How to Avoid Burnout While Growing Your Company
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Planning, Conducting, and Getting Results

Burnout is like pornography; you may not be able to define it, but you definitely know it when you see it—or feel it! It’s that general malaise that has you pulling the covers over your head instead of leaping out of bed. It’s the sudden urge to head to the airport instead of back to the office after lunch. It’s the no-energy, no-motivation, no-dreams state of mind. And it’s awful!

The pain of burnout is obvious: You just can’t get motivated. You feel worn down, ineffective and hopeless. The idea of moving at all, let alone moving forward, requires way too much effort. Burnout is a waste of time and energy. While you’re suffering, you could be living a fantastic life.

You’ve likely experienced burnout at some point in your life, maybe related to your business or maybe related to a relationship, a college class or even a restaurant. Sometimes it creeps up on you, building over time, while other times it jumps out of the blue and hits you upside the head.

Burnout doesn’t always come from the same source, either. It can come from working hard and needing a break or it can come from lack of challenge. That means that addressing burnout is going to require some analysis. You might need a good, long rest or you might need a kick in the pants. You might need better focus on your goals or you may need entirely new goals.

We’re going to tackle the five most common sources of burnout and five solutions for tackling them. Whether you’re finished with your life as a whole, you want to change your workout routine or you need a new job, there will be some solutions for you. Remember, you may not see yourself in every situation, but if you’re suffering from burnout you’ll definitely find some suggestions to rev your engine and get you motivated.

Ready? Let’s hit it.

Burnout Cause #1: Overwork

Imagine training for a marathon. Every day for months, you check your online training schedule, you map out your running course, you lace up your sneakers and you hit the road. Rain or shine, you put in the miles – 3 miles, 13 miles, 23 miles. Over time, the mileage builds until it’s the big day. With literally thousands of miles under your belt, you line up with hundreds of other runners, adrenaline pumping and sweat already starting to form on your forehead. It’s time.
Three or four (or five!) hours later, depending on your pace, you cross the finish line. You did it. You’re a marathoner. You grab your medal and finisher’s t-shirt and hobble to your car, probably with the help of a friend or two.

The LAST thing you feel like doing is to run another mile or two. You’re done. Spent. Exhausted. In fact, it may be a few weeks before you feel ready to run again. It’s to be expected; you trained for months, you ran for hours and you left it all on the course. Your reserves are empty and you’re ready for a nice, long break.

Do you see an analogy here with work? Maybe you’ve been pushing hard for a specific project or goal, day in and day out for an extended period of time. You’ve pulled a few all-nighters and you don’t even recognize your kids because you haven’t been home before their bedtime. You’ve been aiming for a product launch or some other hard deadline and now it’s done. You’re exhausted, and rightfully so. Just like the marathoner, you’ve left it all on the course.

Some of us may be lucky enough to have more predictable jobs where the highs and lows are minimal. If we should all be so lucky! Chances are, your job – whether you’re in retail sales or software development – has large fluctuations due to external events. You have tax season, holiday season, or inventory season, and that makes your life crazy at times. Don’t worry; that’s normal. And it’s normal to want a break after it’s done, just like in the marathoner scenario above.

What isn’t so normal, though, is a constant pressure that never abates. If you are always under the gun, always faced with a seemingly insurmountable deadline, always running at record-breaking pace, you’re not going to last.

So here’s the deal; if you’re facing a natural downtime as the result of a big push, relax and enjoy the break. You’ll soon feel like working again. But if you find yourself unable to relax due to internal or external pressures, you need to evaluate. You’re on the brink of total breakdown. How do you change? Well, that leads us to our first solution.

Solution #1: Pace Yourself

If you’re a car racing fan, you know that in some races it’s common for the driver to pull over for a pit stop. During this brief intermission, tires are changed, fuel is added and other diagnostics are performed to insure the car and driver continue to operate at maximum potential. You can probably see where I’m going here: If a professional race car driver needs to pace him- or herself, it’s natural to assume that people in other areas of life should think about pacing as well.

Even if your business or career requires constant push-push-push (and with 24/7 technology, almost everyone considers themselves to be always “on”), you have to find ways to pace yourself. Maybe it means taking a yoga class during lunch one day a week, or using every Sunday as a complete day of rest away from cell phone, pager, fax, email and iPad.
Sound crazy? Well, the crazier it sounds, the more necessary it is. To quote Eleanor Roosevelt, “We must do the thing we think we cannot do.” If you think you just can’t take a week vacation each year that means you need to do it!

