Transforming burnout from breakdown to breakthrough

Copenhagen University

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September 14th 2010
Agenda

1. Why focus on burnout?
2. Story of our research
3. Findings
4. Application – coaching & leadership
5. Conclusions
Why focus on burnout?

1. Burnout primarily afflicts high achievers/potentials

2. Significant consequences/costs for individuals & organisations

3. Developmental potency to transform leadership

4. How leaders deal with it determines identity (& success)

5. Coaching in this area requires distinctive capabilities
Chronic work stress: individual consequences

• Deterioration of wellbeing & vitality, leading to...

• Burnout, depression & other forms of psychological distress

• Career derailment
Consequences for organisations

• Jeopardises talent pipeline, brand & ability to attract new hires

• Reduces engagement & retention

• Significantly impacts productivity

• Financial costs of burnout: DKK 3.4M (€450K) – DKK 9M (€1.2M) per employee
Our research story

• What piqued our interest?
  – Puzzles about existing research paradigm
  – Trivialisation of burnout
  – Experience of coaching top talent

• Research study 2002 – 07

• Field application 2008 – 10
Context

• Burnout (Maslach/Leiter/Schaufeli/Pines/Cooper)
  – Personal characteristics

• Personality psychology (McAdams/Pals)
  – Adult identity as coherent life story
  – Story construction & revision central to development & wellbeing

• Talent management/ leadership development (McCall/Bennis/Revans)
  – Leaders made not born
  – Significant developmental experience

• Wellbeing (Antonovsky)
  – Sense of coherence
Research study 2002 – 07

• Burnout in ‘top talent’

• 100 high potentials from Professional Services, Global oil industry, Security solutions, Banking, Police

• 29 different nationalities (80% European), domiciled in 21 countries
Nationality of research participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>%age of total research sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Russia/ CIS</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern European</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British/ Irish</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scandinavian</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek/ Greek Cypriot</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (Middle East/Africa, SE Asia, Americas)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Methodology

• Psychometric survey (MBI) + survey of work stress coping behaviour

• Debrief psychometrics/ career history interview (c.3 hour) – thematically analysed

• Follow up interviews one year later (50%)

• Reality test findings with research organisations

• Explore findings at peer forums (UBS Wolfsberg, EMCC, EFMD etc)
Field application 2008 – 10

Leading from the Edge programme – applied findings & developed further
Findings

- Nature & forms of job burnout & who is affected
- Prevalence
- Visible symptoms
- Causes
- Stigma
- Learning
- Characteristics of ‘sustainable leaders’
What is job burnout?

3 different forms of experience, each multi-dimensional...

- Work related, negative, psychological condition primarily affecting career driven achievers

- Develops gradually over long term from prolonged work pressure

- Pervasive, non culturally dependant phenomenon

- Emerges out of relationship between individual & work environment
Forms of ‘burnout’ experience & who it affects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Joyless depletion</th>
<th>Chronic self destructive pattern</th>
<th>Conventional Burnout ‘Crashing &amp; burning, total devastation’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>While negative, not experienced negatively</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affects</th>
<th>Highly career driven, ambitious, success orientated high achievers/ potentials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Any age but susceptibility visible from 20’s onwards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Prevalence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form of ‘burnout’</th>
<th>%age of top talent pool</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conventional burnout &amp; chronic self destructive pattern</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joyless Depletion</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
‘Burnout’ symptoms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptom</th>
<th>Burnout type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conv. &amp; Chronic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overwhelming exhaustion</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distress – affective, cognitive, physiological</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disillusion leading to reduced motivation</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decline in performance &amp; productivity</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dysfunctional work attitudes &amp; behaviour</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addictive behaviour</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recognising ‘burnout’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptom</th>
<th>Behaviour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overwhelming exhaustion</td>
<td>Over adrenalized &amp; permanently in sleep debt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional weariness or physical lethargy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distress – affective, cognitive, physiological</td>
<td>Disturbed sleep, gastrointestinal problems, weight loss/gain, headaches, skeleto-muscular problems etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anxiety, powerlessness, hopelessness, risk taking behaviours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disillusion leading to reduced motivation</td>
<td>Disenchantment, not caring anymore, anger, bitterness, disengaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decline in performance (unaware)</td>
<td>Unable to see broader consequences of own actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rash decision making/ poor judgment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Short term focus/ pursuit of immediate goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blind spots/ unable to accept feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dysfunctional work attitudes &amp; behaviour</td>
<td>Arrogance – belief in own superiority &amp; invincibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Insensitivity/ abrasiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addictive behaviour</td>
<td>Work ‘junkies’: job &amp; career all consuming Substance abuse, recklessness in personal life etc</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Burnout caused by dynamics in relationship between...

How individuals deal with chronically stressful work environments

How organisations create chronically stressful work environments
How organisations create chronic stress

- Culture
- Work environment
  - work conditions – highly demanding, time pressured, short term focus
  - work controls – lax risk management
Culture characterised by blame, conformity, short-termism, hierarchy, obedience ...

- Vision
- Decisions
- Fearless speech vs. conformity?
- Risk
- Voice
- What is meant by engagement?
- Engagement
- Leaders

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High stress work environments

- Relentless, unpredictable workload & intense time pressure
- Lack of risk management
-Demanding or invisible or bullying bosses
- Unsupportive work relationships
- High potential programmes
Personal ‘susceptibilities’

Motivation – need for recognition & fame

Sense making – lack ability to reflect on action

Purpose – derived from work & career
Loss of self in burnout

Healthy, inter-dependent relationship

High potential for burnout, co-dependent relationship (dysfunctional closeness)
The truth about (avoiding) burnout

‘It exists...but we’re not going to admit it...’

