

# Burnout Nation

Last week, a client of mine had a stroke. He's 37, works for a multinational corporation, runs a \$1B global business. Has five kids, cares deeply about his family life and is active in his church. I'd been thinking about writing this article for some time, but this put me over the top. I'm an executive coach. At least 60% of my clients are suffering from serious health issues – typically migraines, insomnia and high blood pressure. And now this. Over and over, I hear them talk about how relentless work is, how little they can find time to feel a sense of accomplishment. What they do feel is overwhelmed and wrong-footed, never able to get ahead of the crisis du jour. What is going on?

## Technology

Several things have converged. Technology is clearly a big player in this. It has historically always served to raise expectations instead of lower work loads. When the washing machine was invented, we suddenly expected to have clean clothes more often, not just once a week. The vacuum cleaner meant the house stayed cleaner, not that we cleaned less. Similarly, modern software gave us the tools so that everyone can now be his or her own secretary and publisher.

Similarly, the rise in possible ways to be in touch with one another (the Internet, cell phones, IMing, pagers, text messaging, etc.) apparently means that we *have* to be in touch with each



other continually. We have created a world that assumes accessibility and responsiveness to a degree that there is no way out – we have to be available to EVERYONE ALL THE TIME. We're proud of our ability to multi-task, to keep multiple streams of conversation going simultaneously, to surf the Net, write that memo and pull together two graphics presentations all at the same time.

## Tsunamis

At the same time, a tsunami wave has hit the entire business world. The old economic geographies have been wiped out, and no one has mapped the new territory effectively. Emerging markets are emerging so fast we have no idea how to think about them. Enormously contradictory pulls towards localism and globalism whipsaw local and regional economies the world over. China has sucked up manufacturing for the entire world. GM is collapsing. The chase for the cheapest everything has India outsourcing software development to China. Wal-Mart has convinced us all we should never pay a premium for anything and the middle class, which used to make cars and things in this country, is rapidly disappearing. How do we map this new geography? How do we survive in it?

## Cycle Time Compression

Starting during the quality movement in the 80s, the concept of cycle time compression has been a driving force for increasing competitiveness, first in manufacturing and then even in service industries. Customized, personalized products and services, instantly available upon demand, have become the new norm. As consumers, we find it pretty

attractive. As producers – whether of products or services, hardware or software – what we experience is work processes in which there are no longer predictable cycles of periods of “busy” and “quiet.” August, the traditional slow month for American business, doesn’t slow down. People work during Thanksgiving and Christmas. There’s less and less time to feel a sense of completion about anything – before you’ve even finished one project, let alone done an after-action review, the next one is ramping up. There’s no longer any breathing room.

I hear from clients in a wide range of industries that: “There used to be a slow season, but there isn’t any more.” Or, “We used to have time between projects to reflect on what we’d learned, but we’re too busy ramping up for the next project now, and so we keep making the same mistakes.” Or, “Even August isn’t slow any more – everyone’s taking their PDA’s and emailing from the beach.” At the same time, many large organizations’ planning and performance appraisal cycles, rather than providing some relief from other forms of work, are being layered on top of all the daily stuff, and are getting so large and unwieldy that they completely torpedo getting real work done.

## Biology

One enormous dilemma is that, as a species, we’re not physically built for this 24-7 world we seem to exult in. Physiologically, we’re built for cycles. For days and nights (where we get enough sleep). For seasons. For fast times and slow times. When we stay in the fast times constantly, we’re literally poisoning ourselves with chemical infusions that are extraordinarily valuable when you’re being attacked by a saber-toothed tiger, but quite harmful when left at elevated levels in our bloodstream for extended periods of time. When we stay permanently in

high alert or fight or flight, the chemical stress is deadly. Hence the migraines, the insomnia, the heart attacks and high blood pressure.

