When Executives Burn Out

The military knows about burnout—but calls it battle fatigue. To offset its devastating effects, the military routinely schedules its personnel for recreation and relaxation retreats, sends soldiers into combat in groups so they can support and help each other, and limits the number of flights that pilots fly. Managers are not soldiers but, according to this author and others who have researched the subject, they are prone to a similar exhaustion and sense of futility. Like other professionals, mental health workers, and policemen who work under severe pressure in people-oriented jobs for long periods of time—with little support and limited gains—managers are among the prime victims of burnout. The author describes what burnout is, discusses why he thinks that modern organizations are good breeding grounds for situations that lead to it, and offers some helpful ways top managers can combat it.

"I just can't seem to get going," the vice president said. He grimaced as he leaned back in his chair. "I can't get interested in what I'm supposed to do. I know I should get rolling. I know there's a tremendous amount of work to be done. That's why they brought me in and put me in this job, but I just can't seem to get going."

Eighteen months before making these comments, the vice president had transferred to company headquarters from a subsidiary. His new job was to revamp the company's control systems, which, because of a reorganization, were in disarray. When the vice president reported to headquarters, however, top management immediately recruited him to serve as a key staff figure in its own reshuffling. Because he was not in competition with line executives, he was the only staff person who
interviewed and consulted with both the line executives and the chief executive officer. And because the top managers regarded him as trustworthy, they gave his recommendations serious attention.

But his task had been arduous. Not only did the long hours and the unremitting pressure of walking a tightrope among conflicting interests exhaust him; they also made it impossible for him to get at the control problems that needed attention. Furthermore, because his family could not move until his youngest child finished high school, he commuted on weekends to his family's home 800 miles away. As he tried to perform the job that had been thrust on him and to support the CEO, who was counting heavily on his competence, he felt lonely, harassed, and burdened. Now that his staff responsibilities were coming to an end, he was in no psychological shape to take on his formal duties. In short, he had "burned out."

Like generalized stress, burnout cuts across executive and managerial levels. While the phenomenon manifests itself in varying ways and to different degrees in different people, it appears nonetheless to have identifiable characteristics. For instance, in the next example, the individual is different but many of the features of the problem are the same.

A vice president of a large corporation who hadn't received an expected promotion left his company to become the CEO of a smaller, family-owned business, which was floundering and needed his skills. Although he had jumped at the opportunity to rescue the small company, once there he discovered an unimaginable morass of difficulties, among them continual conflicts within the family. He felt he could not leave, but neither could he succeed. Trapped in a kind of psychological quicksand, he worked days, nights, and weekends for months in an attempt to pull himself free. His wife protested, to no avail. Finally, he was hospitalized for exhaustion.

As in the previous example, the competence of the individual is not in question: today he is the chief executive of a major corporation.

Quite a different set of problems confronted another executive. This is how he tells his story:

"In March of 1963, I moved to a small town in Iowa with my wife and son of four weeks. I was an up-and-coming engineer with the electric company—magic and respected words in those days.

"Ten years later, things had changed. When we went to social gatherings and talked to people, I ended up having to defend the electric company. At the time, we were tying into a consortium that was building a nuclear generating plant. The amount of negative criticism was immense, and it never really let up. Refusing to realize how important that generating plant was to a reliable flow of electricity, people continued to find fault.

"Now, nearly ten years later, we are under even greater attack. In my present role, I'm the guy who catches it all. I can't seem to get people to stand still and listen, and I can't continue to take all the hostility that goes with it—the crank calls, being woken up late at night and called names. I don't know how much longer I can last in this job."

Before looking in depth at what the phenomenon of burnout is, let's look at the experience of one more executive who is well on his way to burning out:

"I have been with this company for nearly 15 years and have changed jobs every 2 to 3 years. Most of our managers are company men, like me. We have always been a high-technology company, but we have been doing less well in marketing than some of our competitors have. Over the past 10 years, we have been going through a continuous reorganization process. The organization charts keep changing, but the underlying philosophy, management techniques, and administrative trappings don't. The consequence is continuous frustration, disruption, resentment, and the undermining of 'change.' You don't take a company that has been operating with a certain perspective and turn it around overnight.

