ADDRESSING LEADER WELL-BEING & BURNOUT

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Every now and then I hear a story that leaves me thinking. A story that inspires me and that I know will inspire others. A story that I know will move the needle, even if only a little, and spark change. These were the opening remarks a senior leader (and departmental head) shared prior to my workshop:

In 2008, four years after joining my company as a senior leader, I had a nervous breakdown. Doctors called it major depressive disorder with anxiety distress. My illness in 2008 followed five years of accumulating professional burnout. What started as burnout could have ended much earlier in its progression. But at that time, no leader admitted to mental health problems in my profession.

I was no stranger to depression and anxiety—my first wife died after a lifelong struggle with these ailments three years before I started down the burnout trail. But as my progression rapidly worsened in 2008, I was not willing to admit to myself that I too could become disabled by anxiety and resulting depression. That's just not how I saw myself—mental illness was something that happened to other people, not to me.

The demands of my work accelerated in 2003 when the economy roared back after the great tech crash of 2000 and the effects of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. I joined my company at the end of March 2004. I got married three weeks later on April 18, 2004, and that day, a Sunday, was my first day off in the year 2004. There was no honeymoon—I came back to a 12+ hour day on Monday. I continued to work that way after my younger kids were born in 2005 and 2007.

I became increasingly anxious, and doing my job became increasingly difficult as the anxiety increased and never seemed to come back down. At one point, I was at one of my monthly team meetings listening to a colleague talk about an important issue. I was keenly aware of these types of issues, and yet when I tried to listen to this talk, I could not understand it. I just couldn't follow the topic through the fog of my anxiety. Unable to understand the presentation, my brain turned to wondering how I managed to convince the world I could handle this level of work when it was so obvious to me at that moment I could not?

I wondered, when did this happen? And I wondered how long it would be until what was now obvious to me would be obvious to everyone. How long until the company would ask me to leave, and I would be unable to support my family? My brain was broken. It's an organ. It can break. I sought treatment that day.

After the screening questions one gets about suicidal thoughts and suicidal plans, I was asked if I was looking forward to anything. My answer was no. Then a surprising question —so what are you living for? My answer was, "I believe I'll get better." I was lucky that I hadn't yet reached the point where even that belief would evaporate. Many are not so lucky.

Fortunately, I did get better quickly with medication, keeping my leave to three weeks and doing my best to make it look like a vacation. When I returned, I changed my approach to respect the limits of my body and brain. After a while, I no longer needed medication. I still worked hard, but I was now aware that I had a breaking point, and I had to watch for it and stay clear of it. Believe me, it's totally doable to be a successful leader, do the hard work that's necessary, and still take care of your body and brain.

Managers and leaders at all levels are burning out and leaving their jobs at an alarming rate. Managers are more likely than non-managers to be disengaged at work, burned out, looking for a new job, and feeling like their organization doesn't care about their well-being. More than one-quarter of leaders feel burned out often or always, and two-thirds feel it at least sometimes. More than 1,400 CEOs left their jobs in 2023, an increase of almost 50% compared to 2022, and it's the biggest turnover at that level in more than two decades. In addition, 75% of the C-suite reported that they are seriously contemplating quitting their jobs for one that better supports their well-being, and 64% of managers said the same thing.

Companies need leaders who are prepared to address how the world has changed and the ongoing volatile business landscape. The pandemic put a huge amount of pressure on CEOs and leaders to navigate unprecedented challenges under increased scrutiny from all of their stakeholders. Many leaders I talk to report that they absorb their team members' extra work so as not to burn them out. They are falling on their own burnout sword to save their teams, and none of this is helpful. Managers have more work, fewer people (or newer teams), and tighter budgets. That's a tough gauntlet to navigate.

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Preventing burnout is a complicated task. It involves taking what I call a "me and we" approach because burnout is caused by a mix of individual and organizational factors.

The point of my new book, *Lead Well*, is to help leaders address the "we" factors—how you make work better by creating more meaning, thriving, and resilience for your team. This is a bonus chapter to that book that focuses on the "me" factors that help you prevent or recover from burnout. Let's review some ideas that can help.

