

How Top Performers Rejuvenate

By Marsha Shenk

Executive Summary

A study based on phone interviews with 50 participants revealed that rejuvenation is an ongoing inquiry. The concept was interpreted by participants; no definition was provided. Subjects shared the practices for sustaining and restoring vitality which enabled them to be at their best - again and again.

Participants have found their own ways to rejuvenate: only one person had a role model; half a dozen began through working with a coach; all continue to learn what works for them. Even for those who had some guidance, rejuvenation is a journey of self-discovery that changes over time, and participants expect their practices to continue to change. They view it as an adventure, a joy, a responsibility, and a critical success factor. The ability to be a 'beginner' is a key factor in sustained top performance.

There is a good bit of variation in the specifics of what works for people, though some clear patterns emerge. Not surprisingly almost all say some form of exercise is essential. Forty eight consciously keep their curiosity sparked through exploration and learning. Twenty nine meditate or pray. Six believe that they should meditate more.

Anthropologists are not unbiased observers. My observation from this simple study is that the tasks of rejuvenating are suspiciously similar to what it takes to sustain relevance in a changing marketplace. I invite your skepticism. Nonetheless, I suggest that there is great similarity between the requirements of high-performing individuals and high-performing enterprises:

- sustained learning
- sensitive and committed observation of concerns, needs, and pleasures
- experimentation
- willingness for new information
- continual redesign
- quickly abandoning what doesn't quite fit and investing in what works better.

Neuroscientists would readily recognize Neuro-plasticity in these tasks.

In my view, rejuvenation is a key leadership inquiry. Executives who take the challenge to renew vitality among their teams and organizations will foster competitive advantage.

The Study

I undertook the research between April and June, 2007. The commitment was sparked at a moment when yet another woman pulled me aside and whispered, "What on earth are you doing to stay in such great shape... How do you stay so energetic?"

I asked myself, "Why are we whispering? Why is this conversation a secret?", and decided to bring the inquiry into the public space by interviewing 50 top performers and publishing the results.

I'm an elder. One of the pioneers of Business Anthropology, I am still working with enthusiasm at age 63 and expect to do so for several more decades. Certainly I am conscious about being fit emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, and physically, and consider it a leadership requisite. Over the 28 years of my consulting practice, I have influenced a number of leaders to develop practices that keep them at the top of their game, and to keep their organizations sparked.

The study has proven fascinating. Some of the themes that emerged are relatively predictable, and others surprising, but I found the interviews captivating. Participants were very open, and many were grateful for the query.

The attached notes and charts reveal the usual data about the sample - age, gender, and profession.

Most Common Themes

38 of 50 are conscious about rejuvenating. The ways they do it vary considerably, and how they think about it has shifted over time. A few examples from a range of vivid responses to "Do you talk to yourself about rejuvenating? What do you say?"

It's my responsibility to take time off from work - I need to get away from one mindset; that's what clients count on us for... I need to go out and experience different things; I plan adventures... it makes me a better advisor... I get more ideas -"

Corporate Exec, age 38

"When I look at my way of being, I see a constant conversation about being at the top of my game for sake of something greater than I am - so that when I die I will be all used up. I am committed to that - couldn't tolerate less."

Professional, age 35

"I'm now on act 4 of my life - few people go beyond 3; most stop at 2. The revival process is ongoing..."

Entrepreneur, age 72

"I think of it as being WHOLE, vs being torn in different directions. I built that practice over time. Prior to this, everything was compartmentalized; I struggled with food, working out, working..."

Corporate Exec, age 53

"...it's more than rejuvenating - it's renewing - you actually become a new person."

Entrepreneur, age 46

"Rejuvenation is not something to work on - it's part of the fabric of living."
Professional, age 60

"We are here to throw ourselves passionately into life and to rejuvenate so we don't wear out... There may be others who are so steady they don't have to think about it - for me, it's important to keep creating pleasure in life. Using my abilities and making a contribution is restorative. Rechargeable batteries have to be run down before you can recharge them."
Professional, age 52

- Most mentioned exercise as essential. Many find it enjoyable (36); some don't (8) and do it anyway.

