BY DENNIS SPARKS

JSD: You organized your book, *Energize Your Workplace: How to Create and Sustain High-Quality Connections at Work* (Jossey-Bass, 2003), around what you describe as a “deceptively simple” premise: “The energy and vitality of individuals and organizations alike depends on the quality of the connections among people in the organization, and between organizational members and people outside the firm with whom they do business.” You went on to say, “[L]eaders ... in their everyday behaviors can make an enormous difference in activating and renewing the energy that people bring to their work.” To a large extent, the work of educational leadership in school reform is about activating and sustaining a flow of energy to do a very interpersonally and intellectually demanding task over a period of many years.

Dutton: Energy is a keystone. In many schools today the energy seems to be generated by external pressure. The core premise of my book, on the

LOOK FOR WAYS TO

Ignite THE energy within

Author and professor ties organizational success to positive connections between people
STORIES CREATE ENERGY

JSD: While you were talking about images, I found myself thinking about leaders’ ability to create compelling stories that explain how the organization will move from its current state to its preferred future.

Dutton: That’s what I’m talking about. A story not only provides a sense of continuity over time, it holds within it knowledge and hope about what is possible for the collective. It defines a sense of we-ness that provides fertile ground for building high-quality connections.

CONNECTIONS SPARK VITALITY

JSD: To be more specific about the attributes of high-quality connections, you say in your book that they are marked by “mutual positive regard, trust, and active engagement on both sides. In a high-quality connection, people feel more engaged, more open, more competent.”

Dutton: The amazing thing about connections with those qualities is that we know in an instant when we are having one by how it registers in our bodies. Engagement, trust, and positive regard are experienced almost instantly in our bodies. Our bodies are hard-wired from an evolutionary perspective to detect whether someone is tuned in to us. Our bodies are very reliable instruments for knowing when we are in connections that bring us life or in those that are slowly killing us. Leaders can make a big difference by encouraging people to take seriously their experience of connection through their own sense of vitality and aliveness.

POOR CONNECTIONS CORRODE ENERGY

JSD: You point out the energy-sapping nature of low-quality connections that are marked by distrust and disregard for human worth. You write, “When low-quality connections are pervasive in an organization, they eat away at people’s ability to learn, to show initiative, and to take risks.” That describes the environment in far too many schools and other educational organizations.

Dutton: There’s not only an emotional and physical cost to this, of course, but also a cost to learning because learning depends on the social fabric of the organization. There’s also an opportunity cost because each time you have a low-quality connection, you miss out on high-quality connections. So the cost is not just the damage done by the corrosive connections, it’s the loss incurred by not having the benefit created by high-quality connections. Corrosive connections can then spread throughout the organization. When such conditions persist, participants in such environments may begin to view them as normal and have no reason to hope that it can be different.

It’s important to note, however, that our research has found that even in contexts dominated by corrosive connections, people nonetheless report that during the course of the day they typically have one or more generative connections. But because they are discounted rather than savored, the individuals involved don’t receive their full benefit. A teacher’s high-quality interactions with students or colleagues, for instance, even if they are few in number, can produce vitality if they are focused on and savored.

INTERCHANGES CAN BE FUEL-INJECTED

JSD: You expressed that view in Energize Your Workplace when you observed that “every interaction with others at work — big or small, short or lengthy — has the potential to create or deplete vital energy.” You also wrote, “(A) high-quality connection doesn’t necessarily mean a deep or intimate relationship. High-quality connections do not require personal knowledge or extensive interaction. Any point of contact with another person can potentially be a high-quality connection.”

Dutton: Our research has revealed that a simple look, a greeting, a five-minute interaction can be a human moment in which there is an exquisite connection of humanity that enables and strengthens people. At the end of a long, tiring day, I can feel myself perk up when a service worker at a place where I pick up food really looks at me and says, “I hope you had a good day.” It’s as if this person has injected fuel into my depleted self.

SMALL ACTS HOLD OUT HOPE

JSD: So such life-enhancing interactions can not only affect the person with whom we are interacting, but all those with whom that person interacts?

Dutton: Absolutely. These seem-
ingly small exchanges can create a positive cascade of energizing interactions. In our studies on compassion at work, people who were experiencing trauma or setback told us stories about the value of even very small gestures. The individuals who offered that compassion were often unaware of its positive effects. I find a great deal of hope in the power of seemingly small relational acts.

