



As a leader what can you do about burnout?

Preparing Leaders to Perform in Critical
Moments & Thrive in Uncertainty



As a Leader, what can you do about burnout?

What is burnout, and (for now) what is it not?

The term burnout was first used in the 1970s in two separate scientific articles. Sigmund Ginsburg highlighted the problems of 'the burned-out executive' in the Personnel Journal, and Herbert Freudenburger described 'staff burn-out' in the Journal of Social Issues. Freudenburger taking the term from his colleagues, describing themselves as being "burned out". The social psychologist, Christina Maslach continued the research, amongst others, and raised the awareness significantly with the development of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), which focused on the three dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism and inefficacy.

Early indications include:

- Difficulty getting up, feeling fatigued and lacking energy for anything
- Critical of management decisions and disillusioned with work
- Constantly complaining and looking negatively at life
- Short tempered and irritable with colleagues (and loved ones)
- Lack any satisfaction from your job
- Reaching out to unhealthy distractions; food, alcohol, drugs
- Unexplained health issues; headaches, stomach problems, muscle aches

So, by definition burnout is not merely exhaustion due to overwork and overwhelm, although it is often described as such. The World Health Organisation defines burnout as an 'occupational phenomenon', and are very specific that it 'should not be applied

to describe experiences in other areas of life'. The distinction is important because it can identify the specific requirements for a solution. If you are exhausted due to an increased workload, taking time to rest and recuperate before finding additional resources and adapting time management could solve the problem. If, however, you are exhausted as a result of burnout, you are unlikely to get the support you need and after taking time off, returning to the same environment will likely just repeat the cycle.

Science and academia do not hold exclusive authority over language, and the use of the term "burnout" is not limited to their definitions. Some dictionaries still associate "burnout" with exhaustion and being overwhelmed due to excessive workload. You might have come across articles discussing entrepreneurial burnout, such as one published by Forbes online in 2022. This article described overwork and exhaustion as elements often labelled as burnout, also highlighting that stress is a cause of burnout, should it not be that burnout causes stress? It is important to acknowledge that factors beyond the workplace significantly impact your overall wellbeing and job performance. These factors can influence your focus, desire and meaning; sometimes things are just more important or a higher priority, we are human. Going through such times may give you an indication of what you mean to your employer but will not necessarily be burnout. Maslach herself has highlighted, in the Harvard Business Review, that businesses are misusing her MBI and handling the information unethically. It was designed to 'help leaders design effective ways to build engagement and establish healthier workplaces in which their employees will thrive.'



Burnout is not a type of illness or disease; however, it can lead to serious health problems when it develops to chronic stress. When burnout is the cause of more serious health risks, surely, we should be stating the facts, you have IBS due to burnout or you have chronic stress due to burnout, not you have burnout. Saying you have burnout is like saying I had 'Rugby' describing the strains, bruises and bloody noses I experienced in my youth, and therefore would not help in directing the right treatment and future prevention.

Maslach identified six triggers of burnout:

- **Work Overload.** Too much work that you cannot keep up with. Unrealistic deadlines. Working too many hours
- **Lack of Control.** Limited responsibility and agency. Unable to speak up and feeling undervalued.
- **Insufficient Reward.** Undercompensated for the effort given. Not recognised and feel taken for granted.
- **Unfairness.** A breakdown of trust. A lack of accountability. A demonstration of

favouritism to some. Certain behaviours seemingly acceptable for the few.

- **Poor Sense of Community.** Closed communication. No conflict resolution or feedback process. A toxic culture.
- **Conflicting Values.** The company goes against your core values. The company's stated values are not lived in the behaviours.

If you are a leader, I invite you to look at those triggers again. If I had even one member of staff off work due a condition attributed to burnout, I would be looking at what the organisation can do and me personally as the leader to solve it. Many companies have many people off work with chronic stress potentially caused by burnout. Of course, it is possible that someone may contribute to their own situation by joining the wrong type of organisation for them, which is why good executive recruitment is so important. But, even so, did no one notice? Were they not able to speak up? Did no one question why they were working such long hours or not keeping up?

Are you creating an environment where people feel heard, valued and trusted? Does everyone

work as a team, support each other and get recognised for their effort? Do you value your employees as human beings? Do you tell them that they mean something, notice their achievements and thank them for their work? If the company's vision is clear and everyone's part in that vision is understood, it is easy to see when there is congruency in the messaging, when behaviours match expectations and the philosophy is lived and not just listed on the walls in empty mantras.

What to do?

The best initial action is to establish the ground truth, and it can be incredibly impactful to bring in external expertise to co-create this journey; showing your staff how much you care. Trusting often leads to being trusted. Knowing your start point will enable you to establish the right path for you, your organisation and everyone in it. Although it may be uncomfortable, creating the conditions for open and honest communication can be extremely rewarding and the catalyst for sustainable change. Remember that prevention is better than cure and everyone will benefit from such a process. An inspired, positive workforce generally achieves positive results.

As a final thought, in Freudenburger's original paper he emphasised that it is primarily "the dedicated and the committed" as most likely to suffer burnout. This is a valuable insight to the holistic aspect of burnout over mere (not to undermine it) exhaustion. It is only those that want to speak up that would notice being shut down, those that want to develop that would feel stifled and those aware of their own values that would feel the lack of congruency. In short, it could be those that care the most and want to do the best job that could be lost to burnout if not effectively led.



Chris Whipp
Partner

+44 (0)203 034 0850
connect@deepskeyleaders.com
deepskeyleaders.com