

Feel the burn...

Research shows the extent of burnout amongst high-flyers but notes the part that coaching can play in leading to a breakthrough.

Tim Casserley and David Megginson

Pick up almost any book on burnout and you'll find the same message: it needs to be banished, prevented or like the Gadarene Swine otherwise cast out. And yet our own experience of burnout was transformational. Why does virtually no one mention the possibility of good coming out of bad. The learning that might emerge as a result of burnout?

Hot topic

The emergence of burnout as a colloquial term, together with the self-help industry's claims that it can happen to anyone, has devalued its meaning as a serious psychological condition. Apparently, you are equally vulnerable to burnout if you're an over-stressed baby-boomer, in a bad marriage, having a mid-life crisis or are a female indoor sex worker. As a result, the term has become meaningless.

And yet the overwhelming weight of 25 years of scholarly research on the subject says that burnout is a work-related phenomenon that occurs largely to those in the early stages of their careers. These are people who are more likely to be in their twenties and thirties than their forties or fifties, and who are restlessly ambitious, career-oriented and achievement-focused. In most organisations such individuals, if they are not formally identified as high-flyers, will be perceived as such.

Our wish to address these flaws in the existing literature led us on a five-year journey in which we recorded, transcribed and analysed in-depth interviews with 100 high-flyers from a global energy company, one of the world's largest professional services firms, a multinational security solutions provider and the UK police force, representing 29 different nationalities, aged from their mid-twenties to early forties. We re-interviewed half of them a year later to track the incidence of burnout, and tested our findings with their organisations.

Survival of the fittest

Our research found that 20 per cent of the high-potential talent pool experienced burnout during the first 10 years of their careers. This represents a significant financial and reputational risk to organisations, and threatens management continuity. We calculated the financial exposure for organisations across a three-phase progression of burnout, using the example of a three- to four-year qualified professional services high-flyer as the basis of our calculation.

These figures do not include damage to succession and reputation management, including the cumulative damage to the brand and employee value proposition, nor do they take into account costs arising from mistakes made during burnout. High-flyers believe their organisations see burnout as a sign of weakness or failure at best and psychological disorder at worst. Organisations run the risk of being seen as 21st-century sweatshops, suffering severe damage to the brand and their ability to attract and retain the brightest and best employees.

Our findings implicate both an organisation's leadership and its high-flyers in the cause of burnout. Organisations create the conditions for it to happen. The constant scramble for growth and shareholder return, an obsession with performance metrics and the continual raising of performance thresholds inevitably leads to a culture of burnout. This culture is magnified where companies base the development of high-potentials on a "survival of the fittest" mentality.

But ultimately it is the individual high-flyer who (through the choices they make and how they handle the challenges in the work environment) determine whether they burn out or not. We found that high-flyers who derived their identity primarily from work and career success, whose sense of purpose was rooted in the need for fame and recognition and who lacked quality self-interaction, were vulnerable to burnout.

Over-identification with work created a "dysfunctional closeness" in which the high-flyer could not distinguish between their work and personal needs. Identity was something that was painted on to them by work, the organisation or career. It was externally referenced and there was little inner sense of self.

We defined a typology of burnout that expanded the condition beyond the conventional notion of it being total devastation.

For most high-flyers, burnout derailed their careers and froze the development of identity. For the lucky few, burnout revealed its transformational learning potential. It accelerated maturity, led to systemic growth and caused them to confront their own fallibilities and limitations, gaining a sense of humility. It also significantly benefited their organisations. Among other things, it led to the development of wisdom, a greater sense of perspective, more grounded business decision-making and a sense of service to others.

Holding pattern

We believe it's not a matter of preventing high-flyers from burning out, but enabling them to learn from the experience, and in so doing permitting them to develop sustainable versions of themselves. Prevention stops high-flyers making critical adjustments to the way in which they relate to the world, and postpones the inevitable, resulting in a far worse outcome both for the individual and their organisation.

Our research showed that one of the key determinants of learning from burnout was the degree to which high-flyers were "held" by someone focusing on them learning from the experience, someone who sustained and attended to them while also challenging and holding them to account. This relationship helped high-flyers to absorb the suffering, listen to the emerging sense they were making of their burnout, and accept responsibility for their part in bringing it about which is an essential first step in the learning journey.

This relationship was usually fulfilled by those with no connection to the organisation like the loved ones or psychotherapists and rarely by external coaches working for the organisation or those inside it. High-flyers' skill in hiding their burnout to those at work effectively concealed it to the untrained eye, and its stigma made them wary of disclosure.