**DAILY CONDUCT RIPPLES THROUGH LIVES**

**JSD:** I’m reminded of a story I read in which a principal recounted that when he was a 3rd grader returning to school for the first time after his father’s death, his principal hugged him and told him that he would be OK. The principal telling the story said that at that moment he knew that he would be OK and that later he became a principal because he wanted to make that kind of difference in the lives of children.

**Dutton:** That story is a good reminder that the way we conduct ourselves on a daily basis has generative possibilities that far exceed our imagination. It requires that we be authentically present with others.

**CREATING CULTURES**

**JSD:** The interactions you are describing comprise the sum and substance of an organization’s culture. You write, “[A]n organization’s capacity to adapt and change is tied to the quality of the relationships between organizational members,” and you quote Roger Lewin and Birute Regine, who say, “In complex adaptive systems, how we interact and the kinds of relationships we form have everything to do with what kind of culture emerges, and this, in turn, has everything to do with emergence of creativity, productivity, and innovation.”

**JANE E. DUTTON**

**POSITION:** Jane E. Dutton is the William Russell Kelly Professor of Business Administration at the University of Michigan Business School. She also is a professor of organizational behavior and human resource management and professor of psychology at the university. Her work focuses on how the quality of connections among people at work affects the degree to which individuals and the organization flourish. Her research has explored organizations and compassion, resilience, and energy.

**EDUCATION:** Dutton has a master’s degree and Ph.D. in organizational behavior from Northwestern University, and a bachelor of arts degree in sociology from Colby College.

**PROFESSIONAL HISTORY:** Dutton was on the management faculty of New York University from 1983 to 1989 before joining the University of Michigan faculty.

**PUBLICATIONS:** She has edited seven books, including *Positive Organizational Scholarship* with Kim Cameron and Robert Quinn (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2003) and *Organizational Dimensions of Global Change: No Limits to Cooperation* (Sage Publications, 1999) with David Cooperrider. She has also written a book called *Energize Your Workplace: How to Create and Sustain High-Quality Connections at Work* (Jossey-Bass, 2003). She is a co-founder and co-director of the Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship (see www.bus.umich.edu/positive/). Dutton also has published more than 50 articles or book chapters about management and strategy.

**ACCOMPLISHMENTS:** Dutton’s research papers have won both the Best Paper Award for the Academy of Management Journal and the Administrative Science Quarterly Award for Scholarly Contribution. In 2001, she was awarded the Organization and Management Theory Distinguished Scholar Award and the University of Michigan Senior Scholar Award. In 2003, she won the Researcher of the Year award at the University of Michigan Business School.

**TO CONTINUE** this conversation with Jane Dutton, contact her at Room E2544, 701 Tappan, University of Michigan Business School, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, (734) 764-1376, fax (734) 615-4123, e-mail: janedut@umich.edu.

**Dutton:** Interactions constitute an organization’s social fabric, the lived values and norms of how things are done within the organization. That social fabric in turn either increases or decreases the capacity of individuals to collaborate, to create new things, to facilitate information sharing, and to adapt. There’s a deep connection between these small everyday interactions and an organization’s overall performance.

**PREPARE TO BE PRESENT**

**JSD:** I’m curious about how leaders prepare themselves to be present in the ways you’ve described, particularly when they feel they have too many things to do in too small an amount of time.

**Dutton:** The leaders we’ve talked with say that they began their careers thinking that leadership was about making broad and bold strategic strokes. And then a crisis, usually a personal crisis in which they experience vulnerability, guides them to try different ways of leading. They learn that it is the simple things, like being present or being more authentically who they are, that produce long-lasting impact on their organizations.”
the interaction. It’s important to note that connections of this sort aren’t something that one person does to another; they are mutually created. We can only be present for others if they let us be so.

An implication of all this is that it’s important for leaders to seek feedback about how others experience them, which puts leaders in a constant learning mode about how they are connecting with individuals and groups. We are not very good at discerning whether others are receiving us as we intend. In some organizations it is typical and normal for leaders to actively solicit feedback. If the culture supports it, it is a far less risky thing to do.

**LEARNING IS LINKED TO CONNECTIONS**

**JSD:** A moment ago, you pointed out that people learn more easily when they experience high-quality connections with others. Tony Bryk and others have done research in schools that demonstrates the value of relational trust. I’m curious about what your research has revealed regarding the link between learning and human connections.

