

ELKE
GERAERTS
**BETTER
MINDS**

*How Insourcing Strengthens Resilience
and Empowers Your Brain*

 | LANNOO

*To all those who have encouraged, challenged
and strengthened my mental resilience*

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PART I

A WAY
THROUGH
THE BRAIN
CRISIS

Portrait of a burnout

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Not a month goes by when we don't hear about burnout in the news. Each time with harder facts and figures, more confrontational analyses. Still, the column that Laurent Winnock, director of communication and corporate responsibility at insurer AXA Belgium, wrote about his experience with burnout is one of the most striking I've ever read. Because his column still echoes in my mind, I'd like to share it with you.

LAURENT'S STORY

Exactly one year ago, I dropped out with a case of burnout. I still see myself sitting in the car, rocked by crying fits because I was "burned out," until the light literally went out at the doctor's office. However bad that period may have been, I still think of it as my greatest opportunity. Not everyone is lucky enough to be able to make a new start at the age of 35 after suffering from depression.

How did it get to this point? Let me call it a combination of structural professional excess and an emotional violation of important professional values, sanctioned by me. In addition, I neglected my body and mind for years in a continuous cycle of neglect and adrenaline-fueled excess.

In retrospect, it's easy to ask why I didn't realize that I couldn't sleep, suffered from back pain and never managed to shake that constant cough. That I abandoned friends and hobbies. That my long days at work, where I was hyper-irritable

with those around me, weren't normal. I know that now, and also that no one tried to stop me.

The first days of burnout are hell. All those repressed physical ailments come to the surface and you're exhausted after walking half a block. But it's the mental emptiness that is most painful of all. It was only after those first few weeks that my brain became active again, but I still wasn't healed. No, in my eyes, the external world was the culprit: it was all the fault of somebody else. In my case, that was partly true, but it was only when I realized that the cause of my burnout was a shared responsibility could I begin my mental healing process.

I was guided the whole time by my wonderful physician and fantastic therapist. I still see the latter every month to talk about how I'm progressing and how I approach things differently. I will continue to do so, and I recommend it to everyone. In addition, I received so much loving care from my immediate environment, and I could count on a lot of understanding and support from my professional environment and my CEO.

But this is only the starting point. The most difficult part is maintaining the daily discipline needed to organize my work better and in ways that are more healthy, to enjoy my work and especially to enjoy what happens outside of work. Initiating a process of change had its ups and downs, but gradually it began to work. I ditched the agenda parasites; now I'm very selective about meetings and only attend those where my presence brings added value. I take time to take distance, to reflect and to be inspired. I set aside time to be with my teams and just hang out. During intense work periods I plan energizing projects. I put work away to spend time with my loved ones and take regular walks during periods when there's not much on the

calendar. "What a life of luxury," I hear you thinking. I prefer to call it a sustainable life. Because make no mistake, I still have to perform for my company and achieve daily objectives with essential cost savings. And since I've started working differently, I do that more successfully than before.

Why am I saying this now? Because I had to discover the hard way that we all perform like top athletes every day, but without the necessary preparation. A top athlete takes into account the balance between mental and physical rest and performance, says no to things that don't fit in his or her program, and talks to the trainer if the latter isn't showing the way to top performance. In the sports world, this is quite normal.

How does the business world differ? In many organizations, the mental well-being of human capital still doesn't get the attention it deserves. But we as individuals are often not aware of what a healthy work ethic involves.

How often have I heard colleagues and bosses say that they're too busy, have lost control of their agenda, and are under so much pressure ... but that they can't say no? What really gets to me are the testimonies of courageous fellow human beings who openly admit that they suffer constant abdominal or back pain because of stress, but don't know how to deal with it differently. It all sounds so familiar. Unfortunately, many, many more don't dare speak up for fear of being viewed as weak in an organizational culture that is not open to the idea. They're the ones who really need help.

Ten percent of the workforce is at home with burnout; five percent are in the critical zone. I've been lucky enough to have an employer that gave me lots of support and has been working on a structural approach to wellness. I hope my testimony

motivates many others to take action. And for those who cling stubbornly to old ways: a sick employee costs more than a healthy one. And now for a bit of recovery.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

For me, what makes Winnock's column so powerful is that he writes without blame. Ever since burnout was recognized as an occupational illness, employers have often felt like scapegoats, even though this is not always true. In some cases the blame is formulated explicitly. In France, the former CEO of France Telecom was summoned to court after more than 30 employees attempted to commit suicide in one year. He was accused of promoting a corporate culture that drove employees over the edge. In Japan, too, employers run serious risks if their employees commit suicide, particularly if the latter regularly did overtime in the months leading up to their death. In that case, the death falls under the category "karoshi," or "death by burnout," in which both the government and the company executives have to pay damages to the family. In China, there is also a term for "death by burnout" (*guolaosi*), and companies are considered responsible for the well-being of their personnel.

