



BEATING BURNOUT

HOW TO WIN THE BATTLE AGAINST
OVERWHELM AND EXHAUSTION

BILL FOURNET

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MY WAKE-UP CALL:

COMING FACE-TO-FACE WITH

BURNOUT

What am I doing?

This was the thought that struck me at the moment my personal story with burnout had reached its peak. As a young executive, I had proven my ability to lead through challenging times. My “reward” came in more responsibilities, more hours at the office, and longer days and nights.

At this time in my career, I mistakenly believed that this was the only way to “get ahead.” Driven by a strong work ethic, I felt deeply obligated to my organization and team to take on whatever needed to be done. The work was grueling. After two years of 80-hour workweeks, leading a team of 150 people, I was physically and emotionally exhausted.

Telecommuting was not an option, which meant I would rarely see my wife and sons, one of whom was just an infant at the time. Every day, I was gone before sunrise and didn’t return home until well after dark. I could feel a cloud hanging over me.

I began to question my decisions and found myself in a constant state of reaction. I wasn’t the type of leader I knew I should be at work.

But worse than that was the underlying sense of guilt and frustration I felt for having my priorities out of whack. Family should have come first, no matter what. Yet when I did see my wife and children, I had little left to give.

I was burned out, and I knew something had to change.

In the 20-plus years since then, I have made it my mission to help others avoid burnout, so they don’t have to “flame out,” as I call it.

My own “recovery” involved a career pivot that eventually led to me founding The Persimmon Group. My philosophy has been that we could create a management consulting firm that values work-life choices for its employees. Back then, we were one of the few to offer this type of environment and flexibility in that space. But I believed it then and have seen the results to prove it now: Successful teams and organizations are those who embrace a culture that helps their employees avoid burnout.



IT'S MY INTENT THROUGH THIS EBOOK TO SHARE PRACTICAL TIPS AND TECHNIQUES THAT HELP YOU FIND RELIEF AND AVOID **BURNOUT.**

You don't have to leave your company or start a new business to escape the overwhelm. Whether you're reading this for yourself or as a leader trying to create better balance on a team, start small, and see what happens next.

Let's get started!

Bill

BURNOUT

IS REAL AND ON THE RISE

While burnout was once primarily associated with high-achievers, it is now more widespread, regardless of role or career aspirations. It also comes as no surprise that it is on the rise. According to an Indeed employee burnout report, more than half of the respondents experienced burnout in 2021. That number was up a staggering 21% from the previous study in 2020.

This statistic aligns with what I see in my day-to-day coaching with clients here in the United States and worldwide.

From my experiences, I learned that although cultural nuances may address the causes and impacts of feeling overwhelmed, the techniques you'll find in this eBook can help.

Factors contributing to burnout are apparent.

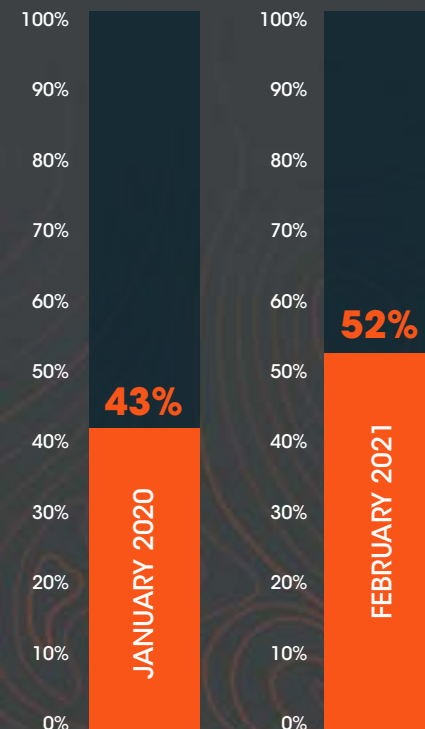
We see drastic changes to the workplace: Unclear expectations; an increased workload, fueled in no small part by the staffing shortage and Great Resignation; real and perceived lack of support by management; a lost sense of control; recurrent "values disconnect;" and decision fatigue.

While every generation/era has experienced its challenges, the accelerated rate of change we are currently facing, where the only certainty is uncertainty, has compounded the stress and the daunting feeling of overwhelm.

For better or worse, we are now an interconnected global society. Our collective well-being is in danger, and we must take burnout seriously.