UNDERSTAND YOUR WIRING

To prevent and recover from burnout, you must go deep. The starting point here is to understand your mindsets and "wiring"—the traits, styles of thinking, and behaviors that help you both prevent and recover from burnout. These are your core values and beliefs about how you think you and others should behave in the world, and they are called "icebergs" or "rules." I talked about icebergs at length in chapter 8 of my first book, Beating Burnout at Work. In the 15 years I've been doing this work, I have yet to encounter a conversation with any leader, whether via formal coaching or otherwise, when rules or icebergs don't arise. Saying "yes" to everything, working at a relentless pace, feeling like you can never let anyone down, that you must have all the answers, produce perfect work, and thinking that your self-worth is tied to your career success or title are all common icebergs or rules I hear from leaders. These core beliefs can be part of what helps you launch a successful career, but over time these rules can lead to a host of issues—including burnout—if they remain inflexible.

Once you surface these icebergs, reflect.

- Where did they come from?

- How have they contributed to your success?

- How have they interfered?

- Are they too inflexible or rigid for the way you want to live, lead, and work today?

- How will you reshape or soften these rules?

A big problem is that organizations continue to hire for and reward these traits, which can perpetuate "playing the game" despite the negative consequences to well-being. You as a leader can soften their effect on others.

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KNOW WHAT'S CAUSING YOUR CHRONIC STRESS AND REPLENISHING YOUR ENERGY AT WORK

Burnout is more likely to happen when you have an imbalance between your job demands (the aspects of your job that require sustained effort and/or energy) and your job resources (the aspects of your job that help you achieve your goals, reduce the stress "cost" of your job demands, and stimulate growth and learning). The first step is to map your job demands and job resources.

JOB DEMANDS

Which of the Core 6 account for your chronic stress?

- Unmanageable workload
- Lack of recognition
- Unfairness
- Values misalignment
- Lack of control/flexibility
- Lack of community

What does this look like? (e.g., too many emails; too many meetings; etc.)

What other factors exist in your day-to-day that increase your stress?

JOB RESOURCES

What aspects of your job increase your energy? Stimulate growth and learning?

What or who generally gives you positive energy about your job?

How do these resources help mitigate against the stress created by your demands?

Do you need more resources, and if so, what might those be?

Most people find that they can populate the demands column quickly, and it's usually a long list of items. Even if it isn't long, the items people list are "big"—meaning, they account for a great deal of the stress problem. Conversely, many people struggle to capture their resources, or the energy-giving aspects of their work. Your columns don't have to contain even numbers of answers. It's not about evenness; it's about strength. Some people may only list 3 or 4 resources, but they may be so strong and so important that it's enough to counter the stress weight of the demands. For example, many people tell me that having strong relationships with their colleagues gets them through the day and often serves as an important buffer for stress. Strong relationships, having decision authority, getting meaningful, in-time feedback, feeling appreciated, having a manageable workload, autonomy, leader support, and the opportunity to learn new things have all been shown to be very powerful job resources that not only slow burnout, but also build your work engagement.

BURNOUT TENDS TO HAPPEN IN PHASES. WHERE ARE YOU?

You are moving out of stress and into burnout when you are feeling all of the following chronically (that is, more often than not, over an extended period of time):

- You are physically and emotionally exhausted.

- You are feeling cynical—often frustrated and annoyed by colleagues and clients.

- You are experiencing a lack of impact. The research calls it "inefficacy," which I translate into a feeling of "why bother, who cares?"

Assign your stress level a zone.

ZONE 1: You go through heavy periods of stress, but the stress generally comes and goes. You may feel overwhelmed from time to time, but you continue to work effectively. Self-care strategies may continue to help in this zone.

ZONE 2: Stress has become chronic. You feel more consistently fatigued, and your motivation and effectiveness are starting to decrease. You are moving into survival mode. You will need to start setting more boundaries and dig into the exercises above.

ZONE 3: You are burned out (and meet all three components above—chronic exhaustion, chronic cynicism, and lost impact). Simple tasks have become unmanageable, and your emotions are unpredictable and hard to control. Your day-to-day world is becoming impacted by the stress. You may need to consider whether you need help from a coach, therapist, or other professional. You may also need to consider whether you need to make deeper life and work changes.

