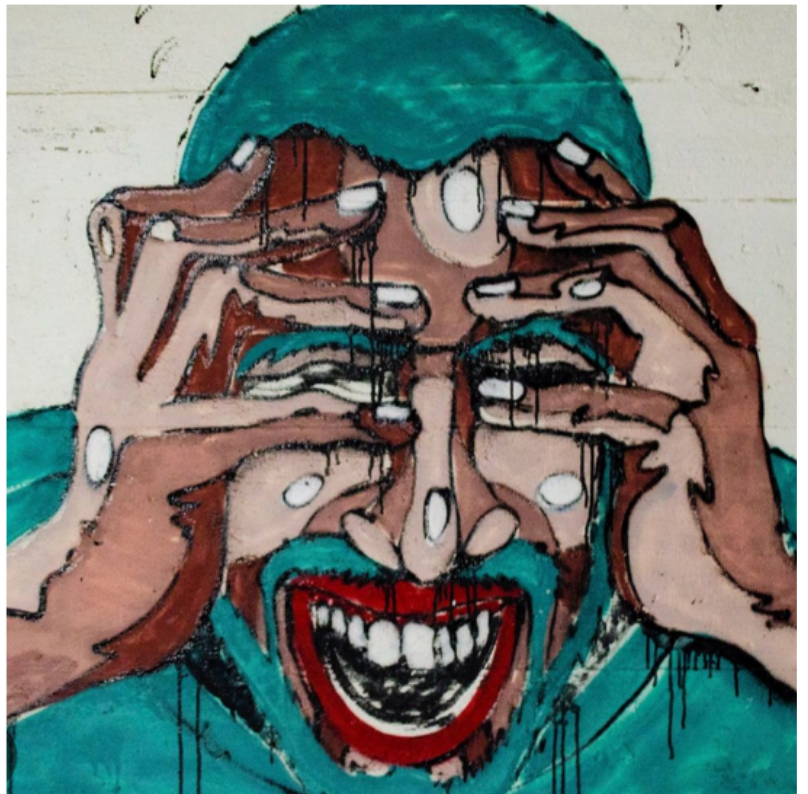


SELF

The Human Touch: The Real Issues Behind Burnout



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Executive stress has come under scrutiny recently, most pointedly in an open letter published by Arianna Huffington, founder of the Huffington Post, to Elon Musk, in which she appealed to him to change the way he works to be more in line with the science of how humans are most effective.

The letter came hot on the heels of the Tesla chairman and chief executive's anguished New York Times interview where he broke down multiple times as he recounted the excruciating pressure he was under in what he named "the most difficult and painful year of my career". Asked if the exhaustion was taking a toll on his physical health, Musk answered: "It's not been great, actually. I've had friends come by who are really concerned." The public admission subsequently sparked a tumble in Tesla shares.

Huffington decried Musk's 120-hour weeks and continued with an argument calculated to break through his denial – science. Musk is nothing if not a scientist, so Huffington asked him to look at the science of human overwork and sleep deprivation: "The science is clear. And what it tells us is that there's simply no way you can make good decisions and achieve your world-changing ambitions while running on empty."

"To cite just one study, after 17-19 hours without sleep, we begin to experience levels of cognitive impairment equivalent to a blood alcohol level of 0.05%, just under the threshold for being legally drunk. No business leader would hire people who came to work drunk, so don't model that behavior for your employees."

The missive drew a Twitter response from Musk. "You think this is an option. It is not." Huffington, founder of wellness website Thrive Global, where she published the open letter, refuses to accept that. In fact, she sees a lesson here for us all. "This is not about sleep, or about slowing down, or about asking Elon to chill out under a mango tree," she said in a statement shared with CNN. "It's about how we can unlock and sustain our peak performance, and see solutions and opportunities where others can't."



“Work like hell. I mean you just have to put in 80- to 100-hour weeks every week. [This] improves the odds of success. If other people are putting in 40-hour workweeks and you’re putting in 100-hour workweeks, then even if you’re doing the same thing, you know that you will achieve in four months what it takes them a year to achieve.”

- Elon Musk, July 14, 2015

The running debate highlights some key points. “Firstly, people who are burnt out are the last to see it and it takes others, family members or friends to point it out to them,” says Lewis Garrad, Business Lead for Employee Experience Research at global consulting firm, Mercer. “Secondly, there’s the question of whether it’s an employer’s responsibility or that of the individual.”