“Yeah,” you might be saying. “That sounds good. But you don’t know MY customers or MY boss or MY industry.” You’re right, I don’t. But I do know that virtually every industry and every market has someone at the top who manages to take time off. Heck, even the President goes golfing and to Martha’s Vineyard! If the head of the free world can scrape together enough time to take a break, you can too.

In fact, that’s a great place to start. Find someone in your field who seems to have managed a workable pace and is still seen as a success. Then ask them how they do it. Do they take lunches off? Leave the cell phone at work? Or maybe they just schedule five minutes of breathing room in every hour?

After you’ve found a life-balance mentor, set a small goal. Maybe this week it’s just to walk to pick the kids up from school instead of driving, and to not use your cell phone during meals. These small cushions of blank space let your emotions and brain – and body! – start to recover.

And speaking of your body, don’t forget to work out. Exercising not only brings much-needed oxygen to your entire body, it also relieves a lot of the stress that gets pent up in us over long periods of work. As if that weren’t enough, exercising regularly also builds your stamina so that you can work for extended periods of time.

You don’t have to be a professional athlete to benefit from regular breaks. In fact, anyone in any field will find their productivity improves when they pace themselves.

**Exercise #1: How will you Pace Yourself? Fill in the blanks to create a much need pacing plan for yourself:**

1. **My Life Balance Mentor** is _______________________________. I chose this person because ____________________________________________.

2. I will contact this person and ask for suggestions on (date)__________________.

3. I will start to pace myself by _________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________

**Burnout Cause #2: Lack of Progress**

There’s a reason that a hamster running on a wheel inside a mesh cage has become western civilization’s icon of a wasted, purposeless life. Who wants to work so hard, day after day, just to remain in the same place? Unfortunately, this is how a lot of us feel about our lives: That we work and work and work and never make any progress or move any closer to our dreams. And that’s a sure-fire recipe for burnout.
While that may be okay when you're at the gym, it's no way to live a life. To have a fulfilling life, or month, or day, you need to have goals and have a sense of making progress towards them. We'll cover goals and goal-setting in a future section, but for now let's talk about the importance of progress.

It's simple: If you feel like you're spinning your wheels, you WILL burn out. Humans are meant to have a purpose, a goal, a destination. Even back in the days of Moses, the most frustrating thing about wandering around in the desert for 40 years was the idea that they were wandering – not making progress, just going aimlessly from Point A to Point Who Knows?

Some people may be content to show up and do the same thing day in and day out, like handing out tickets to drivers on the turnpike. But I'm guessing that's not you. In some area of your life, you need direction and you need to feel like you're moving that way. If you feel frustrated, like you're banging your head against a brick wall, or just pained at the thought of spending another day of your life doing the same darned thing, then you may be suffering burnout from the lack of progress in your life.

One simple solution is to just quit – get off the hamster wheel, walk away from the dead-end job, or give up on whatever goal you were aiming for. If that works, great! Quit wandering around aimlessly and just sit down where you are. But if that's not a viable option, you'll be interested in reading the suggestions in the next section on tracking and celebrating small victories.

Solution #2: Track and Celebrate Small Successes

To fight burnout that comes from the frustration of lack of movement, you must have a sense of making progress. Depending on your exact goal, how you measure that progress will vary. But it's essential for your mental well-being for you to be able to look back at your day and say, “Yes! I accomplished this!”

Tracking progress could be as simple as having a daily list of things to do and crossing them off, knowing that the day’s list rolls up into your larger goals. Or you may want a more firm metric, like miles traveled, dollars earned, calls made or pounds lost. Obviously, some goals are easier to track than others, but overall, you should know where you're going and how close you are to achieving your specific goals.

Let's say you want to get a promotion. You sit down with your supervisor and determine that in order to make it to the next level, you need to take a few extra classes in project management, you need to demonstrate leadership ability and you need to be more diligent about submitting your monthly reports in the required format. Bingo! You've got a ready-made checklist of items to tackle.

But what if your goal is more ephemeral, like making your wedding photography business your day job? You can still break it down into actionable chunks. What do you have to do before you can quit? Make enough money to replace your income, or $50,000. What do you have to do to earn $50,000? You need to shoot 25 weddings this year. How many couples will you need to get in touch with before you get 25 customers? You know it's about 10 go-sees for each booked appointment, so you will need to talk to 250 customers. Bingo! There's your progress chart.

