

Learn how the ability to harness this relentless energy can pave a direct path to success.

# Élan at Work

Patricia A. McLagan

I'm trying to think of the times I felt—knew—of “élan” at work. Where energy flowed, where people or an organization were either at one with the moment or where something turned or was in the process of turning.

*Turning?*

“Turning” as in exposing other sides, shifting or, as the new scientists say, dissipating! Thus moving to higher levels of energy, complexity and organization. Reorganizing. Reassembling. Creating or recreating.

## **I've experienced it with and in individuals.**

One time, for example, in South Africa, an old shop steward—ready to retire—got up in front of a group of managers and workers as part of a change process, and said, “I never thought an old man could feel so important to the future.” And in the United States a local union executive close to retirement committed to “creating a new relationship between labor and

management” in one of the oldest corporations in the country—knowing that he was swimming uphill and that his time was running out.

Or, the many times when a courageous woman in a huge

### **ÉLAN, *n*:**

Vigorous spirit or enthusiasm typically revealed by poise, verve or liveliness of imagination  
-Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary,

corporation, a woman with very little formal power, position or academic background, found the energy

to stand for her beliefs and cause—and refound it, and refound it and refound it, despite derision.

And the steady, centered leadership of a female executive in the 70s, as she raised the functional excellence standards of one of the world's leading corporations—and did it with discipline, constancy, universal fairness and a commitment to being a leadership role-model and sponsor for women with and after her. For her, as for most people with élan, there were no models and no assurances. There was just conviction, vision and the raw power of heart and muscle that

going against the forces requires.

I think too of a dear friend who overcame learning disabilities and grew into a voice that calls and echoes throughout the world on platforms with the likes of Peter Drucker. He helps set new standards of service in agencies and corporations everywhere. His personal presence and integrity are an *élan* that lights fires and hope wherever he goes.

Then, there are the many examples of missed *élan*. We all crave it—the feeling of and being in flow. But, there are so many ways to be led astray! Think of the engineering executive at a big aerospace company. At 7 p.m. he is putting on his coat, feeling drained. “I’ve been here since 6 a.m.,” he tells me, “and I haven’t gotten a thing done!”

“Tell me about your day,” I say. And he tells his story:

“I started out getting ready for some budget discussions. Then, there was that long and testy meeting with manufacturing—we just can’t get our designs produced right. Without lunch, I spent three hours in performance discussions with my teams. And, we’re getting ready to propose a whole new organization structure for next year. I just didn’t get a thing done today!”

*Élan*? For many people, his situation was a chance for *élan*. But not for this executive. There was just no real soul connection for him. He’d spent 13 hours at work and felt he had accomplished nothing. Of course, he’d been doing managerial or leadership work all day. But for him, this was not valued work. His internal valuing system just didn’t recognize it. He would have felt much better

and more whole if he’d been designing an airplane or a fuel cell. Then his *élan* would have flowed. Instead, he ended a long and demanding day feeling drained and insignificant.

*Élan* is, after all, a very personal thing. It is about the connection of energy and soul to life and work. It is about expansiveness and synergy. It’s about being in a state where the equivalent of massive chemical and physical changes can occur and where fires can spark from two cold pieces of wood. Or, where unnoticed people suddenly explode to life—they move into the light and heat because a new insight occurs or they shift their internal thermostat to notice forces that are new. (Think of our engineering

is, “Look omnipotent, for the need to change is an admission of weakness and failure. So, look perfect and in control at all times.” Now, we all know this is impossible—we are all human and the need to learn is accelerating. No one can be on top of everything. We all know it, yet we buy into perfection models. Leaders isolate themselves or stay involved in everything, and the rest of us gossip about the fact they really don’t know it all.

Think of the *élan* that is released when we stop buying into the fiction of perfection. We can be ourselves. We can learn, take risks and fail and openly and consciously take our learnings into the future. The energy explosion is profound.

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executive changing his internal evaluation system to support his managerial rather than his bench engineer role!)

