

POWER R.I.P.

At the height of the Communist domination of the USSR, when every aspect of life and the economy was managed from Moscow, the government official responsible for milk production on State dairy farms was proud of his achievement in having increased milk production from 5 to 6 litres per cow per day.

But he was perplexed and annoyed by the fact that on one farm the milk production was 50 litres per cow per day! Moving the decimal point didn't solve his dilemma so he had no alternative but to take a long black car and drive the bumpy road to the farm.

There he was met by an awed committee of comrades from whom he required an explanation of what was almost a treasonable performance. They had no answers since they were never allowed to visit other farms and all they knew was what volume of milk was in the bucket. But they suggested that he meet the milkmaid.

That was the furthest thing from his bureaucratic mind, but he met her at the milking shed where he confronted her with the same demand.

"Explain to me why in the whole USSR we are proud of increasing milk production to 6 litres per cow per day and you get 50 litres per cow per day!"

She thought for a moment then said, "Perhaps it's because I talk to my cows".

"Show me", he demanded.

She opened the milking shed doors and walked in, greeting her herd warmly. "Good morning my lovely ladies, my beautiful beasts. Good morning Daisy, Buttercup, Rose and Daffodil. What is it going to be on this beautiful morning? More milk? Or more beef?"

Power doesn't ensure more milk indefinitely. Sooner or later we run out of cows.

Our South African Constitution deals power a mortal blow. It expressly protects those who are victims of undue power and offers them redress. The Mayan civilisation predicted the end of power as the predominant force for change – about now. Power has run its race, done its time and will be replaced by a new ethic. For a very long time, power has been used to keep humans, indeed all things, going in the direction we want them to go. And doing what we want them to do. Slave traders used whips and chains; colonialists and imperialists used armies and guns. Presidents use and abuse it and so do army generals. It's what most educators, principals, police and parents rely on.

But slowly inexorably it is being switched off. It is no longer ethical, acceptable or even effective. And it is too expensive. Its impact upon human lives and upon the planet is devastating. Because of the indiscriminate, excessive use of power by the powerful over the powerless wherever it is manifested, the planet is in crisis. So, as fast as they can, well meaning, brave humans are throwing the power switches too. Environmentalists, human rights activists, trade union leaders, dissidents and freedom fighters are up against corrupt regimes. Even ordinary workers have found a simple and effective way to avoid the power of bosses – they simply lie down and play dead.

Research done by the Gallup organisation in the United States, reveals that the percentage of humans who are defined as "disengaged" has reached 75%. Disengaged people come to work, attend church regularly, live in communities, go to school, but leave their energy at home.

Our measurements suggest that the percentage of the disengaged in South Africa is as high, if not higher.

And at about the same time, we meet the new Generation Y head on – an army of young people who are not awed by power as we used to be. Power does not make them obedient or subservient, not at all.

Historically, power over the powerless has worked wonders. Empires have been built, nations forged and wars have been won. Great global industries and impressive edifices have been built. Technology thrives spanning the globe. But all this is at the expense of energy – the daily joy of living – and at the risk of the long term survival of the planet. Oscar Wilde was right when he said: "To live is the rarest thing in the world ... most people just exist that is all". Malidoma Some the celebrated poet from Burkina Faso puts the challenge more bluntly: "When death finds you, may it find you alive". Power is the mortal enemy of energy, both natural and human. And, paradoxically, energy is the only available alternative to power and it is clean, unlimited and free.

As brave activists and deep thinkers throw the switches of power one by one, true leaders are emerging who are showing a new way. They have harnessed their own energy and are effective at encouraging others around them, even those of Generation Y. Their networks are alive with energy and their hierarchies have long since been collapsed. Their behaviours have changed bravely and permanently. Recognising that human energy and effectiveness go hand in hand – when energy is high, performance soars, whilst when energy is low it slumps – these inspiring new leaders seek balance.

Our own revered Nelson Mandela was surely one of these. He put the right amount of emphasis upon outcomes, which are not negotiable, and mixed them with the right amount of wholesome positive human energy. The rewards were quantum outcomes and amazing possibilities. These kinds of leaders "see" and value human energy.

They unblock natural energy flows conventionally clogged by internal competition and silo mentality. They engage the disengaged. They change attitudes and allow their followers to see that what could never be done, becomes possible. They create the conditions for individuals to tap into the sources of their own energy. They seek synergy in high energy effective relationships.