Making progress is the first step; tracking that progress is essential, too. Some people are very visual and like to see at a glance on a chart or graph what they've accomplished. Others find it sufficient to look
back at their calendar or old to-do lists and see what they’ve done. Still others like to monitor their bank balance on a daily basis. Whatever works for you, find a way to link your progress to your goal. When you see yourself making strides forward, no matter how small, you’ll see that the end is closer every day.

One final word of advice: Celebrate your progress! Whether its five pounds lost, 100 pages written on your novel or ten new sales calls, take a moment to enjoy the completion. Reflecting on how far you’ve come will make success that much sweeter.

**Exercise #2: Celebrate! Consider the past month. List three accomplishments, progress made or just great moments or days:**

1. 
2. 
3. 

**Burnout Cause #3: Lack of Vision**

So you feel like you’re making progress, and you regularly take breaks to let your batteries recharge, but you still feel a general malaise and a lack of motivation. What gives?

The answer may lie in your end goal. You may think, “I know why I’m working twelve-hour days: I want to get my business off the ground.” And to that, I respond: “Yeah, but...”

- Yeah, but... why do you want to start your own business?
- Yeah, but... how will you know when you’ve reached your game?
- Yeah, but... what about after your business is launched? What then?

Think of a group of metal workers in a mid-Twentieth-century steel factory. The first group knows that each day they’re working to build airplanes and ships to liberate occupied Western Europe. They go to work knowing their labor, sweat and lifeblood are being put to use for a greater good.

Now there’s a second group of metal workers. They have no idea what their daily effort is going towards. They show up, put in their ten hours and clock out without any understanding of how their work will be used.

Finally, we’ve got a third group. Unfortunately, these workers are greeted at the gates every morning with a large flag flying overhead – and the red, white and black flag has a large swastika emblazoned in the middle. As they work, they are blasted with Nazi propaganda, being constantly reminded that the products of their labors are going to protect the world from the scourge of Jews, gypsies and other “undesirables.” Whether or not the workers share this perspective, they are forced to salute the Nazi flag and claim allegiance. Those who don’t are punished and might even lose their jobs.
Which group of workers do you think feels most motivated during the day? If you haven’t figured it out yet, having a goal isn’t enough. Sometimes your goal is fantastic and it’s the perfect combination of motivational and inspirational. But if you’re not feeling the love, there’s a good chance your lack of motivation comes from a lack of vision. Put it this way: Having a goal that is misdirected, unclear or not motivating enough can be worse than having no goal at all.

So, if you’re not waking up psyched for the day ahead, lack of vision could be the issue. Thank goodness, there’s an easy way to rectify this issue, which we’ll discuss this thoroughly in the next session.

Solution #3: Get Clear on Your Why

Today’s culture is rife with rags-to-riches stories, those now-successful entrepreneurs who were able to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, inserting themselves into a life of leisure and umbrella drinks. Analyzing these stories – at least the ones that seem to be true – show that one thing many of these self-made successes had, was a big reason to succeed.

- Financial guru Dave Ramsey had faced bankruptcy and was at risk of losing his family.
- Super affiliate marketer Lynn Terry was a single mom who had to feed her kids.
- Music phenom Jewel was living in a car.
- Internet marketer Nicole Dean was working hard to save her family’s finances after her husband was laid off.
- Motivational coach Carrie Wilkerson was $100,000 in debt and 100 pounds overweight.

All of these people had huge reasons for working hard, day in and day out. Like explorers who had burned their ships after arriving at the New World to take away any option of retreat, success was not an option; it was an imperative.

So to bring this home, if you’re working to put food on the table, you’re not going to worry too much about motivation. You’re going to get up every morning and start hustling because you have no other option. But what if you’re not in this back-against-the-wall position?

You can still create a strong “why,” one that motivates and inspires you. Money is rarely sufficient; instead, think of what you’ll do with the money you earn. Take your family on a trip? Ensure your parents’ comfortable retirement? Build houses for the homeless? Take your goal beyond a number in the bank.

If you’re trying to lose weight, why did you pick your goal weight? To look sexy and get a new mate? To be able to shop in any store you want? To be around when your kids have their children? You need to know the why behind the goal in order for it to successfully motivate you.

During this exercise, you might determine that your goal is misaligned with your values. You may need to re-align your goals, find a different “why,” or find a new goal altogether. Don’t let that discourage you though – better to re-evaluate now than to reach your goals only to look around and wonder why you bothered.
Exercise #3: What drives you? Write out your “WHY”:


Cause #4: You Don’t Know the Next Step

Burnout can often come when you are so overwhelmed with information, possibilities and ideas that you have no idea where to go next. It’s like planning a vacation, but you’re not sure where you want to go, when you want to leave or return, how you want to get there or what you want to see along the way. Mountains? Beach? Safari? Skiing? It’s all on the table.