Our research findings form the basis of an approach to coaching that enables high-flyers to learn from the experience, while ensuring they do not derail. This is underpinned by some fundamental principles:

- *Focusing the coaching on transformational learning* – bringing about profound and lasting change at the level of personal identity.
- *Adopting a systemic perspective in coaching.* Burnout is a systemic condition. It follows that sustainable change can be brought about only by working with the mind, body and identity as an interactive system.
- *Coaches holding their clients, rather than merely supporting them.* By offering support without challenge, the coach falls into the trap of mirroring the same unbounded process manifested by the client. By exercising ruthless compassion, the willingness to sit with the suffering of another for the sake of their development, rather than trying to rescue them, coaches can help high-flyers to establish the necessary distance between their own needs and the demands of work.
- *Coaching at a developmental stage beyond those being coached.*

Burnout is fundamentally an issue of individual identity, meaning and purpose. In enabling the high-flyer to develop a sense of internal identity, it is important to start with their current identity on what gives them purpose and work from there. This will lead to improved performance over time.

The primary focus should be on the ways in which identities are formed and expressed, the stories the client tells themselves about themselves, the way they embody their identity physically, the manner in which they interact with others and the sense of meaning and purpose that emerges from the interaction of these dimensions.

Heart and meaning

In our coaching we ask high-flyers to recount the story of their burnout and the turning points in their understanding of themselves. Using the work of Keleman, we notice how people somatically respond to the challenges that confront them. We explore how these habitual somatic patterns affect people's sense of who they are.

We also focus on the quality of interaction we are experiencing with the client, bringing this information into the coaching relationship. By understanding the quality of the relationship with their coach, clients will better understand the quality of interaction they have with themselves. Burnout is significant because it opens a window through which high-flyers may perceive.

Perhaps for the first time their own purpose, that which, in Angeles Arrien's words, "has heart and meaning" for them. Within the personal trauma of burnout, something happens to high-flyers that is in some sense connected with the ultimate meaning of their lives. Something new, unexpected and transforming shows itself. This is ultimately the reason why prevention, without fostering the learning that is about to happen, is a huge disservice.

Key findings

- Burnout affects 20 per cent of high-flyers in the first 10 years of their careers, stigmatising them and their organisations.
- Organisations create the conditions for burnout to occur; individuals determine whether they burn out or not as a result of how they handle the conditions.
- The financial impact of burnout on the organisation (per employee):
 - Partial withdrawal (the stage when high-flyers first show signs of burnout): £393k–£743k
 - Full withdrawal (a later stage of collapse in the job): £420.5k–£770.5k
 - Total loss (the final stage, in which the high-flyer exits the organisation): £695.5k–£1.045m
- Specific individual characteristics make some high-flyers more prone to burnout than others.
- Burnout has three variants: total devastation; a chronic self-destructive pattern; and joyless depletion i.e., exhibiting some of the symptoms of burnout but never tipping over completely.
- Burnout offers the potential of transformational change, leads to the development of wisdom, and moves high-flyers along the path of evolution towards full adult identity.
- Coaching high-flyers in burnout means focusing them on learning from the experience while ensuring they do not derail.

Case study: the masked stranger

Tim Casserley's experience of chronic self-destructive burnout started in his early thirties: "I was crashing but not burning. I crashed without realising it and consequently surrendered myself to repeating the same self-destructive pattern for the next decade. Finally I did burn, and then things changed forever."

The pattern began when he started working for a very ambitious man who set the performance standard "several metres skywards". Tim responded by working harder than he had ever done before, averaging 10- to 12-hour days with a long commute at either end. Things took a turn for the worse when the boss began bullying his staff and the atmosphere in the department "became poisonous".

At the same time, the organisation which is a major IT company implemented wave after wave of redundancies. Tim started to suffer from insomnia, lost weight and drifted away from his girlfriend: "I struggled on and in the process of struggling became a very different person i.e. cynical, disengaged, withdrawn, distant, lifeless."

Going into psychotherapy stopped him from burning out but failed to resolve deeper issues of identity. As a result, the next 10 years were interspersed with episodes of extreme symptoms in what otherwise seemed a normal life. This cycle was finally broken after a prolonged period of constant business travel. Work came to define his life entirely, leading to thoughts of suicide.

"I remember the epiphany of grasping that my burnout was the consequence of the story I had created for myself, a persona that I came to call 'the masked stranger': a tough, unstoppable figure on whom others depended but who never needed their help. Burnout confronted, in a way nothing else could have done, the relevance of this part of my personal myth. It made me realise it had come to define me instead of being something I could use when I chose. It was living me rather than me living it."

References

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Their book, Learning from Burnout: Developing Sustainable Leaders and Avoiding Career Derailment, is published by Elsevier in October. They are looking for up to 12 high-flyers for the first Edgeequilibrium programme, which starts in September. Email them to find out more if you have a coaching client who you think might be at risk of burnout.