University**Business**

An Elixir for Burnout

By Barbara Kaufman, Ph.D.

It's no secret that university leaders today are under far more pressure than their counterparts of even a decade ago. They are increasingly challenged by the cumulative impact of fatigue fueled by 24/7 work schedules, competing priorities, large-scale change initiatives, scarce resources, and the demands of managing large, diverse campuses and systems. With a never-ending cycle of conferences, private meetings, and public appearances, it's not uncommon for a university president to arrive home at 11 p.m. in the same jacket and tie he put on a 5:30 that morning.

But, in spite of the negative consequences of leading in such a dynamic environment, few of these university leaders have learned the important lessons about addressing inherent stres-

> "I spend time early each morning before the day begins to reach a level of congruency between the strategic and the tactical."
>
> –Tomas Morales,
> California Polytechnic University at Pomona

sors. Instead, they often choose to continue pursuing a pace that ultimately leads to burnout, which negatively affects both their work and their personal lives. In fact, it is rare for these senior administrators to stop their fast-paced cycles, reflect on the goals and strategies they are creating and recognize the need to step back and use their change agent skills to improve their own work environment.

Although the relentless pace and deeply engrained behavior patterns of American institutions make it difficult to get off the treadmill, leaders can harness their strengths as strategic thinkers and risk-takers in an effort to create a healthier and more effective balance.

Fatigue or Burnout?

Herbert J. Freudenberger coined the term 'burnout' in 1980 in his book *Burnout: How to Beat the High Cost of Achievement*. He used the metaphor of a building that has been burned out, "a once throbbing structure … where once there had been activity, now only crumbling reminders of energy and life." The outer structure may be intact but inside one can see the full impact of the devastation.

The symptoms Freudenberger observed in his patients were loss of meaning in their lives; inability to get along with family, friends and co-workers; disillusionment with marriage or career; and being tired and filled with frustration, while at the same time needing increased amounts of energy to maintain the pace set.

The complete burnout Freudenberger describes extends across all dimensions of one's life, from work to family to self.

Before this kind of full-blown burnout, more commonly leaders first experience a cumulative level of fatigue related primarily to work, which may be the first symptom of impending burnout. This cumulative level of fatigue has its roots in the changes of the work environment and work itself.

The current work environment is rich in social, psychological, and political drivers that cause fatigue and eventually lead to burnout. These include:

Extended hours. A February 2004 article in Fast Company indicated that American workers clock more time on the job than workers in any other country in the world, some 500 hours a year more than the Germans and 250 hours more than the British. A 60 to 75 hour workweek is typical for leaders.

The 24/7 environment. E-mail has evolved from a productivity tool and much-appreciated communication vehicle to an expected *primary* mode of communication. People are connect-

ed 24/7, whether they want to be or not. For the administrator, e-mail is often a counterproductive intrusion into his or her ability to be reflective and think strategically. Some executives even admit to a self-imposed ritual of catching up on email correspondence every evening after the family dinner and experience guilt when they skip an evening. "Like large business enterprises, universities today operate around the clock," says Bruce Darling, senior vice president for University Affairs at the **University of California**. "The University of California, for example, is a multi-billion dollar business. We deal with both the state and federal government, have hospitals operating 24 hours a day and are responsible for national laboratories that ensure the safety and reliability of the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile. That means a lot of travel, as well as regular evening and weekend work."

Challenges of shared governance. "Higher education is unique in its commitment to shared governance," says Tomas Morales, provost and vice president of Academic Affairs, **California Polytechnic University at Pomona**. "This need to be consultative with other governance partners requires a greater effort and can be stressful, particularly in change initiatives."

A feeling of lack of control. Particularly in a resource-scare environment, leaders are overwhelmed by the number of priorities, all of which are on the A-list.. Gretchen Bataille, senior vice president for Academic Affairs of the **University of North Carolina** system, maintains a sense of control in her busy environment by preparing for upcoming travel, presentations and other events as far ahead of time as possible. "I never put anything off," she says. "I also return phone calls promptly and finish my email every day. I encourage my colleagues and staff to do the same."

Conflicting values or values mismatch. Espoused values (e.g., "We value teamwork") that are not observed in actual practice (e.g., only individual contributions are rewarded) may create a level of cognitive dissidence that encourages cowboy behavior and erodes leadership trust. In other cases, organizational and employees' individual values may be in conflict. Individuals who have small children or are caring for aging parents, for example, may feel disgruntled, overwhelmed or guilty and experience burnout if constantly asked to work weekends and evenings or travel extensively.