"With these changes, we are also being told what we must do and when. Before, we were much more flexible and free to follow our noses. These shifts create enormous pressures on an organization that is used to different ways of operating.

"On top of that, a continual corporate pruning goes on. I am a survivor, so I should feel good about it and believe what top management tells me, namely, that the unfit go and the worthy remain. But the old virtues—talent, initiative, and risk taking—are not being rewarded. Instead, acquiescence to corporate values and social skills that obliterate differences among individuals are the virtues that get attention. Also, the reward process is more political than meritocratic.

"I don't know if we're going to make it. And there are a lot of others around here who have the same feeling. We're all demoralized."

Burnout—A Slow Fizzle

What was happening to these executives? In exploring that question, let's first look at what characterized the situations. In one or more cases, the situations
were repetitive or prolonged;
placed enormous burdens on the managers;
promised great success but made attaining it nearly impossible;
exposed the managers to risk of attack for doing their jobs, without providing a way for them to fight back;
aroused deep emotions—sorrow, fear, despair, compassion, helplessness, pity, and rage; to survive, the managers would try to contain their feelings and hide their anguish;
overwhelmed the managers with complex detail, conflicting forces, and problems against which they hurled themselves with increasing intensity but without impact;
exploited the managers but provided them little to show for having been victimized;
aroused an inescapable sense of inadequacy and often of guilt;
left the managers feeling that no one knew, let alone gave a damn about, what price they were paying, what contribution or sacrifice they were making, or what punishment they were absorbing;
caused the managers to raise the question What for?—as if they'd lost sight of the purpose of living.

Those who study cases like these agree that a special phenomenon occurs after people expend a great deal of effort, intense to the point of exhaustion, without visible results. People in these situations feel angry, helpless, trapped, and depleted: they are burned out. This experience is more intense than what is ordinarily referred to as stress. The major defining characteristic of burnout is that people can't or won't do again what they have been doing.

Herbert J. Freudenberger, a New York psychologist, evolved this characterization of burnout when he observed a special sort of fatigue among mental health workers. Freudenberger observed that burnout is associated with physiological signs such as frequent headaches and the inability to shake colds, as well as with psychological symptoms such as quickness to anger and a suspicious attitude about others.

Christina Maslach, a pioneer researcher on the subject at the University of California at Berkeley, says that burnout "refers to a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that frequently occurs among people who do 'people work'—who spend considerable time in close encounters." People suffering from burnout generally have these identifiable characteristics: (1) chronic fatigue; (2) anger at those making demands; (3) self-criticism for putting up with the demands; (4) cynicism, negativity, and irritability; (5) a sense of being besieged; and (6) hair-trigger display of emotions.

Although it is not evident from the above examples, a wide range of behaviors—some of them destructive—frequently accompany these feelings. Burned-out managers may inappropriately vent anger at subordinates and family, or withdraw even from those whose support they need the most. They may wall off home and work from each other completely. They may try to escape the source of pressure through illness, absenteeism, or drugs or alcohol, or by seeking temporary psychological refuge in meditation, biofeedback, or other forms of self-hypnosis. They may display increasingly rigid attitudes or appear cold and detached.

Most people, even effective managers, probably experience a near burnout at some time in their careers. A 20-year study of a group of middle managers disclosed that many of them, now in their forties and with few prospects of further promotions, were tolerating unhappy marriages, narrowing their focus to their own jobs, and showing less consideration toward other people. Despite outward sociability, they were indifferent to friendships and often hostile. They had become rigid, had short fuses, and were distant from their children.

Personality tests disclosed that these managers had a greater need to do a job well for its own sake than did most of their peers and that they initially had a greater need for advancement as well (although it declined over time). They showed more motivation to dominate and lead, and less to defer to authority than other managers. While they still could do a good day's work, they could no longer invest themselves in others and in the company.

When people who feel an intense need to achieve don't reach their goals, they can become hostile to themselves and to others. They also tend to channel that hostility into more defined work tasks than before, limiting their efforts. If at times like these they do not increase their involvement in family matters, they are likely to approach burnout.