Interestingly, recent brain-scan research from the FAA and the University of Michigan has demonstrated that all our multitasking efficiency is really a myth. Stopping one task, deciding to work on another and getting up to speed on it can make the tasks take two to four times longer! And doing two things at once means the brainpower we can apply to either is cut in half – so we’re not working smarter, we’re working harder to get the same amount of stuff done.<sup>1</sup>

On top of the environmentally induced ADD that’s been widely written about, which means we’ve lost the capacity to actually focus on *anything*, I also see an insidious new disease that’s crept into business cultures – AMS (Afraid of Missing Something). This means we never fully disengage from work, we never turn our attention fully to our families, our homes, our hobbies, our health – the things that can renew, reenergize, regenerate and rejuvenate us. We’re constantly checking in, afraid that something important might have happened that will leave us out of the loop.

## Going Down

The result is a rising tide of complexity: a new economic geography, multiple demands, technology that most of us can’t live with or without, constant interruptions, more information than we can possibly digest and a time frame that has shrunk to hours and minutes. Do we ever give our



full attention to anything anymore? Overstimulated, exhausted and unbalanced, can we possibly make good decisions? Let alone get good work done?

Few have stopped to consider where all this busy-ness gets them, because they have gotten seduced by the short time horizons of daily life. As an observer, I'm always astonished to watch my clients hurtling through their lives, never recognizing that turning 50 or 55 isn't the end point. They may have to find meaningful things to do with themselves for another 30 or 40 years! That's if they don't kill themselves getting to that pinnacle.....

What I'm seeing is that "successful" people – the folks I coach -- are too exhausted and dispirited to take the proactive steps that might let them get ahead of these cycles. Days spent in endless meetings mean "real work" gets done at night. A sense of accomplishment is a fleeting thing. There's less and less time for meaningful connection at home or at work. The conversations that would make sense of it all, make clear the importance (or lack of same) in what they do never happen. We grow more and more disconnected. And a gaping hole – in our hearts, in our psyches, in our souls – begins to grow. Unlike all our technology, we don't have a little light that comes on that tells us our batteries are dying.



So where does this leave us? Are we becoming a nation of burnouts? Has our business model created a life style that our neurology and physiology simply can't support? Are the demands of 24/7 globalism pushing

us into something fundamentally and profoundly unsustainable?

## Root Cause

Obviously, here we enter touchy territory. Remember the old Pogo comic strip line? "We have met the enemy and they is us." Root cause is old mental models, old management practices, old organizational structures, fear and lack of trust. The period in which "fairness" was understood to be some exchange of work for pay with the results procedurally guaranteed, has come to an end, both in China's "Iron Rice Bowl" and in our own big institutions – look at General Motors. In order to survive in this new environment, there's no longer any entitlement – whether it's of a manager to her job or a union worker to her pension. What keeps you viable today is a willingness to learn and the capacity to see possibilities that others don't. The predictability and reliability that many of us need isn't to be found externally any more, so we're going to have to create it internally – to trust our own ability to survive and thrive in a chaotic world.

When we're driven by fear, that's a hard thing to do.

Rob Goffee and Gareth Smith noted in a recent *Harvard Business Review* article that "Hierarchies have always been much more than structural devices. They have also been sources of meaning for people. Moving through stable hierarchies gave the illusion of becoming more of a leader."<sup>ii</sup> Last fall, *Business Week* ran a story called "The Real Reasons You're Working So Hard." In it they noted that, despite all downsizing, right sizing and business process reengineering, there are actually 20% more managers today than there were 15 years ago.<sup>iii</sup> Quite arguably, our hunger for hierarchy in order to make meaning of our work lives has created

the force that strangles productivity. Because managers want to be included, and managers want to approve, and that means meetings and meetings means work isn't getting done.



Charlie Grantham and Jim Ware, in their *Future of Work Agenda*, rightly observe that in an era of knowledge workers, the person with the best knowledge base for making the decision is rarely, if ever, the boss. “We’ve got to ask the question: what in blazes are all those so-called ‘managers’ *doing* all day? With a higher and higher proportion of self-directed knowledge workers producing the innovation and intellectual property that drives our economy, and with more and more of those knowledge workers working remotely, what is there for managers to do (other than slow things down and gum them up?)”<sup>iv</sup> The challenge is that, with an economy that doesn’t seem to be offering a lot of choices, even those knowledge workers need to see some sort of forward motion in their careers. Without hierarchy, leaders need to get good at finding creative alternatives.