Preventing burnout is a complicated task. It involves taking what I call a "me and we" approach because burnout is caused by a mix of individual and organizational factors.

As you can see, this is an imprecise process. That's because it's generally accepted that burnout is not a medical condition, and therefore there isn't an agreed upon and readily established process to officially diagnose it. Rather, it is viewed as a specific type of stress associated with one's work, and that it where we must address it.

IMPROVE "ANTI-BURNOUT" BEHAVIORS

Leadership researcher Nick Petrie and his team have spent the past several years talking to high performers to better understand the conditions under which they burnout (or don't). He's found that people who perform at very high levels, yet don't burnout, exhibit similar behaviors.

- Make peace with not getting everything done each day.

- Have rituals for switching between work and home.

- Create clear boundaries between work and home.

- Develop many different roles and identities outside of work (who are you and what do you love to do when you're not at work).

- Decide on a "phone strategy" to intentionally manage phone use at home.

- Reflect on the best and worst ways to work. Examine what works for you each day in terms of how you get your work done.

BUILD A STRONGER RELATIONSHIP BENCH

Microstressors are the small moments of stress in your personal and professional life that accumulate over time, and the accumulation can have a significant impact on your well-being, health, and resilience. Researchers discovered that focusing on your relationships is a critical pathway for helping you better manage microstress. Why? These connections provide important pathways to thriving and resilience. Specifically, they suggest you need to build a relationship bench that includes people in seven different categories. Please complete the chart below by writing down the name of a person or people who help you in each category. If you can't think of a person, please leave it blank. Then add a few notes about how this person or these people help.

RELATIONSHIP CATEGORY	PERSON/PEOPLE WHO HELP	HOW THEY HELP
• Gives you empathetic support	_____	_____
• Helps you identify a path forward when you're stuck	_____	_____
• Helps you manage work or home surge & unpredictability	_____	_____
• Helps you take a break Provides levity	_____	_____
• Helps you navigate people and organizational politics	_____	_____
• Offers you perspective about work and life challenges	_____	_____

When I lead groups through this exercise, one of the biggest issues I see is that people write down the same name for every category. It's usually a significant other or spouse, maybe sometimes a close friend. If that's the case, you're asking a tremendous amount of that one person, and he or she likely isn't the best person to support you in every category.

In addition, people, especially leaders, rarely list their colleagues in these categories. Many work environments, especially as you ascend the career ladder, are competitive and cutthroat. Unfortunately, that makes it more unlikely that you'll reach out to a colleague in these valuable ways. The workplace can't afford this—not with more than 20% of the global workforce experiencing chronic loneliness.

Effective recovery habits are crucial to preventing and recovering from burnout.

WORKLOAD SUSTAINABILITY PROMOTES RECOVERY

Workload unsustainability impacts everything. It impacts good teaming, your ability to appreciate and recognize others, how cohesive people feel in their work community, innovation, and your health and well-being. When workload is more consistently at sustainable levels, it allows you to more fully recover from the stress associated with work, both at work and after work hours.

Recovery is simply the act of processing the day's stress, and the research around effective recovery activities is more complex and nuanced than what you may read in popular media or hear from self-help experts.

As you think about processing stress each day, I want you to think about these six pathways as being promising avenues to do so:

Psychological detachment: Refraining from or limiting work-related thoughts and gaining mental distance from your work during non-work time.

Relaxation: The experience of everyday activities that calm the body and mind.

Autonomy: Knowing that you have some degree of self-determination and agency in deciding what to do and how to do it during nonwork time.

Mastery: Activities that include the experience of growth and/or learning experiences.

Meaning: Activities that connect you to your values or something important.

Connection: Pursuing activities associated with friends, family, or close others that you care about. Spending time in the presence of others who matter to you.