Even if you have the end result in mind – trip to beach, let’s say – the possibilities can still be overwhelming. Studies have shown that a confused mind does nothing, and nothing is more confusing – and tiring – than a plethora of options to evaluate, rank and act upon.

Sometimes you can feel overwhelmed and burned out not only because there are so many options, but because you have no idea what your criteria should be. To go back to our beach example, if you don’t have a departure date in mind, a specific destination, or a price range, you’re going to have a difficult if not impossible task in sorting through all options to find the “best.”

If this sounds familiar, the good news is that your frustration and lack of motivation are temporary. Typically as soon as you can identify your end goal and define some parameters for your decision, you can move forward. It’s the dozens of possibilities combined with the lack of decision criteria that make for the banging-the-head-against-the-wall feeling.

So, before we get into some specifics of handling overwhelm, here are a few quick actions you can take if you’re feeling bogged down and mired in choices:

- Define the ideal outcome. Back to the beach example: Do you want to relax, skydive, be surrounded by people, or be on a desert island? Get clear on what you want to feel, have or do.
- Eliminate the obvious. If there are some options that are just so far out there that they’re not even in the realm of possibility (like a three-month trip to Richard Branson’s private island), get rid of them. Do a quick pass through your contenders to narrow down the choices as much as possible.
- Make a list of criteria. For our fictional vacation, is cost an issue? Travel time? English-speaking?

Once you’ve taken as much off the table as you can, you may feel motivated enough to move forward with clarity. If not, we’ve got some more advice in the next section.
Solution #4: A Handful of Kitty Litter

In the last section we talked a bit about ways to quickly wade through the information and/or options overwhelming you. For some people, that fast sort-and-purge may be enough to get you on track. But if you’re still stuck and feeling burned out as the result of the avalanche of choices you face, here are some tips to help you move from “stuck” to “superstar:”

Make progress, however small. Sometimes all it takes is a bit of traction to get yourself moving again. Think of a car stuck in the snow, spinning its wheels. The snow is so slick, the wheels can’t get traction and so they just spin and spin. But with a handful of kitty litter or sand, there’s enough grit that the wheels have something to push against and Voila! The car moves. The same can be true for you. All you need is a little handful of something to let you make progress.

Your “kitty litter” could be cleaning off your desk and getting rid of all the extraneous papers and projects. Or you could make a phone call, submit an article, write an email, etc. What it is, is less important than the actual process of undertaking and doing something.

Swallow the Bitter Pill. Sometimes we’re not really overwhelmed with tasks, we’re overwhelmed with tasks we don’t want to do. We’re burnt out because instead of just doing what we need to do, we think about it, whine about it and resist it. Resistance, whining and mentally rehearsing the task all take a ton of energy, more than it would take to just do the stupid thing in the first place!

Maybe you’re resisting a sticky personnel problem, like firing someone. Or maybe dealing with the “business” side of business, like finances or taxes, is where you get bogged down. Oftentimes these rotten little tasks build up until we feel totally overwhelmed by them. Doing one or two can get you moving again.

Make a choice. Ask anyone who’s planned a wedding or other huge event and they’ll tell you that the whole thing seems like a big ball of snarled yarn. You can’t book the church until you get the date. You can’t get the date until you talk to the caterer. You can’t get the caterer until you choose the reception locale. You can’t get the reception locale until you get the church. And you’re back to the beginning again. It’s enough to make you want to elope!

What works in these situations is to just put a stake in the ground. Decide one thing, however small. Even knowing you want fish for dinner and you want an outdoor reception will help narrow the field. Once that stake is planted, you can begin to make other decisions based on it.

Give up the idea of “perfection.” Whatever goal you’re tackling, whether it’s a product launch or a wedding, you probably want it to be the best it can be. But striving to make everything “perfect” is just going to drive you nuts. Perfection doesn’t exist, and looking for the “perfect” harpist is going to have you wasting time. Instead, look for “adequate” or “good enough.” Once you release yourself from the bonds of perfection, you’ll be able to move forward more easily.
Exercise #4: Un-stick Yourself! List three tasks you will complete within 24 hours to get yourself moving again.

1. 
2. 
3. 