EMPLOYEES EXPERIENCING BURNOUT





THE GREAT REALIZATION

I recently visited a client site in a large metro area where I observed the effects of burnout running through the team. Throughout the time we worked together, they began to share their frustrations. In particular, an overwhelming number of employees did not want to return to working full-time in the office. They shared that their productivity was higher when working in a remote or hybrid “flex” schedule. Yet, when I asked what they felt the reason was behind the change in productivity and happiness, they struggled to identify a specific cause.

This particular client is in a city notorious for traffic issues, so I asked a follow-up question: “How long is your daily commute?” Their average commute was 1 to 1.5 hours each way to the office, every day! Lunch breaks were nothing more than a time-suck often spent standing in long lines, only to be left with 10 minutes to eat.

Think about that scenario, or maybe you’re living it: That’s three to four hours a day lost to driving or standing.

They were shocked at the realization. Before the pandemic, it had become such a routine that they didn’t consider the time they had gained back by working remotely.

When asked how they filled their extra time while working from home, answers varied, from time spent with family to hobbies to simply enjoying life.

I find so many of us can relate to this realization.

It’s as if the pandemic gave each of us a mirror and forced us to look at how we previously spent our time. Many did not like what they saw reflected in their mirror.

THE SHIFTS WE ARE EXPERIENCING IN THE
WORKFORCE NOW RESULT FROM THIS AWARENESS.

STRESS AND BURNOUT

Since the beginning of time, stress has been around, and it's not going anywhere. And that's actually a good thing. Stress is essential to survival.

But there's a fundamental difference between stress and burnout.

Dr. Bryan E. Robinson defines it best in Psychology Today. "Under stress, you still struggle to cope with pressures. But once burnout takes hold, you're out of gas, and you've given up all hope of surmounting your obstacles. When you're suffering from burnout, it's more than just fatigue. You have a deep sense of disillusionment and hopelessness that your efforts have been in vain. Life loses meaning, and small tasks feel like a hike up Mount Everest."

When I look back at my own experience, I checked all the boxes for burnout. It was well beyond typical work-related stress; I felt like a shell of myself.

Take a moment now and consider whether you recognize these common signs of burnout within yourself:

- *Chronic fatigue*
- *Lack of concentration*
- *Depression*
- *Irritability*
- *Trouble sleeping*
- *Physical ailments including headaches and stomach pains*

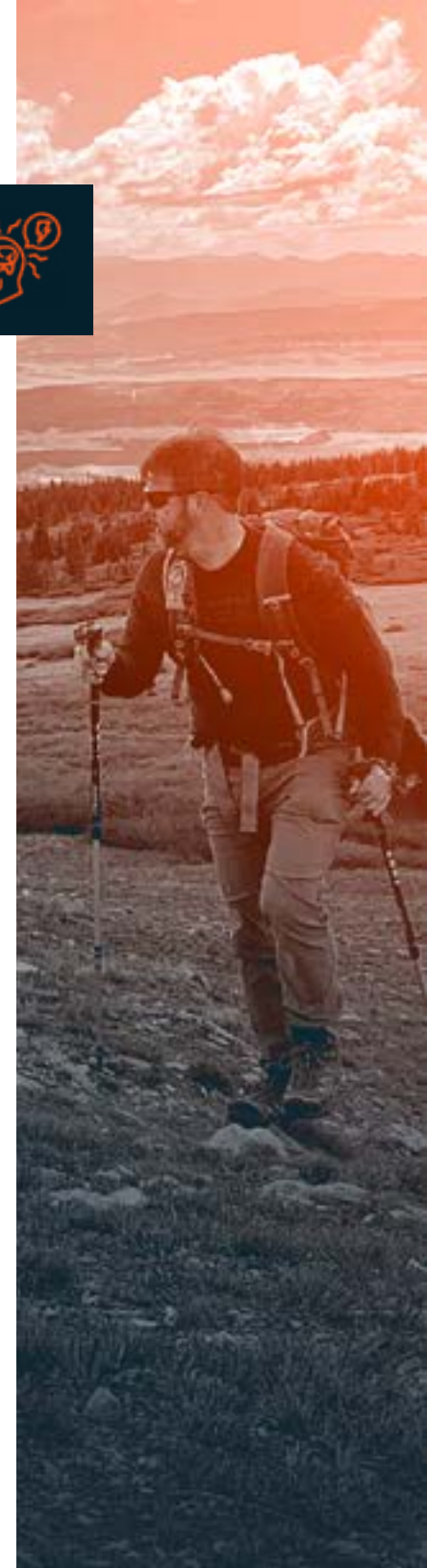
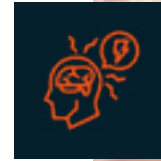
I liken the difference between stress and burnout to a physical exercise scenario. When we work out, we are stressing our bodies. Some stress is healthy, but it can go too far.

