

Leadership Talking Points

NEWSLETTER

Fuel Your Fire Instead of Burning Out


When Marianne got pneumonia, she didn't think it was a big deal. She knew she had been overworking—running a sales region for a big company meant constant travel and endless problems to solve—and she was averaging about five hours of sleep a night.

But month after month, even after the pneumonia dissipated, Marianne stayed ill. She had no energy. She'd get up and take a shower and then lie down again exhausted.

And she was afraid. It was taking her longer to do everyday things. Her company paid her to solve problems, but she found she couldn't do it. Even simple problems seemed overwhelming.

Was this her life now, never to get any better? Or could she choose otherwise? She decided that for her next birthday, her present to herself would be a healthy, new person.

Getting over her long-held beliefs about herself was the hard part. As she started reading up on her condition, the first thing she learned was to start moving. She had bought into a myth about herself: that she couldn't do anything athletic, that she wasn't built for moving. Somewhere she read about the importance of "10,000 steps," so she started going for walks and got up to 7,000 steps the first week. Then she learned to her chagrin



that she was supposed to walk 10,000 steps *every day*, not every week. But she made the commitment to herself—she would do the 10,000 steps.

A second commitment was to eat brain-healthy foods. She made a list of fifty foods and stuck to them—more fish and vegetables, apples with cinnamon instead of candy bars, whole grains instead of white bread and pasta. And she promised herself a good night's sleep every night.

The fitness center three or four days a week, healthy “grazing” all day on nuts and fruits, parking her car far away instead of close to the office, walking around airports instead of sitting waiting for a flight—these simple choices soon became habitual.

By her next birthday, Marianne was able to keep her promise to herself: she was now a healthy person. Her energy, passion, and problem-solving ability were sharper than ever. “Things are clearer and in focus—even colors look brighter to me!”

“For most of my adult life, I feel I was not at my best because of the choices I made,” she now says. “I had stereotyped myself and believed the lies in my head about why I couldn’t do it. And they were lies. I thought things were hopeless, that I couldn’t change. But it’s all within our power to choose.”

Because so many of us are just struggling to survive under the urgent pressures we live with, we work terribly hard, using stimulants to get through the day (thus the grim jokes about needing an intravenous coffee drip), and then we crash.

*The energy of
the mind is the
essence of life.
—Aristotle*

This mode of life—constant stress, poor diet, lack of exercise and sleep—leads to what scientists call “exhaustion syndrome.” The rest of us call it burnout. This pattern is killing our mental and physical capacities, and it’s spreading globally. People in countries as diverse as Portugal, Estonia, and China now work longer hours than Americans do, with Mexico leading the world, averaging nearly ten hours a day.¹

By contrast, extraordinarily productive people are wise enough to consistently recharge their mental and physical energy. They maintain a constant flow of fuel to the mind and body so they can perform at their best every day.

Questions to Ponder

Why do so many of us “burn out”? Is burnout a choice? What would you have to do to “fuel your fire” instead of “burning out”? What would be the consequences for organizations if everyone made the right choices about recharging the mind and body? What about organizations where people don’t make those choices?

¹ “Who’s Busiest? Working Hours and Household Chores Across the OECD,” OECD 50, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, April 4, 2011.
http://www.oecd.org/document/60/0,3746,en_21571361_44315115_47567356_1_1_1_1,00.html