The chairman of one of the world’s most controversial and (today’s) respected utilities sparked *élan*, when he admitted to his top 50 executives that he had learned and changed over the last five years of massive change in the corporation. This seemingly insignificant and obvious comment coming from the chief patriarch of the corporation, unleashed a tsunami of energy. Why? The top role model acknowledged that it was OK to learn and grow. For many executives, the unwritten rule

**I know *élan* personally!**

Courage is certainly a theme. For me, my life pattern and personal experience of *élan* has taken at least three forms. One *élan* expression I am very proud of is that I take a stand. I put myself into situations that are very risky—where I can lose business and battles. I do not do this without thought. I try not to do this in ways that deny other’s right to express. But I do it on principal, whatever the personal consequences and often sacrificing my very ingrained need to be liked. And—you know what? My courage to speak up makes a difference in the conversation, in decisions, in

actions and in how people think while going forward. In these moments, I feel that I am helping to co-create the universe. I feel my presence here matters to the future in some way. I feel élan. It is tangible, present and affirming.

On some issues, taking a stand may have cosmic implications. I believe that energy exists simultaneously in many interrelated channels: intrapersonal, interpersonal, social, global and universal. Our evolution occurs simultaneously on all of these levels, with changes in one spreading to others. Consider, for a moment, the shift from patriarchal to participative values. This is happening simultaneously on the intrapersonal level (we struggle to integrate all the parts of ourselves as we develop), the interpersonal level (in marriage, between parents and children), the social level (think about the shifts trying to occur in the workplace, in social and governmental institutions), global (think of the challenges of having the interests of all the species and parts of the globe heard and considered). When I take a stand against autocracy in my personal relationships, I take a stand that reverberates across all the channels. I can't just act in one. Élan doesn't work that way!

My second personal pattern of élan is a connection of humor. I'm not a naturally funny person. But, I find that when I take myself less seriously and I admit to and celebrate my foibles, I somehow tap into the flow of life that is truly funny. This takes me off guard to see the conventional in a new light—it's then that bursts and laughers of energy break loose.

Connections spontaneously occur and combust. We all go into a different zone of consciousness where there is no time—only energy and insight. I want to spend more time in these élan spaces. I sometimes think I'd like to spend a day in Robin Williams' brain to experience the world that way for an extended period rather than in blips. Perhaps this is what more of the planet needs to keep us in a space where we can deal with issues and opportunities unencumbered by our personal programs and conventions.

Then, there's the beautiful élan of touching others' lives—sparking insights, courage and confidence. We truly can play a role in stimulating and amplifying new life

### **And, élan is what institutions should be about**

For what other purpose do institutions exist than to amplify élan? If people and resources could collectively accomplish the same things as institutions, then why the need for institutions? How do we talk about institutional purpose other than to be clear about the value of being a collective rather than a gaggle of individuals.

An institution needs to be more than the sum of its parts. And this must occur as a net effect after accounting for the loss of energy in creating and sustaining the institution. Think about it—the costs of being a collective include creating and agreeing on processes, systems and hierarchies (yes,

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in others. Sometimes for me, with my own unique skills, I just say things and am a person that others take courage from. At other times, my attention helps others see that they are valuable and important. Things I say that are caring—even when critical—also unleash élan. We all do this. I am just thinking about the signals I see and hear. Others' eyes light up for an instant. They tell me years later that something I did (and maybe don't even remember) made a profound difference in their lives. They thank me for being there. This is an amplification of energy that is very subtle, but profound. The energy baseline of the earth changes.

hierarchies! Nature has them, but they don't lead to the kinds of domination that we have evolved to in our human inventions!). And there are the costs of matching the needs, intentions and visions of the people with the needs, intentions, and visions of the institution. Anyone who has tried to get alignment in any institution—regardless of size—knows how very energy-absorbing it is.

Yet, with all the energy (élan) costs, there are tremendous benefits that can occur. Anyone who doubts the possibilities must only think at the smallest level. Think of a relationship you have where 1+1 always equals more than

two. Your ideas and intentions spark off of each other and some new and powerful synergistic solution or idea appears. When this happens, you have just experienced élan.

