they are just getting to the realization that they need to take care and do some things for themselves."

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