The Breeding Ground

Researchers have observed this type of exhaustion among many kinds of professionals. As the examples here indicate, it is not unusual among executives and managers, and it is more likely to occur under competitive
conditions than in a stable market. Managerial jobs involve a lot of contact with other people. Often this contact is unpleasant but has to be tolerated because of the inherent demands of the job.

One problem with managing people is that such a focus creates unending stress for the manager. The manager must cope with the least capable of the employees, with the depressed, the suspicious, the rivalrous, the self-centered, and the generally unhappy. The manager must balance these conflicting personalities and create from them a motivated work group. He or she must define group purpose and organize people around it, as well as resolve conflicts, establish priorities, make decisions about other people, accept and deflect their hostility, and deal with the frustration that arises out of that continuing interaction. Managing people is the most difficult administrative task, and it has built-in frustration. That frustration can—and does—cause many managers to burn out.

Many contemporary managerial situations also provide the perfect breeding ground for cases of burnout. Today's managers face increasing time pressures with little respite. Even though benefits such as flexible working hours and longer vacations offer some relief, for the most part the modern executive's workday is long and hard. Also, as more women join the workforce, the support most men used to receive at home is lessening, and women who work get as little support as, if not less support than, the men. To many managers, the time they spend with their families is precious. It is understandable if managers feel guilty about sacrificing this part of their life to the demands of work and if they also feel frustration at being unable to do anything about it.

Adding to the stress at work is the complexity of modern organizations. The bigger and more intricate organizations become, the longer it takes to get things done. Managers trying to get ahead may well feel enormous frustration as each person or office a project passes through adds more delays and more problems to unravel before a task is finished.

Along with the increasing complexity of organizations goes an increase in the number of people that a manager has to deal with. Participative management, quality-of-work-life efforts, and matrix structures all result in a proliferation in the number of people that a manager must confront face-to-face. Building a plant, developing natural resources, or designing new products can often mean that a manager has to go through lengthy, and sometimes angry and vitriolic, interaction with community groups. Executives involved in tasks that entail controversial issues may find themselves vilified.

As companies grow, merge with other companies, or go through reorganizations, some managers feel as though they are adrift. Sacrifices they have made on behalf of the organization may well turn out to have little enduring meaning. As an organization's values change, a manager's commitment and sense of support may also shift. Another aspect of change that can add to a feeling of burnout is the threat of obsolescence. When a new position or assignment requires that managers who are already feeling taxed develop new skills, they may feel overwhelmed.

These days, change can also mean that managers have to trim jobs and demote subordinates—or maybe even discharge them. Managers whose job it is to close a plant or to go through painful labor negotiations may feel enraged at having to pay for the sins of their predecessors. Also, a fragmented marketplace can mean intense pressures on managers to come up with new products, innovative services, and novel marketing and financing schemes.

Finally, employees are making increasing demands for their rights. Managers may feel that they cannot satisfy those demands but have to respond to them nevertheless.

**Prevention Is the Best Cure**

Top management can take steps to keep managers out of situations in which they are likely to burn out. Of course, something as subtle as psychological exhaustion cannot be legislated against completely, but acting on the following insights can help mitigate its occurrence:

First, as with all such phenomena, recognize that burnout can, does, and will happen. The people in charge of orientation programs, management training courses, and discussions of managerial practice ought to acknowledge to employees that burnout can occur and that people's vulnerability to it is something the organization recognizes and cares about. Personnel managers should be candid with new employees about the psychological aspects of the work they are getting into, especially when that work involves intense effort of the kind I've described. The more people know, the less guilt they are likely to feel about their own perceived inadequacies when the pressures begin to mount.
Keep track of how long your subordinates are in certain jobs and rotate them out of potentially exhausting positions. Changes of pace, changes of demands, and shifts into situations that may not be so depleting enable people to replenish their energies and get new and more accurate perspectives on themselves and their roles. Change also enables people to look forward to a time when they can get out of a boring job. Long recognizing this need, the military limits the number of combat missions that air force personnel fly and the duration of tours that ground personnel must serve.