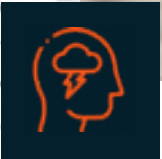
I am an avid backpacker; it's my favorite form of exercise, and I find it to be mentally stimulating. Yet even with all my experience and training, as I trek through difficult terrains and high altitudes, I sometimes can overdo it.

To avoid burnout on tough trails, I consider my options.

I can stop, so I can breathe to prevent passing out. I can recognize that I'm not ready to proceed and return to the previous level. Or I can keep going forward but do so cautiously. All the while, I need to remember burnout can happen fast, and when it does, it's easy to end up in an emergency situation.

At work, as when working out, the goal is to avoid that point of no return.





PREPARE FOR **IMPACT**

The effects of burnout have become so severe the World Health Organization (WHO) classified burnout syndrome as a medical diagnosis in 2019.

With burnout rampant, consider the massive impact this has on our organizations, according to a survey from Indeed:

- 625 million people suffer from depression and anxiety, and the WHO estimates that \$1 trillion is lost in productivity each year.
- Employee burnout leads to lower levels of confidence in teams and diminished employee engagement, which can have a negative impact on job satisfaction, employee retention, customer relationships, and overall success.

Reducing employee burnout is crucial for organizations because of its profound impact on areas such as innovation, productivity, and retention.

AS A LEADER, YOU CAN'T AFFORD NOT TO TAKE ACTION.

LESSONS LEARNED:**AN ANTI-BURNOUT SUCCESS STORY**

Two decades ago, I led a software development team of more than 150 people for 2 ½ years. It was a very intense project for everyone involved. My incredible team was committed to the objectives and worked countless hours to meet their commitments.

When we were in the throes of project execution, one of my key responsibilities was managing the team's productivity and stress levels. Due to tight timelines and other pressures, we couldn't afford a substantial miss or delay.

I was receiving an average of 150 to 200 emails per day and struggled to respond and keep up with the various needs of my stakeholders. My boss would leave the office, go home to eat dinner, turn on the computer, and fire off emails. As a result, my leadership team and I would arrive in the morning to an inbox full of questions, needs, and issues before we could even start our day.

Further complicating the situation, my team members spent most of their time in meetings rather than working on their assigned tasks. Our schedules looked like the old-school Tetris video game, with multiple meetings occurring simultaneously. We would have to pick which one we would attend.

As the pressure on the project intensified, my concern was the team would succumb to this crushing sense of overwhelm. I had to do something about it.

I enacted two rules for my team. The first rule: Emails could be written but not sent between 6:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m..

The purpose was to slow down the rhythm and reduce the amount of reactivity and overload on my team members, especially my leaders, who needed to focus on performance and team member development and managing risk within the project.

The second rule: No meetings were to be held after 12:00 p.m., except for my direct leadership team. This assured that everyone could work on their assigned tasks for at least half a day without being interrupted by meetings. In addition to these two rules, I challenged my leaders to find ways to bring "fun" into the office—from internal challenges to eating lunch together to games. (We once had a water balloon fight with the leadership team during a week of intense stress!)

And it worked.

NOT ONLY DID MORALE IMPROVE ALMOST OVERNIGHT, BUT TEAM MEMBERS STILL COME TO ME 20 YEARS LATER AND SHARE THAT IT WAS THE BEST PROJECT THEY EVER WORKED ON.

They appreciated the way the leaders respected them, considered their well-being, and protected their time from the "noise" of the organization. For me, that was the highlight of my career. Not because of what it accomplished, but because of how we achieved it.



THREE STRATEGIES TO AVOID BURNOUT

Avoiding burnout requires discipline, creativity... and, yes, work.

Looking back on my own experience, I sometimes reflect on what I could have done differently.

I always considered myself a typical overachiever, wired to succeed. I couldn't imagine letting down my organization or my team, for even a moment, to contemplate the possibility of not achieving project goals.

Some employ a "Zen" attitude, letting the chips fall where they may. Others beat their heads against the wall, hoping for a different outcome. Some choose to take action, no matter the consequences.

There is a better way.