**Dutton:** Learning requires vulnerability. It involves self-disclosure and risk taking. High-quality connections produce all three of these qualities. But that’s only part of the story. High-quality connections also enable individuals and the collective to grow in unanticipated directions. For example, research on effective teams has found that when positive talk exceeds negative talk, there’s a quality of connection among team members that leads to the accomplishment of collective work that none of the individual team members thought was possible.

**LEARNING IS SOCIAL, NOT PASSIVE**

**JSD:** Professional development in schools too often consists of a speaker telling a relatively passive audience about things they should be thinking and doing. For instance, you might be invited to a school system to tell principals what you know about energizing the workplace. Schools hope for professional learning and changed practice, of course, but those things seldom occur. What you just described seems to derive from a different notion of professional learning.

**Dutton:** Learning, in my view, is more than acquiring information. It’s a social activity that leads to more complex ways of thinking, which is as much a function of the space between us as it is a product of what happens in our own heads. When the space between people contains trust, engagement, and positive regard, the capacity for cognitive, emotional, and physiological changes is greater. Professional development leaders can increase learning by actively cultivating richer, more positive connections among people. That would have a higher yield of professional learning than the importation of experts who dispense lots of information.

**MOVE BEYOND CORROSIVE CONNECTIONS**

**JSD:** In discussing strategies for dealing with corrosive connections, you write, “The key is to avoid letting yourself become merely a victim, which only magnifies the effects of negative connections. Action is better than no action.” Later you add, “Suppressing negative emotion can do more harm than expressing it.” Most of us are well aware of the risks associated with taking action and with speaking out loud our negative feelings. But we give little thought to the benefits.

**Dutton:** I take a proactive stance because I’ve seen the damage done when people just absorb the ill effects of corrosive connections. People don’t take the costs of these relationships seriously enough, and it kills them a little bit at a time. We underestimate both the damage done by corrosive connections and the opportunities we have to improve those situations.

It is even worse when we believe that we are powerless and just have to put up with it. While in many circumstances we cannot totally remove ourselves from the corrosive connections, we can take steps to buffer ourselves from their ill effects and to build antidotes by cultivating high-quality connections. For example, to buffer ourselves, we might reduce reliance on the person by building alternative sources of information and taking steps to minimize our interdependence with this person. Alternatively, it may mean actively building additional supportive connections that can be important sources of emotional uplift and advice and that can provide a fresh perspective on how to deal with the corrosive connection.

When we do these sorts of things, we establish a sense of efficacy and hopefulness that can be applied in arenas beyond that particular situation.

**CHANGE DEMANDS INTERDEPENDENCE**

**JSD:** I want to confess that I’m a bit surprised to hear these things come out of the mouth of a professor at a highly regarded business school. Business leaders often tell educators that schools would be better if they were run more like businesses. What they seem to mean by that, though, is that they want schools to be more bottom-line oriented and driven by marketplace competition. Improving the quality of human connections within schools is not on their agenda.

**Dutton:** Businesses operate from a number of paradigms. Those that are hard-nosed and finance-driven are...
counterproductive in a world of rapid change and deep interdependence because they chip away at the most important asset of the organization — the human community.

UNDERSTANDING EXTRAORDINARINESS

JSD: You recently edited with others a book titled *Positive Organizational Scholarship: Foundations of a New Discipline* (Berrett-Koehler, 2003), which describes a new field of study that has become the basis of your work.

Dutton: *Positive Organizational Scholarship* seeks to understand extraordinariness in individuals, groups, and organizations. It is a field of study arising in business, psychology, social work, sociology, and medicine. It’s the most exciting thing I’ve ever been a part of in my entire professional career. We focus on the positive dynamics of human communities and prepare case studies that we intend to be deeply inspirational and transformational. We believe that exposure to these positive examples will change peoples’ sense of possibility for themselves and the groups of which they are a part.

"We ask students to use these 60 stories as the basis for a reflected best self-portrait, a written statement of who they are at their best. We then ask them to set goals to make changes in their lives based on what they have learned about their reflected best selves."

One of the things that we have learned is that even a slight shift toward the positive can create powerful new insights into what’s possible for an individual, a group, or the organization. For instance, we use a process called the Reflected Best Self-Assessment to help individuals develop a deeper understanding of what they are like at their best. Our students ask 20 people in their lives — friends, family members, work colleagues — to tell them three sto-