Huffington would argue that burning out is not the price of success. “As all the recent scientific findings show, the opposite is true,” she said, noting people “perform better” when they “take time to refuel and recharge.”

Picking up the pieces

According to Jenn Fenwick, Founder of Rebel Road Executive Coaching, who frequently coaches stressed-out executives, it comes down to sustainability. “There’s a balance between the duty of care of the employer to support the employee and the responsibility of the individual to manage their own health and wellbeing. Frankly, in my experience, leaders are frequently left out at sea, especially during extremely stress-inducing times like [transitioning into more senior positions](#). The employer is often not forthcoming in terms of providing

onboarding support, and employees are left floundering – not sleeping, experiencing severe anxiety due to lack of internal support, lack of clarity around the role, and this ‘all-or-nothing’ approach where the employee forsakes all health and wellbeing activities in order to prove to their employers that they made the right decision in hiring them.”

It’s a considerable cost to the employer. “Many often leave because of burnout. In this one case, it was going to lead to losses of £200,000 if this particular senior Medical leader resigned – not to mention the impact on team morale if she left. As a coach, I’ve had a lot of experience of rescuing situations where leaders are on the point of leaving due to overwhelm. Employers need to provide better support particularly at flashpoints like transitioning to new roles, or during mergers and takeovers where people can suffer due to lack of communication from the top and insecurity surrounding the continuity of their role. But employees also need to learn how to self-care,” says Fenwick.

A tailored approach

While well-managed wellness programs are beneficial in redressing the onset of workplace stress and burnout, they often target the wrong cohort. “You’ll often see the highest uptake in these wellness programs are among those that least need them – the people who are typically health-conscious anyway and are into health and fitness. The likely burnout candidates may not take up these initiatives and this is where we need to have a more personalized approach to the issue of burnout. Are there other stressors at play within the overall culture? Are there other stressors at play, which are impacting on employees’ stress levels, like financial concerns? Tailored programs – for example, financial security programs – may be appropriate in this instance so it’s vital to acknowledge that one-size does not fit all. We need a very tailored approach to the issue,” says Garrad.

Christina Maslach, creator of the Maslach Burnout Inventory and author of *The Truth About Burnout*, has identified six “mismatches” that make a person more likely to burn out – and only one of these factors is too much work. “It is a common belief that there is just one dimension to job stress, work overload. Indeed, overload is often considered to be a synonym for stress. But in our burnout model, overload is only one of six mismatches in the workplace. And it’s not always the most critical, especially if things are going well in some of the other areas.” (2) Maslach cites five other triggers than can lead to burnout, including lack of control, insufficient reward, lack of community, absence of fairness, and conflict in values.

Mental health strain

The health and safety precautions applied to an employee’s physical health apply equally to their mental health. Jeffrey Pfeffer is professor of organizational behavior at Stanford University Graduate School of Business. In his most recent book, *Dying for a Paycheck*, he writes:

“The workplace profoundly affects human health and mortality, and too many workplaces are harmful to people’s health – people are literally dying for a paycheck.”

Pfeffer cites extensive examples from across the globe of the negative effects toxic work practices have had on people – to the point, in some cases, of pushing them to suicide. Other examples given include serious health effects such as collapsing from fatigue, developing a dependency on anti-depressants, or substance abuse. (3)

“For men, prolonged exposure to work-related stress has been linked to an increased likelihood of lung, colon, rectal, and stomach cancer and non-Hodgkin lymphoma. Moreover, we are increasingly understanding the mechanisms linking stress to disease.”

Pfeffer namechecks a few positive cases throughout the book. He cites companies such as Southwest Airlines, Toyota, and SAS Institute for their resistance to layoffs, and Patagonia and Aetna for progressive policies regarding healthcare insurance and work-life balance.

His response to corporate wellness programs as a salve to reduce burnout is that they are largely ineffectual, mainly because they focus on the wrong things. “We know, from extensive research summarized in *Dying for a Paycheck* that individual behaviors such as overeating, smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, and drug abuse are related to the stress, including workplace-induced stress, that individuals experience. So instead of trying to get people to engage in healthier individual behaviors, workplace wellbeing initiatives would be more effective if they focused on preventing the stress-inducing aspects of work environments that cause the unhealthy individual behaviors in the first place. Simply put, companies need to build cultures of health – and that begins by creating work environments that help people thrive both physically and psychologically. Not on trying to remediate the harm that toxic workplaces inflict through limited-intervention ‘programs’.” (4)

The solution is simply the flip side of his data: it’s providing more job control, reducing work-family conflict, being fair to employees and providing social support at work. It’s also avoiding lay-offs; Pfeffer quotes evidence that while layoffs “increase fear and stress, they do not lead to higher profits, productivity, stock price, innovation or quality.”