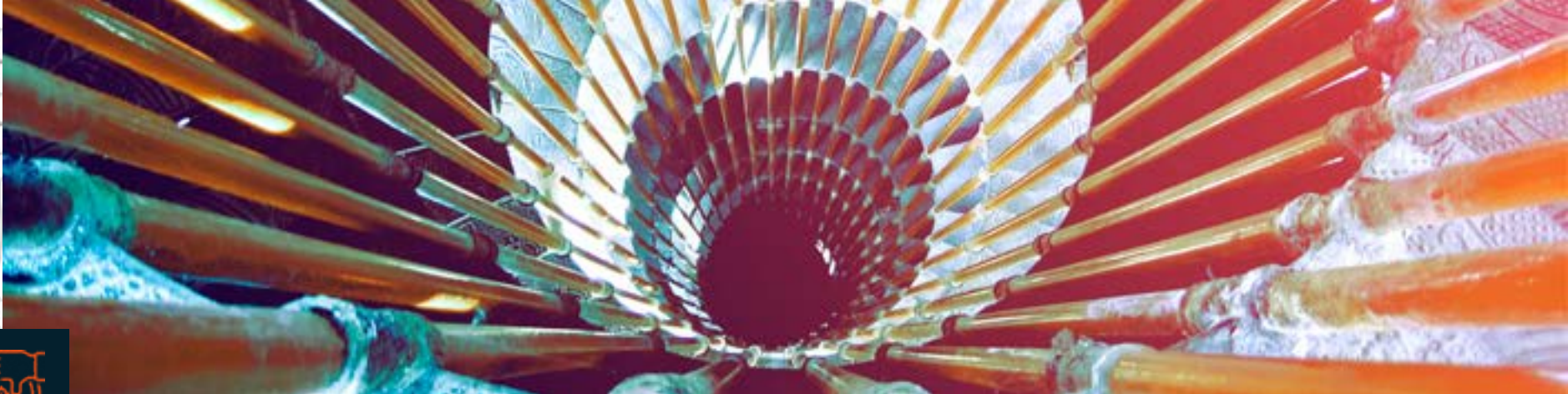
STRATEGY 1: FIND YOUR PURPOSE

What gives your life purpose? For me, it's my family and a love of the outdoors; it's meaningful work alongside a team, and clients who inspire me.

When I was in a spiral toward burnout, I vividly recall being in the office early morning after early morning, and late night after late night. I had sacrificed the things I loved. Self-care (*which wasn't even a phrase I would have thought about then*) had fallen to the wayside. Every moment was filled with work, but I was not working with drive or passion.

Any sense of purpose I had was evaporating.

Research shows having a strong sense of purpose in life directly correlates to positive mental health, well-being, and better cognitive functioning. Finding a sense of purpose is crucial to beating burnout.



Over the past decade, I have seen a disturbing trend amongst the leaders I coach and work with—they perform what I call their “real work” for their position after normal work hours.

When I ask *how much of their work they **should be doing** as an executive or manager that actually is conducted during business hours*, the answer is less than 50%. Somehow, developing people, thinking strategically about your team or organization, and personal development have become dissociated from “working.” Instead, their days are filled reacting to issues of the day. Think about that for a minute.

When leaders are so consumed with fire-fighting issues, when do they ever look forward to leading? And how do they clear out the noise from their personal-work lives to step back and look at the proverbial forest for perspective?

What leaders focus on and how they manage it leads to two critical business risks:

- **A lack of strategic thinking about the business**
- **Personal overwhelm when the leader eventually succumbs to the weight of the fires they keep trying to put out**

Leaders see this happening in themselves, and most internalize this by putting their head down and pushing through, hoping it will get better. And then, they look up, and it is years later, and they wonder what happened?

Where did the joy in the job go?

YOU CAN BREAK THIS DARK SPIRAL.

The 80/20 PowerPlay™ helps you regain focus on what you should be working on and what work items play to your strengths, thereby bringing you joy. I use this technique with leaders to assess where they are on the job. What do they like to work on? What work wears them down?

I’m not saying you should only work on things that make you happy. We all have work that sometimes just sucks. This technique is a great way to reflect on where your strengths should best be applied and where there are opportunities to delegate work that may not be your joy, but may be the strength of someone else in your team.

80/20 REFLECTION

Review your past to make a better future.

One of my favorite podcasters is Tim Ferriss. From Tim, I learned and this planning technique and applied a unique approach. I encourage you to try it!

