

WHEN THE ENERGY CONVERSATION MISSES THE POINT

Trisha King explores why rest is not reaching the women who need it most- and what a more accurate conversation looks like.

She came back from two weeks off and within a day, the weight was back.

It wasn't because she had failed to rest. She had rested. This time she was disciplined: she switched off her work email, spent time with her family and slept properly for the first time in months. Her colleagues noticed she looked well. And briefly, she felt like herself again.

Within forty-eight hours of returning, she was holding three things that had accumulated in her absence, fielding a query that should have gone to someone else and absorbing the tension from a relationship in her team that had frayed while she was gone. No one had asked her to do any of this. She had simply moved toward what needed to be held, as she always did, because she was the person who could.

By Friday, she told me she felt as though she had never been away.

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This is the conversation I keep having. Not with women who have failed to prioritise themselves, or who lack the self-awareness to recognise burnout approaching. With women who have done everything the energy discourse recommends: the boundaries, the annual leave, the deliberate recovery practices; and who find themselves, within days of re-entering their organisations, carrying exactly what they carried before.

The energy conversation, as it is currently framed in coaching, is not reaching these women. What follows is an attempt to explore why- and what another conversation could look like.

THE IMPLICIT FRAME

Most energy-focused coaching rests on an implicit assumption: that depletion is a personal problem. The client has a finite amount of energy. The work is to help her understand how she spends it, where she leaks it, and how to replenish it more effectively.

This approach is not wrong. It is incomplete.

For the women I work with, depletion is not primarily a personal problem. It is a structural one. The system around them draws on their energy as a matter of course- because they are good at what they do, because they have demonstrated that they can absorb what others cannot, and because their absorption has become load-bearing for the teams and organisations around them.

The system does not take a holiday. When she returns, it resumes.

This is a meaningful distinction for coaches to hold. A client who is depleted because she has poor recovery habits is a different proposition to a client who is depleted because her organisation has quietly structured itself around her capacity to hold things together. The first needs different habits. The second is in a different condition- and coaching that addresses only the habits, has the potential to miss it entirely.

WHAT THE SYSTEM ASKS- AND WHAT BECOMES AUTOMATIC

There is a pattern I observe in women who have held high-responsibility roles for some time. They have become so practised at responding to what the system needs from them that they have stopped experiencing it as a response. It has become instinct. They move toward complexity, toward unresolved tension, toward the thing that is about to fall- not because someone asks them to, but

because they are finely attuned to what needs holding and they are capable of holding it.

Capability, in organisations, tends to attract load. This is not necessarily a failure of the organisation. It is a predictable consequence of reward structures that cannot easily distinguish between a person who is choosing to carry something and a person who has simply become the person who carries it.

Endurance and integration are not the same thing. From the outside, they can look identical. The internal experience is entirely different.

The cost of this is not always visible in performance data. These women deliver. They continue to deliver through the depletion, often so effectively that the depletion itself goes unnamed. They are described as resilient. They are praised for their steadiness. The praise is accurate. It is also part of the problem- because it confirms a pattern that is costing them considerably more than the organisation can see.

When I work with a woman in this condition, the first question is rarely about energy management. It is about recognition: does she know this is a condition, and does she experience it as something she is choosing?

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A person who is choosing to carry a load, with full awareness of what it costs and why it is worth it, is leading from integration. A person who is carrying a load because the system expects it- and she has adapted to that expectation so thoroughly that she no longer registers it as extra- is enduring. Coaching that cannot make this distinction is not reaching the problem.

WHAT THIS ASKS OF COACHES

The energy and balance discourse tends to position the coach as a facilitator of recovery. We help clients understand their energy patterns, build restoration into their routines, establish clearer limits around their availability. This is useful work. It is not sufficient for a client who is in a structural condition rather than a personal one.

The more useful question, for these clients, is systemic: what is the organisation actually asking of this person, and how much of her response to that asking is chosen?

This requires coaches to hold two things simultaneously.

The first is an accurate read of the system the client is operating inside- including the ways that capable women in particular tend to attract responsibility without a proportional increase in formal authority, and the ways that their adaptive responses to this dynamic can become invisible to them over time.

The second is a genuine distinction between restoration and resolution. Restoration, however well-designed, returns the client to the same system. Resolution asks what would need to change- in her choices, in her relationship to her role, or in the role itself- for the condition to shift rather than simply reset.

This is a harder conversation. It asks the coach to name what they are observing in the system, not just in the client- and to hold that

observation steadily even when the client's first instinct is to manage the condition rather than examine it.

THE QUESTION UNDERNEATH THE ENERGY QUESTION

My client who returned from two weeks off and felt the weight descend again was not suffering from poor energy management. She was experiencing the logical consequence of having become the person her organisation could not function without- in ways that had accrued gradually and were now invisible to her as a pattern.

The coaching conversation that helped her was not about recovery. It was about recognition: first, that she was in a condition, not simply having a difficult period. Then, that the condition had a shape she could see clearly enough to make deliberate choices about. Then, that those choices belonged to her- not to the system- and that leading from her own judgment looked different to leading from what the system had learned to expect from her.

Energy returned when the load became chosen rather than structural. Not because the load reduced, though it did, over time. Because she stopped absorbing it automatically and started deciding what she would carry and why.

That is a different kind of balance to the one the discourse usually describes. Less about how she manages her energy. More about whether the authority she holds is genuinely hers.

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For coaches working with women in high-load, high-responsibility roles, this is the question worth sitting with. Not: 'How does she replenish?' But: 'What has she agreed to hold, and when did she agree to it?'

The energy conversation that reaches these women starts there.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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