Burnout Cause #5: Your Goal Is Stale

By this point, you’ve read a lot on causes of burnout and many suggestions for combating it. Are you still wondering why you get a headache every time you think about working on your goal?

Sometimes our goals seem fine. They’re measurable, we put a timeline to them, and they’re things we really want – or think we want. But still they’ve lost their ability to motivate us, and as a result we feel bereft, bored, or just plain blah. If this sounds familiar, you may think that there’s something wrong with you – you’re not disciplined, you lack commitment, or you simply don’t have what it takes.

Don’t be so hasty to get down on yourself. The problem may not be you: It may be with your goal. If you haven’t found yourself in the previous sections but are still suffering from burnout, here’s one more possibility: Your goal is stale.

Let me explain: In order to have the capacity to motivate, our goals need to captivate us – not just logically, but emotionally. The logic part is important, sure, but even more important is the ability to ignite our passion and capture our imaginations. If your goal makes logical sense (“Get into law school,”) but your heart isn’t in it, you could be suffering from stale-goal-itis.

Before you chuck all those LSAT practice exam books, though, do some evaluation. You could still want to be a lawyer in your heart of hearts, but you haven’t painted a bright enough picture to involve your emotions. You know logically that going to law school is the right thing to do, and it even feels right, but you aren’t captivated.

Sometimes stale-goal-itis occurs when we’ve been working on a goal for so long that we take it for granted. We know we’re working towards a larger picture – launching a company to become financially independent – but it’s become words on a page rather than a living, breathing dream. It’s the living, breathing dreams that get us through the downtimes!

Your goal can also lose its luster if it’s so far off that any and all progress seems just a drop in the bucket. For instance, when you’re an ultra-marathon-runner, passing the quarter-mile mark doesn’t give you much motivation when you know you have 49.75 miles ahead of you.

Fortunately, in these situations, it’s not that your goal is wrong; it merely needs some freshening up. We’ll talk about how to do that in the next section.
Solution #5: Make Your Goal Come Alive

So, by now you know that having a great goal is only the first step. For it to truly motivate you through times of trouble, low energy and even burnout, you need to make your goal come alive. Fleshed-out, passion- and emotion-filled goals are the ones that are going to have you getting up early to hit the gym or staying up late to add one more post to your new blog. While logic may tell you what to do, passion motivates you to do it.

Consider the difference between saying, “I want to lose 20 pounds so I can look good at my college reunion,” versus, “I want to lose 20 pounds so I can go buy a knock-'em-dead little black dress from the swankiest boutique in town, wear it to my college reunion next month and make all those sorority girls who were so mean to me fall over in a dead faint because I look so good. Oh, and my freshman dorm crush will see me and dump his wife to run away with me.”

Which goal do you think has the chops to inspire? Hmmm??

If you're wondering how to make your dream come alive, it's actually quite simple. Thanks to Oprah, “The Secret,” and other New Age-y gurus, we’re all familiar with concepts like “visualizations” and creating vision boards. These “woo-woo” techniques are not magic; they’re tools that have been used for decades to motivate.

Think about the basketball coach who has his players imagine playing – and beating – their big rival. Or the aspiring novelist who lies in bed at night, imagining what she'll say when she’s interviewed on the “Today” show. Or the next Justin Bieber, singing his ten-year-old heart out in front of his bedroom mirror while imagining he’s performing in front of thousands. These are just visualizations.

If you want to make your dreams and goals come alive, you need to add texture, emotion and color to them.

What will it feel like when you walk across the stage to accept your law school diploma?

Exactly what store are you going to buy your reunion dress from and what shoes will you wear with it? Who will be in the audience at your first book reading?

This isn't mindless dreaming; it's creating the blueprint for your future success. Plus it's a lot of fun!

If there's one thing to remember from this section, it's that logic gives you the quickest route to your goal, but emotion makes the time fly.
Exercise #5: Reignite Your Goals! What are you passionate about? What makes life worth living? Use the table below to outline your goal and why it matters:

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<tr>
<th>1. What is your goal?</th>
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<tr>
<th>2. Why is it important to you?</th>
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<tr>
<th>3. How will you feel when you accomplish it?</th>
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<tr>
<th>4. Describe how you will celebrate when you achieve your goal?</th>
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It’s natural to face some burnout along the way to your goals. Sometimes it’s as a result of working hard, sometimes it’s because you aren’t clear on where you’re going and sometimes it’s because you’re not passionate enough about your end goal. Whatever your goal, and whatever the cause of your burnout, I hope that this short report has given you some concrete ideas about how to revitalize your spirit.