Try it!

1. Schedule time on your calendar for this exercise. (*I found it took me 30-45 minutes.*)
2. Take a blank sheet of paper and draw a line in the center, from top to bottom. Write a "+" at the top of the left side, and a "-" at the top of the right side.
3. Open your calendar and go week by week, reviewing all of your work and personal appointments and efforts, asking yourself this question: What were the 20% of items/effort I spent my time on that gave me 80% of my emotional satisfaction (*pleasure, positivity, learning*)? Write each of those items down in the left-hand column.
4. Restart the same review, but this time ask what were the 20% of items that gave you 80% of emotional dissatisfaction (*fatigue, frustration, negativity*). Write each of these items down in the right-hand column.
5. Once completed, review each of your columns for patterns—what were the characteristics, trends, and patterns that made the left-hand list give you satisfaction? What was it about the right-hand list that drained you?

Steps 1-5 completes the 80/20 analysis of your time and effort.

Positive (+) patterns:

- + Impact
- + Engaged Audience
- + Travel
- + Learning
- + Working on the Fly

Negative (-) patterns:

- Repetitive
- Lack of Leadership / Drive / Results
- Going through the motions

These patterns reminded me of the type of work and personal time I enjoy: The sense of making an impact, whether for a client or with one of the Scouts in my Boy Scout troop; the energy and fun I have when consulting in real-time on challenges with clients and my team. It also was a wake-up call, showing me what has drained my energy and passion over the year—at times, feeling a sense of futility or a lack of commitment to drive change or results. From this, I'm asking myself, "How does this effort/client relate to the positive or negative patterns?" If it leans towards the negative, what (if anything) can I do to pull it towards the positive?

What do you do with it now?

You apply those lessons to this year: Consider how to say "no" or delegate those items that were on your right-side column and find ways to enhance your left-side patterns. Intentionally seek opportunities to work on those efforts that give you pleasure and satisfaction and work to remove those that wear you down emotionally. In a year, when you do this reflection, will you have found more of your time in the right or the left column?

OWN THIS YEAR.

80/20 REFLECTION

(continued)

Use the table below to record the lists from your 80/20 reflection.

On the left side of the table, list any activity that energized you. On the right side, list any activity that drained you.

List any activity that ENERGIZED you here.

List any activity that DRAINED you here.

What patterns do you notice about the positive / negative tasks?

How do you make time for the work you enjoy and reduce the work that wears you down?

STRATEGY 2: REMOVE THE NOISE

One of the best ways to achieve clarity is to remove the noise.

When I need to clear my headspace, I go off-grid. Ideally, I'll head to the mountains. Being disconnected helps me when I need to think strategically or be creative.

In retrospect, I wish I had taken the time to do this when I was on the path to burnout all those years ago. However, it was difficult to see the forest for the trees at the time. I couldn't imagine stepping away. Instead, I moved in an unhealthy fashion, trying to meet the ever-changing demands and deadlines of the massive project I was managing.

That was a mistake.

The good news is, you don't have to trek to a mountain cabin to remove the noise: a simple digital detox for a day or two, or even a few hours, can work wonders. A digital detox involves unplugging yourself from your devices for a while. That includes smartphones, televisions, and computers. Even committing to turning off your phone at 6 p.m. each night can provide some needed relief.

**ANOTHER PROVEN APPROACH FOR
REMOVING THE NOISE IS TO SCHEDULE
REGULAR TIME ON YOUR CALENDAR FOR
INTENTIONAL THOUGHT.**

Today's workplace feels like a combat arena with issues, needs, and "fire drills" flying at us across a multitude of communication channels (*email, Zoom, text, calls*). It's easy to feel like a pinball bouncing from one thing to the next and then wonder where the time went. As a species, we thrive on learning and thinking, but how often do we have time to focus on it?



THIS TIME
BLOCKING
TECHNIQUE WILL
INCREASE YOUR
FOCUS AND
EFFECTIVENESS
TO BECOME AN
INTENTIONAL
LEARNER—AND
AS A BONUS,
YOU WILL
FEEL HAPPIER,
SMARTER, AND
LESS STRESSED!

TIME BLOCKING

Protect your time for maximum productivity and intentional learning.

This technique enables intentional learning because you will schedule blocks of time in your calendar as “white space.” White space is unstructured time in which you decide what you want to focus on—learning, reflection, deep work. These will look like regular meetings in your calendar—this way others won’t schedule over them.

