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The Hidden Burnout Problem Leaders Are Missing in High Performers

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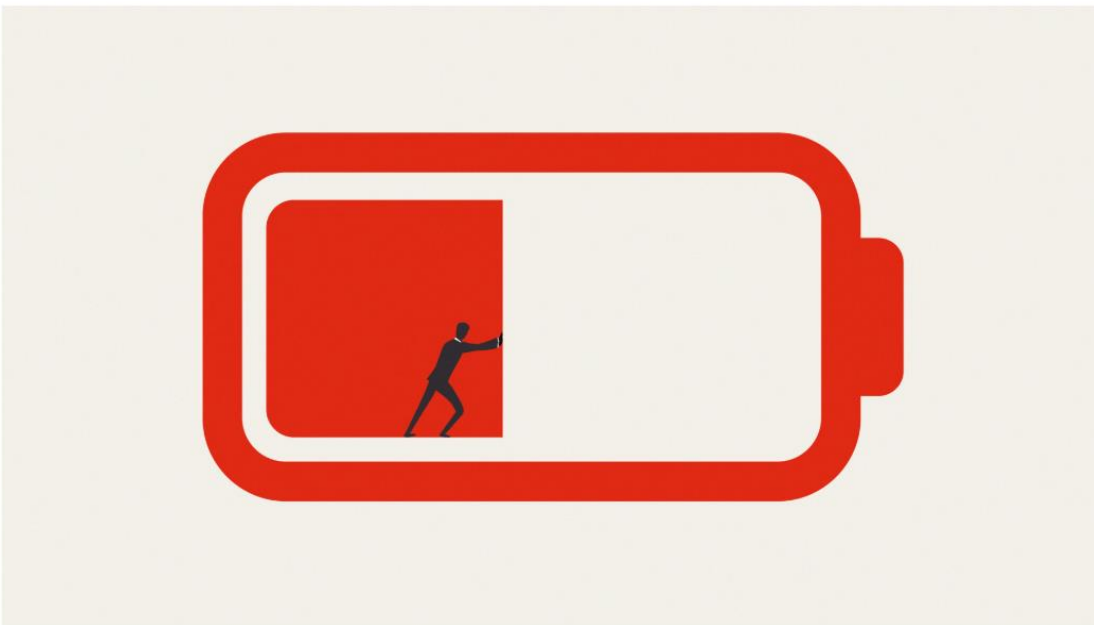


Illustration: Adobe Stock

Most leaders assume burnout is easy to spot. An employee checks out, performance drops, enthusiasm fades, and the warning signs become obvious.

A more unsettling truth, revealed by new research from Bentley University's Center for Health and Business and unBurnt, is that burnout might be most apparent in individuals who still appear highly productive.

That's the central finding in *When Burnout Looks Like Productivity: The New Risk to Innovation Capacity*, based on a survey of 544 full-time U.S. professionals across 15 industries.

The study introduces a useful concept for leaders: *Innovation Capacity*, defined as the cognitive and strategic bandwidth required to turn effort and ideas into high-quality, sustained organizational value. Put simply, it's the difference between people staying busy and people still having the mental space to build something meaningful.

Burnout isn't making people do less. It's changing the kind of work they can sustain

Traditional burnout thinking assumes that when burnout rises, effort falls. But this study found something else: employees experiencing high burnout often continue to generate ideas, respond quickly, and show initiative. The visible activity remains. What erodes is the deeper capacity behind it: strategic judgment, long-range thinking, systems integration, focus, and intelligent risk-taking.

In other words, burnout doesn't always reduce visible effort. It redirects it.

"What we found is that burnout doesn't look the way leaders expect it to look," said Dr. Danielle Blanch Hartigan, executive director of Bentley University's Center for Health and Business. "The employees most at risk are often the ones who seem fine. Responsive, engaged, generating ideas."

Visible activity can hide a deeper loss of innovation capacity

The study argues that innovation does not operate as a single construct. Under burnout, it splits into two dimensions: visible innovation behaviors and the underlying capacity required to turn those behaviors into lasting value.

That's where organizations may get it wrong. A team can look active, energetic, and full of motion while its ability to think clearly, connect dots, and build for the long term is

slipping. High output and idea generation can mask declining strategic capacity, leading to more activity without more breakthroughs.

“Organizations can misread busyness as health,” Hartigan said. “Visible output does not always mean the system underneath is working well.”

Burnout is strongly tied to lost innovation capacity

The study found that burnout was the strongest predictor of diminished innovation capacity, with a large negative correlation of $r = -0.79$. As burnout rises, the ability to perform focused, strategic, high-quality work declines sharply.

That makes this much more than a wellbeing conversation. It is an execution conversation, a growth conversation, and for leadership teams betting on innovation, a risk conversation.

“Leaders cannot afford to treat this as a side conversation about wellbeing,” said Alison Campbell, founder and CEO of unBurnt. “This is an operational performance issue that affects how teams prioritize, solve problems, and build long-term value under pressure.”

The people carrying the most responsibility may be under the most strain

The study also found that burnout is not evenly distributed. Managers were about *1.7 times more likely* than individual contributors to report high burnout: 38 percent versus 22 percent. Caregivers were about three times more likely than non-caregivers to report high burnout: 51 percent versus 17 percent.

That matters because these are often the very people organizations rely on to stabilize teams, move work forward, and absorb complexity without complaint. If they are burning hot while still appearing effective, leaders may be looking at short-term reliability while missing long-term erosion.

“When I built unBurnt, I was trying to name something I had watched happen to myself and to people I respected,” Campbell said. “This slow, invisible narrowing of what you are capable of, even as your output keeps coming.”

Ambiguity may be more damaging than workload alone

Another important finding is that burnout was tied not just to volume of work, but to the experience of uncertainty and instability at work. Among the strongest predictors were fear of admitting the need for support, unclear expectations, frequent unexplained changes in company direction, and low safety to take risks.

This is particularly important now, as many organizations are redesigning jobs, workflows, and expectations related to AI. During times of rapid change, employees face not only increased demands but also the challenge of understanding shifting rules, changing priorities, and vague definitions of success.

“Workload matters, but ambiguity is a major part of the story,” Campbell said. “When people do not know what is expected, what is changing, or whether it is safe to speak up, the stress load compounds quickly.”

Leaders may be tracking the wrong performance signals

Most organizations are comfortable measuring output: projects completed, initiatives launched, deadlines hit, ideas generated.

According to the new study, these metrics may only capture the surface. They indicate whether people are still moving, but they don't show if people still have the cognitive and strategic ability to achieve lasting results.

This study aims to bridge a critical gap, not by advocating for diminished ambition or activity, but by providing leaders with a more accurate signal. The message for executives is unambiguous: the dedication of your hardest-working employees is not always a sign of a healthy system. In fact, their effort can be the clearest indication that the current demands are exceeding what human capacity can sustainably deliver.