Time constraints on a job are crucial to preventing burnout. Don’t allow your people to work 18 hours a day, even on critical problems. Especially don’t let the same people be the rescuers of troubled situations over and over again. Understandably, managers tend to rely on their best people; but the best people are more vulnerable to becoming burned-out people. The overconscientious, in particular, need to take time off from the demands of their role and to spend that time in refreshing recreation. The military has learned this lesson, but management has not. One way to make sure people break from work is to take the whole group on a nominal business trip to a recreational site.

Some companies have set up regular formal retreats where people who work together under pressure can talk about what they are doing and how they are doing it, make long-range plans, relax and enjoy themselves, and, most important, get away from what they have to cope with every day. When managers talk together in a setting like this, they are able to make realistic assessments of the problems they are up against and their own responsibilities and limitations.

I think, for example, of the extremely conscientious engineers in many of the small electronics companies on Route 128 in the Boston area, and of those in the research triangle in North Carolina or in the Palo Alto, California, area, who have reported feeling that they simply are not developing new products fast enough. They are convinced that they aren’t living up to the extremely high standards that they set for themselves. Such people need to talk together, often with a group therapist or someone else who can help them let go of some of the irrational demands they frequently make on themselves as groups and as individuals.

Make sure your organization has a systematic way of letting people know that their contributions are important. People need information that supports their positive self-image, eases their conscience, and refuels them psychologically. Many compensation and performance appraisal programs actually contribute to people’s sense that their efforts will be unrecognized no matter how well they do. Organizational structures and processes that inhibit timely attacks on problems and delay competitive actions can produce much of the stress that people feel at work. If top executives fail to see that organizational factors can cause burnout, their lack of understanding may perpetuate the problem.

It is also important that top-level managers review with people their capacities, skills, and opportunities so that, armed with facts about themselves and the organization, they can make choices rather than feel trapped.

During World War II, the army discovered that it was better to send soldiers overseas in groups rather than as single replacements. It may be equally effective for managers to send groups of people from one organizational task to another rather than assemble teams of individually assigned people. When Clairol opened a new plant in California, it sent out a group of Connecticut-based managers and their spouses, who were briefed on the new assignment, the new community, and the potential stresses they might encounter. The managers discussed how they might help themselves and one another, as well as what support they needed from the organization. People who have worked together have already established mutual support systems, ways to share knowledge informally, and friendly alliances. These can prevent or ameliorate the burnout that may occur in new, difficult, or threatening tasks.

Managers should provide avenues through which people can express not only their anger but also their disappointment, helplessness, hopelessness, defeat, and depression. Some employees, such as salespeople, meet defeat every day. Others meet defeat in a crisis—when a major contract is lost, when a product expected to succeed fails, when the competition outflanks them. When people in defeat deny their angry feelings, that denial of underlying, seething anger contributes to the sense of burnout.

If top executives fail to see these problems as serious, they may worsen the situation. If a company offers only palliatives like meditation and relaxation methods—temporarily helpful though they may be—victims of burnout may become further enraged. The sufferers know that their problem has to do with the nature of the job and not their capacity to handle it.
Those managers who are exposed to attack need to talk about the hostilities they anticipate and how to cope with them. Just as sailors at sea need to anticipate and cope with storms, so executives need to learn how to cope with the public's aggression. Under attack themselves, they need to develop consensus, foster cohesion, and build trust rather than undermine themselves through counterattacks.

Another way executives can help is by defending the organization publicly against outside attacks. For example, a prominent chief executive once raised the morale of all his employees when he filed suit against a broadcast medium for making false allegations about his company's products. Another publicly took on a newspaper that had implied his organization was not trustworthy. A visible, vigorous, and powerful leader does much to counteract people's sense of helplessness.

As Freudenberger commented after his early observations, however, introspection is not what the burned-out person requires; rather, he or she needs intense physical activity, not further mental strain and fatigue. Retreats, seminars, and workshops therefore should be oriented toward the physical rather than the emotional. Physical exercise is helpful because it provides a healthy outlet for angry feelings and pent-up energy.

Managers who are burning out need support from others who can offer psychological sustenance. Ideally, those others should be their supervisors—people who value them as individuals and insist that they withdraw, get appropriate help, and place themselves first. In times of unmitigated strain, it is particularly important for managers to keep up personal interaction with their subordinates. To borrow from the military again, generals valued by their troops, such as George Patton and James Gavin in World War II, have made it a practice to be involved with their frontline soldiers.