"I work out in the morning no matter what, even if I have to get up at 3 am. It wakes me up, and puts me in a great mood - it gets rid of all the toxins from the day before..."
Corporate exec, age 56

"A sweaty workout lifts something off of you"
Entrepreneur, age 34

"I'm a strategic thinker. I asked myself, "What am I doing about aging?" and began exercising 7 days a week. I had never exercised, and I still don't like it. But I love being with my trainer 3 times a week... it's the only time in my life that I'm not the one making decisions - I can just follow."
Entrepreneur, age 45

"Not only do I organize my schedule around my workouts, I am constantly learning more, e.g. the physiology of food and exercise..."
Corporate Exec, age 46

"I walk to and from work: 45-60 minutes each way up and down San Francisco hills. I use it to mark the transitions into and out of my work life - to process through and reflect the energy that has gone through me that day, and re-set my self back to myself."
Professional, age 52

- The question, "Is being a beginner rejuvenating?" met with great interest. While 6 groaned that they are always eager to push beyond it, to become skilled, most others find being a beginner refreshing and enjoyable, and all believe it key to staying in top form. Forty eight spoke at length about learning, curiosity, and creativity.

"What I'm doing now was totally beyond me 12 months ago."
Entrepreneur, age 72

"I'm constantly looking for new service offerings... we invent it from nothing. Professionally I have to learn from scratch often... and I love that."

Entrepreneur, age 45

"I abdicate to beginner on every project - it's like playing jazz."

Corporate Exec, age 38

I discourage planning on my shows. Senior management fights me, but they have to acknowledge how audiences respond to spontaneous talent..."

Corporate Exec, age 53

"I'm doing my entire workout this week on an exercise ball - it's a new challenge... I flirt with books and magazines... dipping in and out as fancy strikes me...many different kinds of publications..."

Professional, age 52

"I don't consider myself an expert at anything, I just keep asking... I am hungry for it..."

Corporate Exec, age 49

"Knowing where and what to learn is a competitive advantage."

Corporate Exec, age 45

"A good book is a vacation."

Corporate Exec, age 56

"I used to cruise high-end stores like Bergdorf Goodman just to be around great design... don't do that so much anymore, but I'm always looking at books and magazines..."

Entrepreneur, age 64

Points of variation:

- For some, time alone with no interaction with anyone is the most important rejuvenator; for others time with friends or family is most important. I assume that the difference is basic to introverts and extroverts.
- For some being with family is a key rejuvenator. For others, being with family is a key value, but not necessarily rejuvenating.
- Twenty nine meditate or pray. Six believe that they should meditate more.

"I pray dozens of times every day."

Entrepreneur, age 42

"I was sitting in the garden one day with my dog, and noticed him just being there, enjoying the air. I thought, 'That looks pretty good'. So I found a meditation teacher, and now I can just sit in

the garden with him rather than having to read the Times...
Entrepreneur, age 72

- Seven people commented that they 'are very competitive', and that they have either given up competing in an activity that they now use for rejuvenation, or that they have cultivated a new activity that they use for rejuvenating in which they do not compete.
- Twenty five say that rejuvenating intellectually is something different than overall rejuvenating; 9 believe that rejuvenating is of the whole person and the two cannot be distinguished.

Two points I found most fascinating:

To, "Do you distinguish work from play?" there was significant disagreement and some strong feelings. Some answers were quick; some lengthy and reflective.

- Nineteen were vehement that, while work may be enjoyable and fun, it is not play
- Fourteen are strongly in the camp that work is play, or should be - and wish they could get back there...
- Two say that in the past they did not distinguish the two, and now do
- A few say that play is not in their world - all they do is work; work is who they are
- Two said that play is a kid's word
- Two said that play is key to who they are.