A fellow coach/curmudgeon and I were recently commiserating on the percentage of our clients whose lives are consumed by meaningless meetings, and how little imagination they seem to be able to bring to bear on resolving the issue. These old management practices and old organizational structures reflect a fundamental resistance to change that is part of human nature. Immigrants to a new country know they’ll have to work twice as hard as the country’s established citizens in order to succeed. Now we *all* need to understand that we’re immigrants. That’s how profoundly the geogra-

phy has changed. But instead of having to work harder – because I truly don’t believe a lot of my clients can work any harder than they already are – we have to learn to work simpler, work easier, cut through the noise and stay focused on what really matters.

## The Ultimate Cost: No Time to Lead

Amongst the many consequences of this implosion of pressures is that the leaders I coach don’t have time to think about leading. They’re being fire-hosed, and can’t get a breath, let alone get strategic, create a compelling story that makes the world make sense, address organizational morale, develop leaders or any of the other things their gut tells them they should be doing. *They can’t find time to lead.*

In the face of all this, what *could* leaders be doing? Here’s my take:

- Learn to, as one of my clients says, “Monitor thyself.” Know your own burnout signs. Take stock of physical health, family health and spiritual health. And invest time in all three.
- Have the guts to say “Time out. We don’t know what we’re doing here, and we can’t make decisions and take actions when we don’t know which way is **true** north. Let’s take the time to have the conversations about what everyone is seeing and hearing so that we can jointly make enough meaning out of the situation to re-establish our compass.”
- Replace the meaning-making function of hierarchies with meaning-making of their own, through creative visioning and strategic planning that results in big, rich stories of purpose that everyone in the organization wants to join.

If these sound basic, that's right: they are. Unfortunately, they're about as common as common sense – which is to say, not very. In the morass of complexity we've surrounded ourselves with, it's very hard for people to make the elemental moves that can hack away the underbrush and cut through to what really counts. Yet those are the moves that will allow leaders to find the time to lead. And when they've found that time, then they can:

- Constantly ask “for the sake of what are we doing this?” and refuse to move forward when there is no clear answer.
- Get good at recognizing competence – their own and others – and working with it respectfully to create meaningful work challenges, design promises, make commitments and assign roles;
- Say no to meaningless meetings and approval processes. I have a client who told me today he'd told his people “I don't need to be part of this approval process, I trust you. You don't need me bottling things up. Send it up the chain.” That's leading!
- Engage in value creation, the kind of thinking that creates new worlds;
- Spend time with their people, coaching and mentoring the next generation of leaders;
- Engage with the rest of the world, and bring what they're learning back into the organization to cross-fertilize it with new ideas;
- Engage with their organization enough to build the trusting relationships that allow them to step back and let people move fast when necessary.

When leaders have made the time to do these things, they'll have learned how to lead in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## Epilogue

My client is recovering, slowly. He's delegated many things that a few short weeks ago he absolutely “had” to do himself, and has

admitted to others that in several cases they're getting done much better as a result. He's paying much more focused attention to lifestyle issues like what he eats, how much he exercises, taking vacations and other forms of self-care. We're having important conversations about what really matters. And he's paying attention to the behaviors at work that got him into this trouble, most especially the one where, even when he wasn't “working,” he was thinking about work. He's a gifted leader, and I have high hopes in a few months he'll be in shape to lead again – and much the wiser for this experience.

Is a near-death experience necessary for you to learn these same lessons?



<sup>i</sup> “Multitasking May Backfire,” *Consumer Reports on Health*, April, 2006, p.10

<sup>ii</sup> “Managing Social Distance in ‘Flat’ Companies”, Rob Goffee & Gareth Jones, HBSWK Pub. Date Feb. 6, 2006.

<sup>iii</sup> “The Real Reasons You're Working So Hard,” *Business Week*, Oct. 2005.

<sup>iv</sup> “Square Pegs and Round Holes”, Charlie Grantham & Jim Ware, *Future of Work Agenda*, April, 2006.

This article started out as a conversation between my colleagues, Chuck Appleby, Cindy Phillips and myself, last December. We were thinking of a joint article, but my client's health issue precipitated this version. Many thanks to Chuck, Cindy, Bill Kirby, Nancy Hughes and of course, my client, for their contributions.