Lack of a sense of closure. Organizations often move on to the next project without having had closure on the last one. "On any given day, the tyranny of the urgent dominates," says William Hynes, president of St. Norbert College, Wis. "The unrelenting stream of crises *du jour* occupies our time, while things that are important, but not apparently urgent, are sacrificed. Recreation, reading time, and celebrations of successes fall into the category of the important, which are crowded out by the urgent. When we resolve a big issue, we never take the time to savor our success or communicate it to the internal or external community. Remember, the bottom line – breaking even or making a profit – is important, but the top line is people. Celebrating your own and others' successes and triumphs feeds the soul."

Lack of leadership continuity and ongoing change initiatives. Every leadership change transforms the existing culture.

Aggressive change initiatives with short timelines are often created as new bosses strive to outperform their predecessors. Stressful change initiatives also include ever-changing team configurations and reassignments of individual contributors to self-managed teams. "Leadership change can be very stressful," says Morales. "Prior to my appointment, Cal Poly Pomona experienced a very high turnover in the office of the chief academic officer, leaving deans on their own most of the time. Since then we've begun to create a structure of reporting and accountability, again a challenging change for both the office of the provost and the deans."

Unlearn and Recommit

Ameliorating cumulative fatigue may require the unlearning of certain learned behaviors that lead to burnout. Perhaps ultimately rooted in worry over job security or an innate belief that only the strong survive, these behaviors include:

Denial. Leaders have trained themselves to look at the additional demands as "just more of the same" and to respond instantly to demands rather than examining the complexity and urgency of the work.

Over-committing. The end to over-committing begins with one more commitment: To carve out time for reflection and strategic thinking. A simple tactic would be to block off a couple of e-mail-free hours each day. One cannot think strategically in between responding to e-mails. "Taking time out for reflection

> "The unrelenting stream of crises du jour occupies our time, while things that are important, but not apparently urgent, are sacrificed."
>
> –William Hynes, St. Norbert College

and quiet time is as important as a healthy diet and regular exercise," says Morales. "I spend time early each morning before the day begins to reach a level of congruency between the strategic and the tactical. I encourage colleagues and subordinates to do the same." Says Hynes, "The best way to make time for reflection and strategic thinking is to schedule it. I schedule 'PCD' -Project Clean Desk- on my calendar every day."

Modeling stress-inducing behavior. If the boss works seven days a week, cancels vacations, misses family events and does not take time to exercise, subordinates follow suit. Even if the leader thrives in a fast-paced environment, subordinates may burn out or at least become cynical. A stressed-out boss who exhibits symptoms such as impatience, frustration and inability to connect to the meaning of the work does not invest in effective relationship management, fostering an environment of fear or cynicism. Colleagues and employees are less likely to be creative, less open to possibilities, and less willing to take risks when problem-solving or leveraging an opportunity. Issues won't get to the table because everyone is fearful of being candid.

False sense of urgency. Leaders who behave as if everything were on the A-list without separating the urgent from the important need to learn to practice what Peter Drucker has called "purposeful abandonment" (see, for example, his 1994 *Harvard Business Review* article "The Theory of the Business"). When faced with an additional task, recognize there are always choices. Take the time to stop and question!

No time to communicate. Employees who are fatigued and overwhelmed are more likely to respond if the leader can tell a compelling story rather than just cite justifications for one more change initiative. Compelling stories establish a shared vision and create followers who feel a healthy, positive urgency rather than stress. At Cal Poly Pomona, Morales has created stories for internal and external audiences that relate to the university's tapestry of professional and liberal arts programs. "It goes back to the importance of communicating and making expectations clear," he says. Bataille also stresses the need for clear communication and getting to the heart of things. "I don't like to waste time making others guess at what I mean or what I expect from them," she says. "I tend to be more vocal than some administrators. When I'm dismayed about something, I don't hesitate to say so, but I also take the time to say, 'That's a terrific idea.'"

Confusing success with happiness. In the February 2004 *Harvard Business Review* article "Success that Lasts" (Reprint 402H), Laura Nash and Howard Stevenson argue that single-minded ambition is a great way to achieve some goals, but not a comprehensive framework for thinking about success. According to their research, individuals who have achieved enduring success share five characteristics: high achievement, multiple

retreat materials to encourage reflection and strategic thinking. Always document outcomes and establish accountability and milestones to ensure a commitment to implementation. Limit focus to a few key strategic topics so reflection is possible and encourage participants to avoid distractions back at the office. If post-retreat progress is tracked, feedback loops established and accomplishments rewarded, new behaviors are more likely to stick.