Without denying that executives have a responsibility and that they can influence corporate culture positively or negatively, I think we cannot get around the fact that the burnout epidemic comes from a broader context that companies do not always comprehend. Moreover, the burnout epidemic is not exclusively limited to employees. Several studies show that freelance entrepreneurs run an even greater risk of burnout than people with paid employment. Business

leaders form another important risk group. When we look at burnout among senior management, recent research from the Harvard Business School shows that 96 percent of senior managers feel “a little burned out.” One in three describes the feeling as “extremely burned out.”

In corporate life, a director might be the loneliest person there is. He or she is always expected to be alert and never to have a bad day. The same characteristics that drive executives to the top, such as their stamina, help hide the fact that something is wrong – even from themselves. People can continue on autopilot for a long time, but the crash will eventually occur, even for executives. When it does, the company often suffers from a domino effect. The workload falls on the shoulders of others, they have more work on their plates and are in turn more susceptible to burnout. And so on. In this way, a company can find itself in a dangerous vicious circle.

BURNED-OUT VOLUNTEERS

The risks for those with burnout are considerable. Among others, Wilmar Schaufeli, a world authority on burnout research at the University of Utrecht, has shown that people with burnout run a greater risk of developing chronic fatigue, alcoholism, sleep disorders, neck pain and other physical health problems. In a study spread out over ten years, Finnish professor Kirsi Ahola showed that burnout was linked to a 35-percent higher chance of death among employees who were younger than 45 when the study began.

Whenever I disclose these figures, people are surprised and disbelieving. “If burnout is such a big problem, why are we only hearing about it now?” I’ve heard that a lot. But it’s

not quite correct. The term “burnout” might sound new, but we’ve actually been confronted with the problem for years. Only, it was called “stress” until very recently. Stress in and of itself is not necessarily a problem; a limited amount of stress can have a positive effect. For example, a small peak in stress just before I give a lecture ensures that I’m more alert, that I reach a certain level of focus, and that I can concentrate fully on my lecture and interaction with the public. Researcher Kelly McGonigal of Stanford University has even proposed that stress is your friend as long as you learn how to handle it well and use it in order to perform. Stress becomes a problem, however, when the burden (the amount of stress or seriousness of the stressful situation) is greater than our capacity to bear it (the resources we have for dealing with the situation). Chronic stress can undermine a person and eventually lead to burnout. For the psychologists who warned us for so many years that stress levels in society were too high, the burnout crisis certainly comes as no surprise.

Likewise, the term “burnout” is not so new. The concept was launched around 40 years ago by the psychologist Herbert Freudenberger, who advised volunteers in New York in the 1970s. Freudenberger noticed that these people, who were at first full of enthusiasm and dedication to their work, began to show serious symptoms of emotional exhaustion and loss of motivation after a few months. One of his respondents described feeling “burned out.” All mental and physical energy was gone, all desire to continue was lost, all job satisfaction extinguished.

Around the same time, on the other side of the United States, in California, similar symptoms were discovered

among social workers. Psychologists Christina Maslach and Susan Jackson first described “burnout” as “emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and the disappearance of the feeling of accomplishment.” Their description of burnout as a combination of these three phenomena is now generally accepted.

Thanks to the pioneering work of these psychologists, the phenomenon of burnout is known to researchers around the world and has been studied extensively. Since then, many thousands have been diagnosed with the condition, but there has been an increase in recent years. Until around a decade ago, burnout was mainly known as a typical illness among welfare workers, but it has now penetrated all levels of society. As a consequence, “burnout” has also become a buzzword. Many people use it colloquially when they experience periods of stress. Recently someone said to me: “Last week I had a little burnout because that deadline was just too stressful.” The danger is that burnout will no longer be taken seriously. I once heard an employee sigh: “Nowadays everyone has burnout when they have too much going on in their private life.” The reality, of course, is somewhere in the middle: people all too readily proclaim “I have burnout!” – but this does not mean that real burnout is less problematic.

TECHNOLOGY AND ROLE STRESS

Burnout may have first turned up officially among volunteers in the 1970s, but today it is no longer limited to the edges of the welfare sector. What is it about our labor market that has changed substantially? Why do thousands of

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