Think about the energy that flows when a leader really brings formal resources together with a highly-motivated and focused workforce. Probably my best story of this explosion of energy is the NASA of the 60's and 70's. NASA combined talented and dedicated scientists and engineers with a strong national purpose and a vision of accomplishing the impossible. Voila! Élan! I consulted with NASA for over 10 years and saw their élan at work. I heard stories and myths—including the heroic epic of bringing a crippled spaceship home by slinging it around the moon. Then I felt the élan as professionals in NASA centers across the country grappled with the profound technical challenges of the space shuttle.

Élan was built into the NASA culture. Virtually every scientist or engineer had stories of sleepless nights in auditoriums during a space flight—waiting to see if the latest grand leap in technology would achieve the mission; ready to tackle the impossible if there were problems. What would any executive group today give to have an organization so united by vision and committed to delivering that energy virtually spills out of the buildings? And all of this with very few procedural hurdles. Expensive? Yes! But we reap the rewards in bigger visions and technology transfers even today.

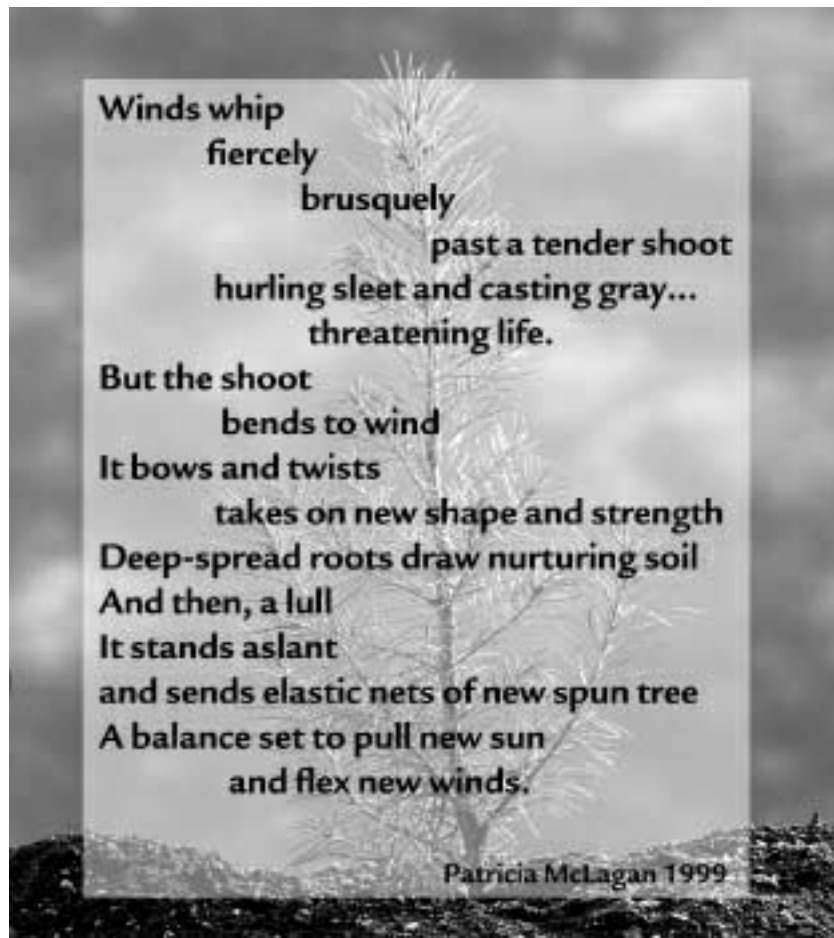
Then there's General Electric Co. It has an élan at the core that allows it to constantly reframe and

reinvent itself. Its élan is an invisible network that carries strategic priorities so quickly into the vast empire's energy stream that it continues to be one of the world's most admired corporations. Where else can you find such an array of technology upgrades, dramatic improvements in cash management, fundamental shifts in portfolio contents and employee-assisted workout or multi-sigma quality improvements. Over the past 30 years GE has accomplished these and many other transformations in fractions of the time it would take many other institutions a quarter of their size.