"Visiting other institutions and learning from colleagues is a great way to get out of the office and get a fresh perspective," suggests Hynes. Another one of his strategies is to schedule a team discussion of a book, article or new technique. "If, as an academic president or vice president, you can't commit and prepare yourself to discuss a book or article, you've abandoned all your credibility as an educator," he says. Hynes also participates in cross-institutional reading groups that meet once every few weeks, as well as monthly TEC meetings that may include a presenter, book discussion, or institutional tour. These meetings are firmly scheduled as part of his professional development.

Many leaders, particularly perfectionists, may need to learn to delegate more. "Delegating not only gives senior managers more time for strategy and planning, but empowers others to assume responsibility for the operation," says Morales. Hynes agrees. "Every time you delegate you open opportunities for others to be successful," he says. "Delegating in a timely manner to people who are eager to run with the ball breeds a kind of synergy of success." This is precisely the brand of success that promotes growth because it's a united effort. "Acknowledge that you cannot do everything yourself," says Darling. "By declining opportunities, you not only unburden yourself, but you provide opportunities for growth to others."

> "Acknowledge that you cannot do everything yourself. By declining opportunities, you not only unburden yourself, but you provide opportunities for growth to others."
> *–Bruce Darling, University of California*

Bataille agrees that having a team to whom one can delegate with confidence is essential to reducing executive stress. "When something urgent comes up while I'm away," she says, "I know that I can ask someone else to step in and take care of it, assured that the task will get done. I know that everything will have been handled professionally and timely, and that I won't come back to a week's worth of problems or work piled up. It's also critical to hire a really efficient administrative assistant," she adds.

goals, the ability to experience pleasure, the ability to create positive relationships and a value system that rewards enduring accomplishments. The authors conclude that lasting success "is emotionally renewing, not anxiety provoking" and "has to rest on a paradigm of limitation in any one activity for the sake of the whole." Knowing when to say no to imposing limitations in their spheres of influence is perhaps the most critical skill for overworked leaders to acquire.

Other Strategies for Reflection and Alignment
A first step to getting a handle on a seemingly chaotic environment is to recognize there are elements that are under a leader's control. Formal or informal retreats of any length, for example, provide a much-welcome change of setting that gets teams off the treadmill while still accomplishing a task. Spending time away from the office even for a half day replenishes the sense of meaning in the work and gives participants a sense of reward for what they have accomplished. Provide pre-

To keep employees from burning out, professional development brings a change of setting and contributes to a sense of control over their areas of responsibility. "I've seen professional development transform faculty over the last few decades," says Hynes. "It has kept them on the cutting edge of their research, up-to-date with new teaching techniques, and alive as human beings. In the same way, staff need to learn new techniques, how to work smarter and how to take on new challenges. But," he cautions, "the training had better be good, not just the latest fad. If it's not both effective and solid fun, but just another set of external obligations that don't do anything for the person's soul, forget it."

At the University of California, Darling has found that learning about the institution from someone else's perspective or learning about new dimensions of the university can be an excellent way to refresh oneself intellectually. One way to do so is to join a task force. "It's a unique and effective method of professional

development," he says. "People become engaged in university issues they previously knew nothing about. Thus they learn much more about the university in a broader sense, which contributes to their personal and professional growth. They gain new perspectives about their own and others' areas of responsibility and become citizens of the university as a whole."

Finally, leading a balanced life that keeps both body and spirit in good shape is essential to preventing burnout. "You need to have some deep passion outside of your profession and work," says Hynes. "Whether it's coaching little league, skiing or wine tasting, it has to be something that totally takes your mind away from all the little nagging worries and tyrannies of the workplace." One of Darling's strategies for "decompression," for example, is to spend a week each spring skiing 50 to 60 miles across the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range with a group of friends – where there is no cell phone coverage. "Everyone needs to identify what works best for him or her to disengage and become refreshed mentally and physically," he says.

Using One's Greatest Strengths

Some of the greatest strengths effective leaders possess are the ability to build in time for reflection, to think strategically and creatively, to manage relationships effectively, and to take the risks associated with being a change agent. Unfortunately, the task-heavy, 24/7 environment leaves little time for these essentials of leadership. Committing to immediate actions that seem to lure individuals off the daily treadmill is one way to prevent fatigue and burnout. As organizational change agents, leaders have the ability to effect change not only in their businesses, but also in their lives. However, it takes a willingness to set aside time for the reflective and strategic activities that will ameliorate, if not eliminate, symptoms of cumulative fatigue and burnout in themselves and their teams.

Barbara Kaufman, Ph.D., is President of ROI Consulting Group, Inc. www.roiconsultinggroup.com. An executive coach and educator, she specializes in leadership effectiveness and organizational development strategies for private and public sector leadership teams.