"Perhaps I should play, but I don't... I'm not sure the distinction is important. Work does have a purpose, and that makes it different than play, which, presumably does not. But I think meaning is the key - if people find meaning in their work, they don't find it tiring and are not worn down by it."

Corporate exec, age 59

"Certainly some of the work I do isn't play, but much of my work is creative...it's the greatest high there is - there's nothing like it."

Corporate exec, age 56

"I have a lot of responsibility in my job, but I am more than my responsibilities...that's very important to who I am."

Corporate exec, age 46

"As soon as something starts to feel like work, I know I need to re-think it..."

Entrepreneur, age 62

"Play is something I need to work on..."

Professional, age 57

Perhaps the most interesting comments for me were from 8 people who spoke about living juvenated rather than rejuvenating. Two asked me to drop the 're' in the interview questions. Others spoke about simply living in the desired state: operating in a way that doesn't wear them down, rather than departing from it and finding their way back.

"About 5 years ago I realized that being one of the top 3 people in the company wouldn't make me happier...so I decided to become a top performer in life. I look at the sky with my children every day... we listen to a lot of music together...?
Corporate exec, age 45

"What if we just live juvenated?"
Executive coach, age 60

"I haven't gotten tired yet, and I don't plan to."
Entrepreneur, age 73

"I live life as a beginner - my mind set is 'I don't know' - so I'm always curious and always rejuvenating."
Entrepreneur, age 42

"I live a very full life...I keep myself from being overwhelmed by staying in the present...it makes a huge difference."
Corporate exec, age 34

"I think of perpetuating, not rejuvenating."
Professional, age 62

Conclusions

This was a rich study. While I suspected that it might be important when I began, I believe now that bringing the intent to rejuvenate into focus is a mission-critical - to families and communities as well as to enterprises.

There are powerful forces at play in modern life that render renewal more and more challenging:

- Adults work longer hours with a greater degree of change and uncertainty than their parents and grandparents
- People don't have role models for rejuvenating, but they experience enormous pressure to perform
- More information is available than ever, and that trend will continue. The need to interpret it, to sort out what's important, choose what to learn, and to determine what resources will be required to meet priorities continually increases stress

- We are operating in a 'youth culture'. Many adults have accepted the challenge to look, think, and live 'young', even as life expectancy continues to increase. For most this serves as a source of stress: one more demand to achieve.

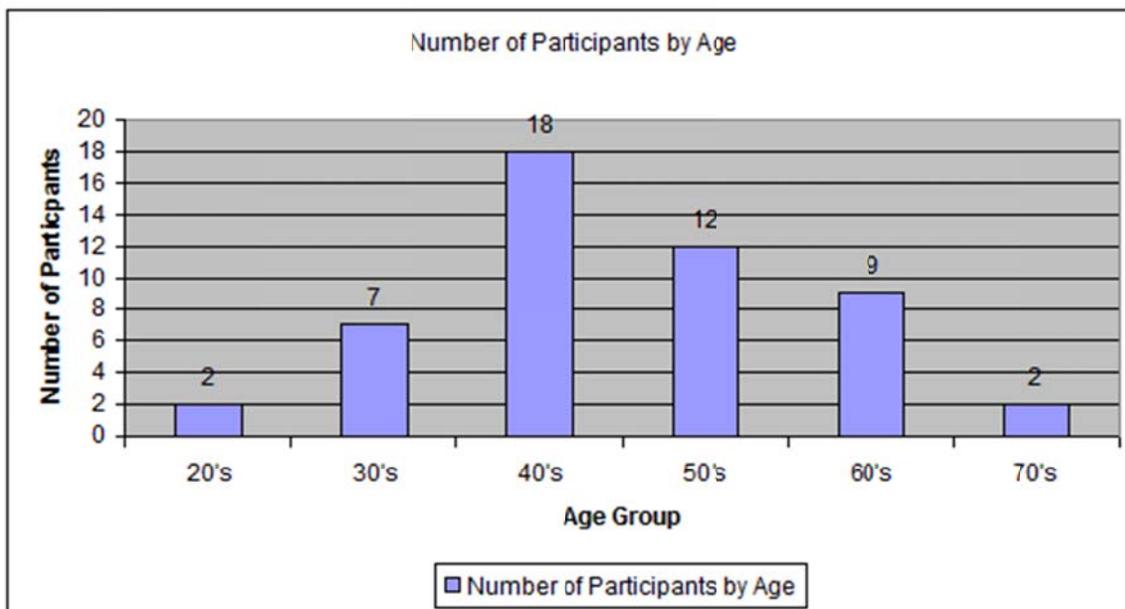
The interviews reveal that among top performers staying vital is an ongoing inquiry. There was little talk of 'shoulds': participants look for what works and invest steadily. Leaders who cultivate rejuvenation in their teams and organizations will enjoy substantial returns.

