

If You're Learning, You'll Never Need to Recharge

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In a recent [interview](#) I did with the *Wall Street Journal*, we hit on a wide range of topics: discount programs disguised as loyalty programs; the experiment in human nature that we call Panera Cares; the opportunities and challenges that come with taking a suburban brand into urban environments; the (minor) impact of the Affordable Care Act on our business, as well as my [management style](#). All in all, it was a pretty in-depth Q&A. But it was a rather innocuous question that took me by surprise.

The reporter asked, what do you do to recharge?

The fact is, I never feel the need to recharge because I rarely feel burned out. After three decades in the food industry, I can unreservedly declare that I still love what I do.

Of course, I get tired. Eighty-hour work weeks and way too many red-eye flights will wear anybody down. Nor am I immune to the stress that comes with running a public company for 22 years and shouldering responsibility for more than 70,000 Panera associates. But thankfully, I've never experienced the *chronic* exhaustion, inertia, frustration, and cynicism that come with a temporary slump or even classic burnout. Hence, I've never had reason to refresh my spirit and renew my spark.

The reason, I think, is that I view my work as a lifelong learning journey. I go to work to learn about how the world works. How humanity works. And what will work in the world.

The British author John le Carré once quipped, "The desk is a dangerous place from which to view the world." I couldn't agree more. I visit anywhere from 25 to 100 Panera cafes every month. And what I always find is a kind of real-time performance art—dynamic interactions between our front-line crews and constantly shifting casts of customers, with the overriding goal of ensuring that when

customers exit our "stage," they are nourished in soul as well as body. The performances always differ. And I inevitably learn something new.

When I learn, the results are actionable ideas and a broadened vision. Opportunities for change are revealed. I'm engaged in the world around me, so there's no need to refresh.

My work is also energizing because I believe I'm doing work that matters. In his seminal book, [*Man's Search for Meaning*](#), Viktor Frankl, a prominent Jewish psychiatrist and Nazi concentration camp survivor, wrote that those who endured the death camps believed that "life was still expecting something from them; something in the future was expected of them." Whether it was a father whose young child was living in a foreign country or a scientist who had books he still needed to write, their lives still held meaning. And that helped them endure the Nazi's brutality.

I'm not a scientist. We don't cure cancer at Panera. We don't launch shuttles into space. But we do touch the lives of 8 million people each week in thousands of cafes across the country. We've helped entire communities care about the quality of their food. We've given customers an inviting place to gather and feel welcome. And through our [pay-what-you-can cafés](#) and other efforts, we're contributing our resources and know-how to the fight against food insecurity in America, where one in six households don't always know where their next meal is coming from. All of that gets me up before dawn and keeps me going until late in the evening.

If you find meaning in your work and you go to work to learn about life, I doubt you'll ever have reason to recharge. The work itself will renew you.

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