If the simple definition of a leader is "someone who has a follower" then a good leader must be someone who has a good follower. Apart from the obvious essentials of capability and competence, skills experience and fit – a good follower is surely one who brings his/her positive energy willingly and generously to the shared journey and its challenges. A good follower cannot be forced or coerced, nor can he/she be bought with money.

If great outcomes are inextricably linked to the energy of the leader and if power is the enemy of energy why are so many power players still in positions of such influence and importance? Why are they still using power so carelessly? Because it is all they know and because most of the people around them constantly play power too. It is the only behaviour they have learnt, practised and seen used around them. So they cling desperately to what power they have, labeling any attempt to replace power with energy as that "soft stuff".

While it is certainly true that human energy is the outcome of a mix of so-called "soft issues" – emotional, intellectual, physical, even spiritual, each manifesting itself differently for every individual at different times and in different situations - the net result, positive or negative, is a very hard and crucial issue. This is not only because negative or positive energy have a direct impact upon every kind of human task and outcome but also because, just like cash in a business, when we use up more than we generate over time we go "broke".

Those in power cling desperately to their power, exhausting and stressing their own energy in the process, hoping that the promise of even greater financial rewards will be adequate compensation. They remain stuck in old behaviours predicated upon old paradigms, victims of Sir Isaac Newton's third law of motion which states that every force generates an equal and opposite force.

All the while, the number and impact of the critics and opponents of power, and the ranks of Generation Y swell, and more and more switches are thrown by these brave people acting differently because their paradigms are refreshingly different.

They see the world, indeed the universe, as a whole system of infinite connectivity in which the steady frequent and regular flapping of the fragile wings of a butterfly over the jungles of the Amazon River Basin can affect weather patterns over Detroit thousands of kilometres away. They live comfortably with the paradox that two or more apparently opposite truths can live comfortably side by side. They understand the Cartesian view of finite things of which they are good stewards, but they can also see infinity as a clear alternative.

They can value peace, love and inner harmony. They have tempered the harsh Darwinian view that some of us are better than others with a contrary view that each human - like each leaf, each snowflake and each grain of sand - is unique. They seek and thrive in the synergy that is the reward for such infinite exquisite diversity. They are certainly cautioned by the harsh brutality and unfriendliness of the world but they rejoice too in its lovely humanity and intrinsic friendliness.

These pictures enable behaviours that build energy and by and large avoid the necessity to use power. But it is important not to confuse power with responsibility and authority. These are surely solid foundation stones for getting right things done right, which is not negotiable. Those who use power excessively insist that it is their obligation and mandate to ensure that responsibility and authority are unambiguous and unhindered and that power is justified. Is it?

Equally important is not to confuse energy with hype. When motivation or morale seems low, power players seek to lift them by investing in expensive sometimes dangerous interventions called "teambuilds". But the money only buys hype which lasts no longer than the hangovers and the bruises.

No amount of power will bring a peaceful end to the war in Iraq, or to the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Power will not solve the crisis in education. No amount of power will restore the world's non-renewable resources nor spark the creativity necessary to find substitutes. Power will not protect rare species of fauna and flora from extinction. No amount of power will make our mines safer places to work in, or our roads safer places to drive on.

And no amount of power is going to solve our skills shortages. Disengaged low energy people don't bring their skills to work with them – they leave them at home with their energy. Disengaged people don't share their skills with their colleagues. Crafts don't pass easily from low energy masters to low energy Generation Y apprentices. Disengaged people don't learn new skills and crafts easily. Low energy classrooms yield disappointing results while high energy classrooms produce excellence.

Power will not make people bring their skills, share their skills nor learn new ones. But energy will, and new age leaders know that and know how to release and nourish energy to restore and enhance skill levels quickly.

The South African Constitution creates the moral argument against power and entrenches the rights of every individual who is a victim of the indiscriminate or unnecessary use of power by those who masquerade as leaders – the power of the powerful over the powerless. Activists challenge it constantly. New age leaders adept at using energy show us the way. The Mayan predictions seem unerringly accurate. Generation Y thumbs its nose at power. Slowly we are learning that its end is drawing nigh but that fortunately a vastly more able substitute is sitting on the bench waiting its turn. And that is human energy.

We, in South Africa, have been challenged to find a clean ethical sustainable alternative to the use of power. What a lesson we are being challenged to learn – and if we succeed, what wonderful lessons we have to share with others.

Colin Hall

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