‘A waste of management time’

‘A lie told by the work shy’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stigmatise</th>
<th>Trivialise</th>
<th>Deny</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admission of failure</td>
<td>Pop psychology/self help</td>
<td>A myth/ fairy tale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived as poor mental health</td>
<td>Universal, context free phenomenon – ‘part of normal life cycle’</td>
<td>Just another excuse – like depression &amp; stress – to avoid work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk to employer brand: 21st century sweatshop</td>
<td>Meaningless</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Learning from burnout

• Burnout has potential to challenge identity

• Way in which individual narrates, interprets & incorporates experience determines learning

• Coaching with ruthless compassion assists assimilation (realisation that narrative identity stagnant or non-existent)

• 6% of research participants (1/4 of those in burnout) learnt from experience
Burnout’s developmental potential

- Maturity & personality development
- Wisdom, perspective & humility
- Subjective well being
Implications for coaches & HR professionals
Significant development experiences

Job Assignments

Balance = diversity of development experience

Bosses

Hardship & Setbacks

‘Lessons of experience’ McCall, Lombardo et al, 1988
Leadership development

• Difficult experiences transform maturity & wisdom...

• ...impacts quality of decision making, integrity & responsibility for collective success

• Put leader’s story at heart of development

• Focus on hallmarks of sustainable leadership
Hallmarks of sustainable leadership

1. Reflection on action
2. Psychological intelligence
3. Physiological wellbeing
4. Negotiated engagement
Coaching

• Capability to recognise & work with different forms

• Work with transition state not end state (burning out, *not* burnt out)

• Focus on identity, meaning & purpose – not performance!

• Developmental stage & sustainability of coach
Purpose of coaching

Enable client to access lessons of wisdom, maturity & wellbeing provided by crisis & transform the client/organisation relationship

...to enable them to sustain business, markets, society, environment
**Where situated**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Performance</th>
<th>Development</th>
<th>Transformation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acquisition of specific Skills</td>
<td>Goal orientated, solution focused</td>
<td>Personal growth, prepare for next job</td>
<td>Profound &amp; lasting change at level of personal identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Existential: wisdom coaching
Psychological basis

• Narrative psychology (White/ Drake)

• Gestalt (Bessler)

• Logotherapy (Frankl)

• Symbolic interactionism (Mead)
What’s distinctive?

• Re-framing of how leaders are developed...
### How leaders develop: old versus new paradigm

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current paradigm</th>
<th>Sustainable leadership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concern with performance</td>
<td>Concern with human sustainability as prerequisite for performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify skills or competencies</td>
<td>Foster and integrate core individual processes of reflection on action, psychological intelligence &amp; physiological wellbeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modify leaders’ behaviour based on these competencies</td>
<td>Negotiate engagement between core processes &amp; culture of organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership is drilled into people via off-job training</td>
<td>Leadership emerges from reflection on action in dealing with real-life adversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on the development of one-size-fits-all set of competencies; no attempt to adapt these to leader’s specific context and challenges</td>
<td>Focus on the quality of the relationship between the individual leader’s core processes and the culture of the organisation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What’s distinctive?

• Re-framing of how leaders are developed...

• Focusing on transformational learning from ‘tough times’

• Holistic approach

• Working with systemic relationship dynamics: client/organisation...
Law of 3 clients

The client in the room

The organisation of which the client is a part

The purpose of their joint endeavour: what here to serve
Key coaching principles

• Lens through which to observe client’s story is their experience of tough times – as a means to shift consciousness

• Enable client to reflect on difficult experience with openness to be transformed by it

• Practice ruthless compassion – sit with client’s experience

• Hold clear boundaries & model responsibility
Sustainable leadership coaching framework

**Issue focus: over-identification with career/organisation**
- Client narrates ‘difficult’ experience/explores significance
- Autobiographical writing
- Challenge that confounds current level of thinking/being
- Use of developmental models

**Foster narrative identity**

**Issue focus: Motivation - career success & fame**
- Surface dominant & alternative stories
- Law of 3 clients
- Laddering questions
- Questions of ‘ultimate concern’

**Deepen personal purpose**

**Issue focus: Stuck reflexivity (reflection on action)**
- Notice how engaged & open client is in processing experience
- Encourage client’s sense of agency in own burnout

**Develop narrative identity processing**

**Issue focus: reduced effectiveness**
- Physiological inquiry & feedback
- Explore dominant narrative about embodied identity
- Stakeholder feedback (face-to-face)
- Unconditional support combined with super challenge

**Access personal resources**

**Issue focus: negotiated engagement**
- Explore how client’s story relates to organisation’s story
- 3 way coaching: get organisation in the room
- Encourage experimentation with new relationship

**Develop healthy client/organisation relationship**

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Conclusions

• Consequences of pathologising burnout

• Most leadership development & talent management informed by old paradigm of growth & influenced by Social Darwinism

• Personal sustainability pre-requisite for:
  – Individual performance
  – Sustainable organisations
  – Sustainable markets & economies
  – Social/ ecological sustainability
Thank You!

Talk to us about ongoing research into sustainable leadership & organisations

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