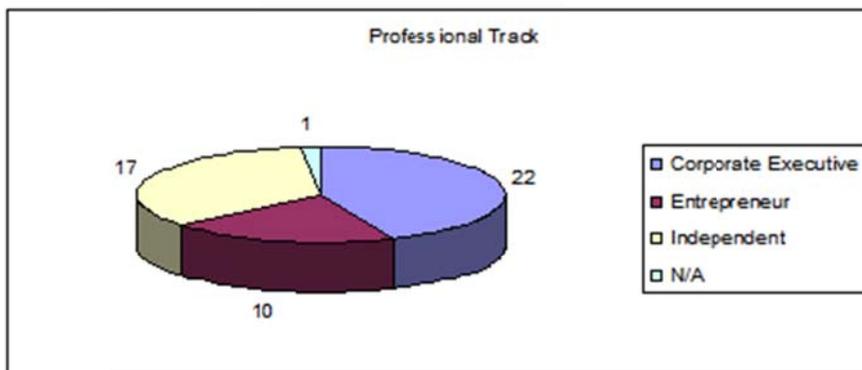
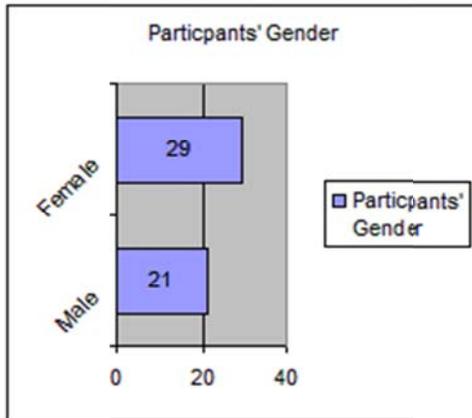
Notes

The Sample

I began by inviting 20 - 30 people I knew as top performers in business or the professions to either participate in the study or to recommend others who they viewed as top performers, who might be willing to invest 30 - 40 minutes of phone time. We didn't use any other criteria in choosing the sample.

While a few people spoke with me for an hour, most were able to complete the questions in 30 - 40 minutes.





Other Notes:

Having become interested in illuminating the question of rejuvenation, I wondered whether I would find significant differences between people I've worked with and other top performers. The answer is 'no'.

Living with family- 40 live with family; 10 do not.

How does rejuvenation feel?

- Balanced
- Body is in expansion
- Calm
- Can breathe deeply
- Centered
- Clarity of thoughts
- Cleansed
- Confident
- Connected
- Content
- Creative

- Enthusiastic/Excited
- Energetic/Refreshed
- Flexible
- Focused
- Friendly/Nice
- Glorious/ Happy/Joyful/Upbeat/Uplifted
- Grounded/Present
- Light
- Love
- Mind is quiet
- No aches and pains
- No struggles
- Optimistic
- Patient
- Play-mode
- Positive
- Relaxed/Rested/Sleeps Well
- Serendipitous
- Ready to take on the world