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You can use different combinations of recovery activities and recovery experiences and these combinations can fluctuate from day-to-day. Here are two ideas for you to consider that use one or more of the above pathways:

HAVE AN "OPPOSITE WORLD" | Research shows that one of the most effective things you can do to manage stress and prevent burnout is to create an "opposite world." For many high achieving professionals, their work role has become too much of their identity, and having an opposite world to go to helps to relieve some of the work-only focus and strain. So, who are you when you're not your work role? Are you a master gardener? A sports enthusiast? A salsa dancer? A volunteer at an animal shelter? You need to develop activities, interests, and identities outside of work.

CREATE AN IMPACT GOAL | Impact goals are less about the objective goals you have like working a set number of hours, but more how you see yourself within your community. When people are connected to impact goals, they are more hopeful, curious, grateful and inspired. Not surprisingly, they also show greater well-being and satisfaction with their lives.

Questions to think about in creating an impact goal:

- What do you want to contribute to the world?

- What change do you want to create?

- What kind of positive impact do you want to have on the people around you?

- What mission in life or at work most inspires you?

RECOVERY NUANCES

It's important to note that "chore breaks"—things like doing the laundry or running errands—have not been shown to enhance recovery. Among the various recovery activities, active leisure activities (e.g., physical activities, social activities, creative activities) are more helpful for improving well-being than passive leisure activities (e.g., watching TV). No, I'm not going to tell you to stop binge watching Netflix.

Cyber activities show mixed results. Spending time on cyber activities (using digital devices for recovery purposes) was positively related to bedtime procrastination and that in turn was related to low sleep quality and low vitality. However, spending time on cyber activities was also positively related to psychological detachment from work, which in turn was related to high sleep quality and high vitality.

Psychological detachment from work mattered only on days when distress at work had been high, so it's particularly important to detach on days when work has been highly stressful, though those tend to be the days in which it's hardest to do so.

Recovery experiences are related to better well-being and more favorable emotional states at bedtime and at the start of the next morning; however, events happening at work the next day might "wash out" the effects of the prior night's recovery fairly quickly. Still, recovery experiences from the prior evening can buffer the detrimental impact of next-day negative work events. So even though there might be a "wash out" effect, coming to work having recovered the night before can make the stress less potent.

RECOVERY AT WORK

Recovery during non-work hours is critical, but you also need to pay attention to the ways in which you recover while at work. A common piece of advice is to take small micro-breaks at work. Micro-breaks are short pauses (10-15 minutes or so in length) that can help you better manage your energy and stress levels during the day. Newer research shows that micro-breaks can be beneficial, with some nuance. Overall, the research supports the role of micro-breaks for increasing well-being (meaning, short breaks can efficiently alleviate fatigue and increase energy); however, recovering from highly depleting tasks may require more than 10 minutes to help you continue to perform effectively. Taking short breaks from routine tasks and creative tasks can help people perform better on subsequent tasks; however, for cognitively demanding tasks, taking short breaks does not appear to confer the same benefit. That doesn't mean that taking a break won't help, it just means it will likely need to be longer than 10 minutes.

It's hard enough to lead when everyone's exhausted; it's even harder when that includes you. Too much stress drains your cognitive and emotional resources, which makes it harder for you to operate effectively and makes it more likely that your team will be stressed and burned out as well. **By nurturing your own well-being, you set a precedent for resilience and inspire your team to thrive at work.**

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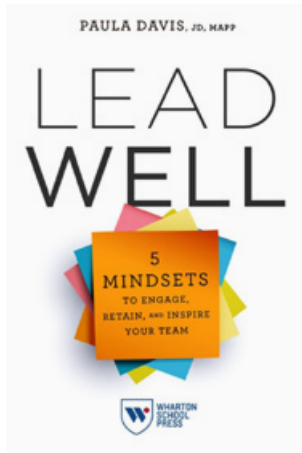
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Paula Davis JD, MAPP, is the Founder and CEO of the Stress & Resilience Institute. For 15 years, she has been a trusted advisor to leaders in organizations of all sizes helping them to make work better. Paula is a globally recognized expert on the effects of workplace stress, burnout prevention, workplace well-being, and building resilience for individuals and teams. Her expertise has been featured in and on *The New York Times*, *O, The Oprah Magazine*, *The Washington Post* and many other media outlets. Paula is also a contributor to *Forbes*, *Fast Company* and *Psychology Today*.

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