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Why Strong Employees Struggle With Burnout— And What To Do About It

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In a recent meeting, a team member shared this: She was on a Friday afternoon flight, heading to meet a client, when she sat next to a man clearly in panic mode—furiously thumbing through his device, copying, pasting, and scrolling through what looked like an endless wall of text. Three full scrolls later, her curiosity got the best of her. Was he writing a last-minute proposal? A full-blown presentation? She leaned over and caught the subject line: **“Weekly update.”** All that screen time, plane Wi-Fi, battery drain and cortisol—for a status report.

What if it didn’t have to be that hard? What if it were simpler?

Workplace burnout has become a common affliction. While we often associate it with feelings of exhaustion and overwhelm, it’s important to understand that burnout is more than just fatigue; it’s a sign of having given everything you have and then some. Those who experience burnout are often the most dedicated and hard-working individuals—the ones who care deeply about their jobs and their teams.

Who Experiences Burnout?

The World Health Organization estimates that depression and anxiety lead to the loss of approximately [12 billion workdays each year](#), resulting in a global productivity loss of around US\$1 trillion annually. Burnout clearly doesn’t discriminate—but some groups are particularly vulnerable.

It tends to be especially common among high-achievers, including managers, caregivers, and professionals in service-oriented fields like healthcare and education.

Research shows that [76% of healthcare workers](#) report experiencing symptoms of burnout, often caused by long hours, emotional stress, and high-stakes responsibilities. But it's not just confined to the care sector. In 2024, global employee engagement dropped to 21%, reaching its lowest level in years. While engagement among individual team members remained steady at 18%, [manager engagement declined from 30% to 27%](#). That team member who seems to have it all together? They might be silently falling apart.

People who are perfectionists or set exceptionally high standards for themselves are also at increased risk. The “I’ll do it myself” mindset—driven by a fear of burdening others or a belief that no one else can meet their expectations—often leads to an unsustainable workload. These individuals typically struggle to delegate or seek support, which can result in a profound sense of isolation.

And the problem is only growing. A 2024 report from SHRM found that 35% of employees say their job [negatively impacts their mental health](#), with burnout cited as a primary factor. High-pressure environments, lack of support, and poor leadership are among the top contributors. In fact, 43% of employees attribute burnout to an [unmanageable workload](#), while 37% point to insufficient resources, and nearly 35% cite toxic workplace culture as a root cause.

Even more striking, a Gallup study indicates that burned-out employees are [2.6 times more likely](#) to actively seek a different job, and 63% are more likely to take a sick day—highlighting not just a personal cost, but an organizational one as well. This underscores the urgent need for systemic changes, not just self-care solutions.

Why Burnout Happens

Burnout often begins with the pressures of modern work life: excessive workloads, lack of control, insufficient rewards, and a disconnect from the values of one’s work. When people care deeply but feel unsupported, they can reach a breaking point where they no longer have anything left to give.

It’s crucial to recognize that burnout does not indicate a lack of dedication. Instead, it reflects the reality that good employees can become overwhelmed when they feel they are carrying the weight of the world alone.

Dr. Christian Marcolli is a global expert on sustainable high performance who coaches executives, business leaders, and elite athletes (including Roger Federer) to achieve peak performance and

outstanding results. "When working with my clients, I regularly address their pain points for sustainable high performance. Pain points are specific factors that increase pressure on individuals and have a significant negative impact, potentially causing them to no longer perform to their best ability. In some cases, one pain point can be so strong that it can cause them to reach a melting point, maybe even stalling their career and adversely affecting their health. Exceptional performers have learned to identify and manage their pain points not only in themselves, but in their teams."

Supporting Your Teammates

Addressing burnout can be a team sport. One of the most effective ways to fight it? Foster a supportive workplace culture. If you see a colleague struggling, don't hesitate to reach out. As the saying goes, "If you see something, say something." Open conversations make a significant difference, and people struggling feel less alone.

After years of helping high achievers stand up to burnout and making sure it never gets to a breaking point, Dr. Marcolli adds this:

"It will be much easier to deliver high performance sustainably if you are inspired and backed up by a diverse range of people who believe in you, who accept your imperfections, who are fundamentally on your side, who want you to succeed and who are aware of your energy levels. It's far healthier and less exhausting to have such people in your camp. The good news is that there are practical steps you can take to manage your energy for sustainable high performance, to make sure you are not on your own by building high-functioning teams at work and investing in strong relationships at home."

Leading by Example: Sustainable Performance Starts At The Top

Leadership sets the pace. If your higher-ups are always on and always pushing, your team will feel compelled to do the same—often at the cost of their well-being and performance. Great leaders don't just demand results—they create the conditions that make excellence sustainable.

If you want to lead a high performing team without high-levels of disengagement, here are four behaviors to *encourage*, model and enforce with repetition.

1. Setting Clear Boundaries

Some team members may thrive under pressure, but that doesn't mean everyone around should absorb it without limits. Teach your team to define what they can and cannot take on. Encourage them to say "yes, if..."—a conditional agreement that creates clarity and accountability. When leaders model this by setting their own limits, they give others permission to do the same. That clarity reduces urgency and increases focus.

2. Normalize Micro-Recovery

People don't just need longer vacations—they need more sustainable days. A five-minute break every hour. A walk after a meeting. A breath between calls. These micro-recoveries are simple, powerful ways to protect mental and physical health. If you never pause, your team won't feel they can either. Build breaks into your calendar—and talk about why you're doing it.

3. Demonstrate Executive Calm

You don't have to lead with intensity to be effective. In fact, calm is often more powerful. When you center yourself in the midst of chaos—through deep breathing, a brief pause, or quiet reflection—you show your team that composure is a strength, not a weakness. Encourage them to find their own reset practices. The tone of your leadership becomes the temperature of the room.

4. Cultivate a Culture of Support

Top performers often feel like they have to carry the load alone. Make it clear that strength includes knowing when to reach out. Talk openly about your own support system—whether it's a coach, a peer, or a trusted advisor—and encourage your team to build theirs. When they know they're not alone, they operate with more confidence and less fear.

Workplace burnout is a challenge that many face, particularly those who are passionate about their jobs. Recognizing the signs, supporting one another, and implementing practical strategies can help create a healthier work environment for everyone. Remember, caring too much can lead to burnout, but together, we can help each other find balance and renewal.