STEP 1

Resolve how many hours per week you want to set aside for white space.

The “Five-Hour Rule” is a popular trend, where its followers commit to at least five hours of learning each week. If that sounds daunting, start with three hours.

STEP 2

Determine which time-blocking approach works best for you. Some people work best with a single block (*say three hours*) for the week—this enables them to get full focus and into deep work. Others prefer three, one-hour blocks spread across multiple days (*i.e., one hour on Monday, one hour on Wednesday, and one hour on Friday*).

STEP 3

Schedule the time blocks in your calendar. Think about the times of day when your mental acuity is at its best. Mental fatigue will inhibit your capacity to learn. Decide what to call these white space appointments. Consider names that will protect them from being scheduled over by others.

STEP 4

Organize and prepare your content for your white spaces. This could be a reading list of books or articles, videos, or deep work items.

STRATEGY 3: DELEGATE FOR SUCCESS

One of the greatest strengths of a leader is their ability to lead. What isn't always natural is their ability to let go. I had a key moment in my career that made this point crystal clear, and it enabled me to have a breakthrough that took my leadership journey to a new level.

In 2012, my oldest son and I registered with our Scout troop to attend the Boy Scouts of America's Northern Tier High Adventure base in Atikokan, Ontario, Canada. It would be a two-week trip paddling canoes more than 100 miles in the Boundary Waters between Canada and the United States. This area is natural wilderness, where your crew of nine people carries everything with them across various lakes, bogs, and landmasses. For ten days you are on the water and do not see another person. And the only way out in the event of an accident is by bush plane. It was heaven. But that wasn't my lesson—it was just the event.

THE TRIGGER THAT CAUSED THE LESSON IN DELEGATION (AND "LETTING GO" AS A LEADER) WAS CONNECTIVITY.

Or the lack thereof. The beautiful thing about true wilderness is that there isn't any cell coverage. Sounds great, right? For me, it did, until I inched closer to the date of departure. I came to realize that 1) I had never not spoken to my wife by phone for an entire two weeks since we had first met, and 2) the decisions, work items, and running of the company would all have "in progress" actions and decisions that needed to be led while I was gone.

My desire to be with my son for this once-in-a-lifetime experience made my priorities clear: I was going.

So I had to rethink how I could enable the company to continue performing with excellence while getting myself comfortable to let go. And I did it.

How did I get there mentally?

I have always been a driven, decisive person. And I have always loved building teams. For the few months leading up to the trip, I stepped outside myself and assessed how well I was coaching my leadership team. Where were their strengths and weakness in decision-making? Each team member had unique experiences they brought to the team. I really thought about how each person approached issues, decisions, and opportunities. From that reflection, I resolved that two of my executives would lead the company together—and if they could not reach a decision, the third leader who I felt understood me the best would be the tiebreaker. That third leader was over a back-office function, but I trusted him to best bring "me" to a tie.

When I shared this approach with the team, I let them know that I would support whatever decisions they made while I was gone. This was a big step for me because I constantly analyze decisions. But I recognized that whether I agreed with their decisions or not, I had to trust and support them. The accountability was mine. I had developed this team, so as a leader, how could I not trust them?

I left without a worry or second thought as to whether the company would be in good hands: It was.

AND I HAD THE BEST OUTDOOR EXPERIENCE OF MY LIFE—
MEMORIES I'LL ALWAYS TREASURE WITH MY SON.



FIVE ROCKS

Effectively Prioritizing to Overcome Overwhelm

Part of the problem with overwhelm is that you may not be prioritizing effectively or letting go of some of the tasks on your list.

The Five-Rocks Exercise is one of my favorite tools because it's fast and insightful. It will help you see what you should be spending your time on and uncover some tasks that can be eliminated or reassigned.

There are three steps in the Five-Rocks Exercise.

- Think about the last two to three weeks. Come up with at least five tasks that you look back on and realize, "I worked on these things, but maybe I shouldn't have." Write that list down.
- Look at the list, and ask yourself: "Who should have completed that work? For each of the items, who on my team or in my organization could have done the work instead?"
- Now ask, "How will I handle this work in the future? How do I ensure that this particular activity is performed by another person inside of my team or organization?"

Analyzing your five rocks enables you to change your mindset. Instead of the typical mentality of "if you want it done right, you've got to do it yourself," you can say, "How do I ensure that another person is doing it— and doing it well?"