Freudenberger points out that the burnout phenomenon often occurs when a leader or the leader's charisma is lost. He notes that people who join an organization still led by the founder or founding group frequently expect that person or group to be superhuman. After all, the entrepreneurs had the foresight, vision, drive, and imagination to build the organization. "As they begin to disappoint us, we bad-rap them, and the result, unless it is stopped, is psychic damage to the whole clinic," he comments. The issue is the same for a clinic, a hospital, a police department, or a business.

Executives who are idealized should take time to remove their halos in public. They can do that by explaining their own struggles, disappointments, and defeats to their subordinates so that the latter can view them more accurately. They also need to help people verbalize their disappointment with the "fallen" executive hero.

When the leader leaves, through either death or transfer, when a paternalistic and successful entrepreneur sells out, or when an imaginative inventor retires, it is important for the group that remains to have the opportunity to go through a process of discussing its loss and mourning it. The group needs to conduct its own psychological wake and consider for itself how it is going to deal with the loss.

Frequently, the group will discover that, although the loss of the leader is indeed significant, it can carry on effectively and contribute to the organization's success. Failing to realize its own strengths, a group can, like the Green Bay Packers after the loss of coach Vince Lombardi, feel permanently handicapped. To my knowledge, few organizations deal effectively with the loss of a leader. Most respond with a depression or slump from which it takes years to recover. Even more crippling is the way people in the organization keep yearning and searching for a new charismatic leader to rescue them. As part of a national organization, Americans have been doing this searching ever since the death of John Kennedy.

A New Age of Self-Reliance

Fifteen years ago, executive burnout was a new phenomenon. Not so anymore. Today extreme feelings of stress are pervasive and growing worse. Reengineering, downsizing, and increased competition have multiplied pressures in the workplace. At the same time, dual-earner couples suffer time and energy famines at home. In the 1990s, it is hard to find peace anywhere.

When I wrote "When Executives Burn Out" in 1981, a chief underlying assumption was that senior management had a role to play in preventing executive burnout. My advice in the article reflected that proposition, and I suggested actions that leaders could take to prevent stress, such as supplying recreation and offering training.

This basic assumption now feels outdated. Why? Because the forces changing
the world in which we work and live have also changed the relationship between the employer and the employee. As we read in the paper every day, most companies no longer expect to have long-term relationships with their employees. In turn, workers—even executives—make sure that they are not too dependent on any one job or employer. They no longer look to the employer to support them. They now look to themselves.

A psychological and practical result of these changes is that we are living in a new age of self-reliance. On a personal level, we must get feedback, advice, and moral support from family and friends. On a professional level, we each need to develop fallback positions. By fallback, I mean an alternative course of action if the current job fails us. In today's world, we need to worry less about the next rung up the ladder and more about the variety of possibilities available to us should the ladder disappear and we find ourselves thrown back on our own resources.

In developing our careers, most of us have thought in terms of acquiring specific competencies (such as marketing techniques, financial analysis skills, or engineering specialization). Of course, skills are necessary, but they will make little difference to us as the tools of our trade if they become outdated. A specific skill will never be an enduring source of self-reliance, because it risks losing its value in the marketplace.

To develop attractive and realistic career alternatives, we need to think more in terms of our characteristic behaviors. We must understand the behaviors that we have developed since childhood, patterns that express who we are instead of what we do. Whether we are naturally levelheaded, spontaneously enthusiastic, artlessly charming, or born to persevere, we take our behaviors with us into everything we do. If what you do is at the core of who you are, your stress level will go down.

In developing your fallback positions, think about what you do spontaneously. The great entertainer Myron Cohen became a comedian because he was frustrated working in the garment business but was good at telling jokes to his friends. A few years ago, we all read about a successful financier who honored his inborn musical talents by becoming a respected conductor. We hear every day about successful business-people who “chuck it all” to satisfy their deeper need to be an artist, teacher, minister, or builder of affordable housing. These people will never want to retire, because they are acting on who they truly are.

Understanding and tapping into your most characteristic behaviors will give you more security and less stress than anything else you can do. To believe otherwise is to ignore reality.

Notes