Creating safe, supportive human environments

For Danie du Plessis, it's time to bring workplace stress out into the open. The Executive Vice President of Medical Affairs at Kyowa Kirin, du Plessis has a strong background in coaching and mentoring, with a heavy emphasis on employee health and wellbeing.

He explains: "In the UK, there has recently been a huge emphasis on mental well-being in the workplace, including support from the House of Windsor. This is great and can unfortunately also have a downside of not seeing the bigger picture and how many factors influence an individual's resilience. Both individuals and employers have responsibilities. Employees need to take time to understand their own purpose in life, in the first instance, and how that relates to the work they are doing and their career aspirations (a great coaching/mentoring conversation). They need to be aware how they manage problems, emotions and their own physical well-being, and be prepared to change their own behavior if the status quo does not serve them well. This will increase their resilience and fulfillment. It is quite amazing how often resilience becomes a key conversation in coaching and mentoring. Sadly, many people are scared to be open at work and discuss this with their managers."

According to du Plessis, employers need to create a safe space for employees to be themselves at work and be vocal about the fact that it is OK to be human. "Offering access to different programs that inform the journey of growth towards managed resilience is the ideal – either in-house or through third parties. I believe this should be the norm for all companies and organizations, while one should appreciate that different size companies will have different offerings. What is in it for the company? Resilient employees perform better and retain their aligned passion for the purpose of the company, which is why they joined in the first place. It becomes easier to really be present (which links again with mindfulness and mental well-being). This takes the term 'presenteeism', coined by Professor Cary Cooper, a psychologist specializing in organizational management at Manchester University in the UK one step further. And by default, absenteeism decreases which reduces workload on co-workers.

Having a reputation of caring about employees can in no perceivable way harm any organization."

Psychologically safe versus fearing the next round of layoffs

Prioritizing your employees over the short-term goals of your company can be the best strategy in the long run, according to Simon Sinek, author of *Leaders Eat Last*.

“The irony is when our top priority is to take care of our people, our people will take care of the numbers. People-focused companies outperform numbers-focused companies over the long-term dramatically.”

When organizations take care of their employees to such an extent, they make them feel safe. And according to Simon Sinek, the natural response to feeling safe is to offer trust and cooperation.

“Charlie Kim, who is the CEO of a company called Next Jump, a tech company in New York City, makes the point that if you had hard times in your family, would you ever consider laying off one of your children? We would never do it. Then why do we consider laying off people within our organizations? Charlie implemented a policy of lifetime employment. If you get a job at Next Jump, you cannot get fired for performance issues. In fact, if you have issues, they will coach you and they will give you support, just like you would if one of your children came home with a C from school.”



Ben Whitter, Founder and CEO of World Employee Experience Institute, suggests that both employees and employers have a role in creating the conditions for burnout to occur. “The thing about some companies, and the tenure figures from Silicon Valley bear this one out, is that they can create a fantastic workplace experience, but in return, they expect EVERYTHING an employee’s got to give, which is very intense and challenging to sustain over the long-term. The increasing numbers of people opting to work freelance within the gig economy is an indicator that people want to take back control of

their life and work to hours that suit them. Companies are responding with various flexible working arrangements, and also the four-day week is growing in popularity, to deliver stronger productivity that can be sustained by the employer and employees. Work and life are converging at a rate we haven’t seen before, and everyone needs to get ready for radically new ways of working within the economy.

Employees are no longer resources to be exploited and commanded, they are now allies in a shared mission to co-create experiences that deliver better results. For Whitter, the future of work and HR is human and this human touch is where we need to get to. “A quote I love from Trudy Purchase (an Employee Experience Award Winning Learning & Development Manager) is: “Don’t judge the quality of an employer by how they treat you on your best day. Instead, judge them by how they treat you on your worst day.’ And in return for that humanity you get a whole lot more: discretionary effort, loyalty, creativity, innovation, because if you treat me like this, I’ll give you everything I have. It certainly beats free snacks or fußball tables.”

Read Huffington's entire letter [HERE](#)

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