THIS WILL ENABLE YOU TO SPEND MORE TIME ON THE HIGH-VALUE WORK ON YOUR PLATE.



FIVE ROCKS

1. List five items you dealt with last week that you shouldn't have.
2. List who should have dealt with each 'rock'.
3. List the actions you'll take to prevent yourself from having to handle that rock in the future.

ITEM	WHO SHOULD / COULD HAVE HANDLED IT	ACTIONS TO TRANSFER OWNERSHIP



HOW TO PREVENT EMPLOYEE BURNOUT

As a leader, you must protect yourself, your family, and your team. That's one of the toughest challenges of leadership.

Gallup says the cost of replacing an individual employee can range from one-half to two times the employee's annual salary – and that's a conservative estimate. Long before the pandemic, U.S. businesses were losing a trillion dollars a year to voluntary turnover.

RETENTION IS MORE CRITICAL THAN EVER, AND KNOWING HOW TO PREVENT EMPLOYEE BURNOUT IS CRUCIAL.

Thinking back 20 years, I can see how my bosses could have intervened on my behalf to alleviate some of the stress I felt while I managed that massive project. Most notably, they could have protected my team and me by showing discipline and following the agreed-upon processes and scope instead of constantly expanding the parameters without adjusting due dates. They couldn't say no.

To combat the stress and potential burnout for yourself and your employees, start with three steps:

1. RECOGNIZE AND TALK ABOUT IT.

Create an environment where team members can share their stress, work to identify the stressors, and ask others for ideas to resolve or reduce them. This step is typically the hardest.

2. ENCOURAGE THEM TO FIND THEIR PURPOSE USING THE 80/20 REFLECTION.

3. FIND SMALL WINS.

When you feel overwhelmed, you can't focus on any task because your mind is "spinning." Stop. Take a short walk, and then write a list of the items you need to accomplish. Just writing them out is cathartic, and it gives you something to work with. Look at the high-priority, high-effort items and break them into smaller chunks (*"eating the elephant a bite at a time"*). Give yourself a short break to transition between different tasks—this will keep your mental acuity fresh.



I challenge you to start by considering your top performers.

It's not unusual for high achievers to take on the work of others. Put on a diagnostic lens. Ask these team members to write down everything they are working on and review it together. Are there tasks others should be managing? Things that don't need to be done at all?

Try to keep an open mind to the causes of the team's stress and whether you contribute to it. The best bosses are coaches who help ensure their team never gets to the point of burnout. Consider this a call-to-action: **Provide relief to your team in the short term or risk losing them in the long term.** Which do you think is a greater risk to your future?

WHAT TO DO WHEN IT'S OUT OF YOUR CONTROL

Sometimes, the circumstances causing your stress will be out of your control.

I've described the feeling of losing control as "the avalanche." It's as if I'm skiing down the mountain, and I look back to see an avalanche coming down toward me. Have you ever had that feeling before?

You realize that the avalanche will overcome you if you stop or try to slow down. So you point your skis straight down and hope that you'll be able to stop at the bottom of the mountain. But as you look over your shoulder, the avalanche just keeps getting bigger and bigger. I realized I was burned out when the avalanche kept roaring toward me.

But that doesn't have to happen to you.





BURNOUT DOESN'T HAPPEN OVERNIGHT.

But when it does take hold, burnout can affect your physical health, psychological well-being, and productivity at work.

And it's not only devastating for the person affected. Burnout also impacts organizations because it triggers issues such as poor performance, absenteeism, and disengagement.

Now is the time to get out of the way of the proverbial avalanche.

Don't Be Afraid to Seek Medical Help

If you are experiencing extreme overwhelm, protecting your well-being should be your first priority. While I have provided strategies and tips for helping manage work challenges, I am not a medical professional and none of this should be considered medical advice. If you are struggling, please reach out to a professional, such as your doctor or a counselor.


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DON'T LET BURNOUT GET THE BEST OF YOU!

Want to retake Bill's assessment after you try his strategies?
Use these links and check your results!



INDIVIDUAL
BURNOUT ASSESSMENT



TEAM MEMBER
BURNOUT ASSESSMENT

READY FOR BILL TO HELP YOUR TEAM BEAT BURNOUT?



KEYNOTES

Thought-provoking yet practical and customized presentations.



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Experience a deeper dive into Bill's expertise.



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Custom advising and facilitation to work through your biggest challenges.

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