



Watch What Happens When You Align Energy and Vision

By Dr. Renee Rubin Ross

A while ago, I was working with the board and staff of a nonprofit social service organization on some strategic planning. In order to build shared vision, I did an exercise that I've done with a number of groups, "What's My Why?"

"What's My Why?" is fairly simple: Each person finds a partner. One person is the listener, the other one is the talker. The listener asks, "What is your why?" and the talker shares whatever comes to mind. In this case, participants were instructed to talk about their reasons for supporting the organization.

When I run the exercise, participants have two minutes to talk or listen, then one minute, then thirty seconds. – then they switch roles so everyone has a turn. Participants consistently report that by the time they get to the thirty-second round, they get to the essence of their message. They find a powerful sense of clarity as well as a recommitment to their goals. In many different settings, people describe greater energy for their goals and determination to accomplish them after doing this short exercise.

This time, something happened that I didn't expect. The Executive Director, Carl*, walked in a minute or two late to the meeting. He was coming from a series of meetings with his staff as well as some client challenges. He looked tired.

I encouraged him to find a partner so that he could share his reasons for putting his heart and soul into this organization. But he didn't want to do the exercise. He said he had done the exercise a few years before and knew why he did the work he did. He didn't feel like discussing it at that moment.

Being a facilitator and having the role of holding the group, I am pretty even keel. I'm not a reactor in situations like this. I did not feel that it was productive to call out the Executive Director in front of his board and staff.

But inside, I was shocked. I thought, “The leadership of this organization starts with you. And in this moment, with your board and staff watching, if YOU don’t know why you do everything you do, no one else is going to either.”

Over the years, as a funder or consultant, I’ve spoken with many Executive Directors about their organizations. So many of them are incredibly passionate about their work. Facing challenges of funding and capacity, they stay connected to the need for their organization’s work, which runs the gamut from supporting homeless people to building communities to feeding the hungry and sick to sharing music, film, or dance. They have a powerful vision that inspires those around them – and with their team, they put in the hard work to bring that vision to life.

And occasionally, I encounter a Carl, someone who has overextended himself, and needs a refresh to find his (or her) energy for the work again.

Carl is not alone: Purpose-driven work can lead to tremendous energy and fulfillment. Yet research has shown that people who do work that they love face greater risk of burnout.

That day, the group continued with our agenda. A few days later, I asked Carl how he was doing and reflected back to him what I saw: That he seemed tired. I didn’t have to say too much before he opened up and talked about the exhaustion and burnout he was feeling. His one “job” was almost two jobs – overseeing the organization’s operations as well as fundraising. He had been working for years to get the organization on stable financial footing, only to recently find out that a large funder had changed priorities and would not be funding them in the future.

I told Carl that the path he was on didn’t sound sustainable. And I encouraged him to do some inner work to figure out, “What’s my why?” Where was his life energy pointing him at that moment?

What happened in the end was inspiring! Carl took some time to reevaluate his commitment to the organization, his schedule, and his energy. For a time, he sat with the question of whether he wanted to continue as Executive Director. In the end, he decided that he did. I worked with him to redesign his job in a way that was sustainable for him.

When I ran into Carl recently, I was struck by how different his energy was. He told me with excitement about the organization’s recent successes. He seemed focused – and relaxed.

It's summer, a time when we schedule in some pauses to our work. So now is a good time to assess our own energy and passion for the work we do. A sense of purpose and direction is one of the most powerful forces out there.

Try this:

Consider: What's your why? Where do you find energy and purpose?

How much is your energy and purpose aligned with your work?

If there is a disconnect between your why and your current work, what change might you need to make?

Dr. Renee Rubin Ross, a former Program Officer at the Jim Joseph Foundation, coaches and consults with West Coast based funders and nonprofits on board governance, fundraising and strategy. She is also the Director of the CSUEB Nonprofit Management Certificate Program and conducts many in-person trainings for nonprofit boards and staff.

*Name and some identifying details were changed.

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