Institutional élan is a very powerful but misunderstood phenomenon. I think of it as a network of energy that, when

tapped into, can flow everywhere and pop up anywhere. It takes time and energy to set up. To some of us, it is called "culture." To others it is "the way we work around here." The words risk, energizing, flow, challenge, trust, fun, partnership and "together we can do it," are familiar words in an élan organization. In an élan organization, the management processes (how strategy is developed and communicated, how people set goals and the feedback processes) are open and two-way. They rivet attention and energy; customers matter and everyone is hooked into some larger purpose of service—including executives and union leaders.

The awakening of élan is a breathtaking experience. I have



been in many rooms where I have seen this beautiful and sometimes fierce energy awaken. It's as if the organization has been in a long, "Rip Van Winkle" sleep—dreaming a low dream. The dream? That managers can't be trusted and they are inevitably suspicious autocrats and that workers who are lazy or always in search of the "easiest way" need to be led. But at the core, most of us don't want to live our lives in that low scenario. We know it is not worthy of us, whether we have formal power and position, or are just bringing ourselves to a collective experience. Perhaps some people do consciously buy into that low dream and are ready to sabotage and take advantage of whatever chance for personal gain at little cost. My own experience is that these are exceptions to the rule. What are not the exceptions are the many people who have (I hope, temporarily) bought into the low dream vision of work. But their own high dream hopes for something else are very near the surface. They are like dry tinder—strike a match and an explosion of energy occurs.

Just after World War II, Victor Frankl wrote about the essence of what is catching fire for so many people today: It's our search for meaning. Our very life force thirsts for it. It is a thirst that can be quenched by just shifting the organization's story about why it exists. Ultimately we work, not for shareholders, but for customers and future societies. They are, after all, the groups that will vote with their purchases and their policies. Shareholders will win big of course, but a higher stock price is a dead-end as far as meaning goes.

The truly great companies flood

themselves with meaning. Medtronic employees know that every pacemaker they produce is part of a dramatic patient story. People who clean operating room floors know that their attentiveness can prevent deadly attacks of septicemia. People who develop Internet software know that we are changing the relationship capacity of people everywhere in the world. People in global toothpaste companies know that their customers won't have to go through the agony of lost teeth at a young age. There is a meaningful story in most organizations—just waiting to be told, just waiting to be touched and amplified by the people who will make it come alive in big ways in the future.

Élan is life force. Life in all its forms, we now know, does more than evolve in a linear or incremental way. It virtually goes into periods of instability and then explodes into new forms of order and competence. This is a lesson the "New Scientists" teach. It is a lesson of energy. It is a lesson that requires us to tolerate instability and uncertainty. It is a lesson that teaches us to focus on the big things (like meaning) and let go of control of some of the little things (like going through the hierarchy to get the right people involved in decisions).

And, élan rarely springs forth out of nothing. Those energy waves that shift mindsets briefly, or forever change the course of things, are born in the very systems and events and personalities that they replace. The quality obsession was seeded in an age of push-mass production. Customer focus was born in an age of internal measures. Élan energies swirl

around beneath the surface until they have enough force to break through and become new themes—only to be replaced someday by the forces that they birth.



*Pat McLagan is president of the RITestuff, Inc., a Web-based business with a mission to help people all over the world create, lead and work effectively in organizations.*

*She is the former chairman of McLagan International, Inc., and is the author of Change is EVERYBODY's Business, co-author of The Age of Participation: New Governance for the Workplace and the World, On the Level: Continuing Education Hall of Fame and The Human Resource Development Hall of Fame.*

*McLagan holds the American Society for Training and Development's highest award and the Larry Wilson Leadership Award. She is Professor of HRD at Rand Afrikaans University, a member of the ASTD Council of Governors and on the editorial board of Advances. She writes, plays piano, scuba dives, golfs and writes poetry. She can be reached via her Web site at [www.theritestuff.com](http://www.theritestuff.com) or through e-mail at:*

*[patmclagan@theritestuff.com](mailto:patmclagan@theritestuff.com).*

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