

Transforming burnout from breakdown to breakthrough

We were inspired to write our book, 'Learning from burnout: developing sustainable leaders and avoiding career derailment' for reasons of personal biography as well as professional practice. The former concern one of us burning out in their early thirties while working as a human resources executive for an IT company; the latter relates to our consultancy work with organisations helping them manage and develop their leadership talent. We noticed an increasing trend among this population towards action addicted, adrenalized working lives and what appeared to be – based on the number who were burning out – unsustainable approaches to the pursuit of career. At the same time we recognised that organisations were becoming increasingly more demanding and absorptive, and as a consequence, work and workplaces increasingly more all consuming. Like the high speed internet connections that serve our offices and our homes, work seemed to be always on. It had become a seven day a week preoccupation which was always there, brought into every facet of human life through the wonders of the Blackberry and the mobile phone. Work, it seemed, never slept, and those enslaved to it were sleeping a great deal less than they used to.

Burnout was the inevitable consequence of this heady combination of addictive behaviour and organisational greediness, or so it seemed to us. But when we referred to the literature on burnout we discovered that the leading authorities in the field believed burnout was largely caused by organisations, rather than both the organisation and those who work for them. We thought this rather odd. It did not resonate with our own experience of burnout, or with what we were seeing among the high achievers with whom we were working.

In addition, the self help industry's claims that burnout can occur to anyone has devalued its meaning as a serious psychological condition. Apparently you are equally vulnerable to burnout whether you're an over-stressed baby boomer, in a bad marriage, having a mid life crisis or a female indoor sex worker¹. As a result, the term has – to all intents and purposes – become meaningless.

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

It was this sense of something not being quite right about what were being told, that led us on a 5 year research journey in which we recorded, transcribed and analysed depth interviews with a 100 high flyers from a global energy company, one of the world's largest professional services firms, a multi-national security solutions provider, and the UK police force – 29 different nationalities, ranging from mid 20s to early 40s. We subsequently re-interviewed half of them a year later to track the incidence of burnout, and reality tested our findings with the organisations for whom they worked.

Findings

Our research found that 20% of the high potential talent pool experienced burnout during the first ten years of career.² This represents a significant financial and reputational risk to organisations, and threatens management continuity. We calculated the financial exposure for organisations across a 3 phased progression of burnout, using the example of a 3 to 4 year qualified professional services high achiever as the basis of our calculation (see Key Findings). 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 achievers believe their organisations see burnout as a sign, at best, of weakness or failure and, at worst, psychological disorder. Organisations run the risk of being perceived as 21st century sweat shops, and suffering severe damage to the brand and their ability to attract and retain the brightest and best.

Our findings implicate both organisational leadership and high flyers in causing burnout. Organisations create the conditions for burnout to occur. The constant scramble after growth and shareholder return, an obsession with performance metrics and continual raising of the performance threshold inevitably leads to a culture of burnout. This culture is being magnified by the relentless pace and pressure of the financial crisis, as firms ask ever more of their high achievers against a background of redundancy and frozen headcount.

Ultimately, however, it is the individual high achiever who – through the choices they make and how they handle the challenges in the work environment – determine whether they burnout or not. We found that high achievers that 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’³ in which the high flyer could not distinguish between their work and personal needs. Identity was something that was painted onto 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 (see Key Findings and Case Study).

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 high flyers’ 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.

Transforming burnout

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 permit them to develop sustainable versions of themselves.

Our research showed that one of the key determinants of learning from burnout was the degree to which high flyers were 'held' by someone focused on them learning from the experience – someone who sustained and attended to them whilst also challenging and holding them to account. This relationship helped high flyers absorb the suffering, listen to the emerging sense they were making of burnout, and accept responsibility for their part in bringing it about – an essential first step on the learning journey. This relationship was usually fulfilled by those with no connection with the organisation – loved ones or psychotherapists – and rarely by those inside the organisation. High achievers' 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 findings point to burnout being fundamentally an issue of individual identity, meaning and purpose. In coaching high achievers to develop a sense of internal identity we start with their current identity – what gives them purpose – and work out from there. Our primary focus is on the ways in which identities are formed and expressed – particularly the stories clients tell themselves about themselves, and the sense of meaning and purpose that emerges as a result.

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 Arien's words, 'Has heart and meaning' for them.⁴ Within the personal trauma of burnout, something happens to high achievers 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.

Case study: a tale of crashing but not burning

Tim's experience of chronic self destructive burnout started when he was in his early 30's. He describes his condition as '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 skyward. Tim responded by working harder than he had ever done before, averaging ten to twelve hour days with a long commute 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 – 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 – 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 ten years were interspersed by episodes of extreme symptoms in what otherwise seemed a normal life. This cycle was finally broken after a prolonged period of constant business travelling during which time 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 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 I living it.'

Selected Key Findings

Burnout affects 20% of high achievers in the first ten years of their careers; it stigmatises high flyers 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) £393 – 743K
- Full Withdrawal (a later stage of collapse in the job) £420.5 – 770.5K
- Total Loss (the final stage in which the high flyer exits the organisation) £695.5 – 1.045M

There are specific individual characteristics that make some high flyers more prone to burnout and others less.

Burnout has 3 variants:

- Total devastation
- A chronic self destructive pattern (see case study)
- Joyless depletion – exhibiting some of the symptoms of burnout, but never tipping over completely.

Burnout offers **the potential** of transformational change, and may lead to the development of wisdom, moving high achievers along the path of evolution towards full adult identity.

Coaching high flyers in burnout means focusing on them learning from the experience *while* ensuring they do not derail.

'Learning from Burnout: Developing sustainable leaders and avoiding career derailment', Butterworth Heinemann, Oxford 232 pages (available from Amazon).

About the author

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¹ Vanwesenbeeck, I. (2005). Burnout among female indoor sex workers.(psychology of prostitutes). Archives of sexual behaviour. December

² This figure applies to those who are manifesting all of the symptoms of full blown burnout. It does not take into account those who may be exhibiting some of the symptoms of burnout – a condition that we call 'joyless depletion'.

³ Clarkson, P. (1989). Gestalt counselling in action. Sage

⁴ Arrien, A. (2005). The second half of life: opening the eight gates of wisdom. Sounds true Inc.