

Burnout Nation

By Lisa Marshall

LISA J. MARSHALL founded The Smart Work Company in 1999. Services include change management, leadership development/coaching, and team building. Clients have included Intel, EDS, CIGNA, World Bank and Hewlett-Packard. She co-authored Smart Work, The Syntax Guide for Mutual Understanding in the Workplace, and is the author of Speak the Truth and Point to Hope: The Leader's Journey to Maturity. (2004). Lisa can be reach at lisa@smartworkco.com or at 814 349-5561.

Copyright © 2006-2008 Linkage. All rights reserved.

Linkage
Unleash your full potential.

Last week, a client of mine had a stroke. He's 37, works for a multi-national corporation, runs a \$1B global business. I'd been thinking about writing this article for some time, but this put me over the top. I'm an executive coach. At least 60% of my clients are suffering from serious health issues - typically migraines, insomnia and high blood pressure. And now this. Over and over, I hear them talk about how relentless work is. They feel overwhelmed and wrong-footed, never able to get ahead of the crisis du jour. What is going on?

Technology

Technology is a big player. Historically, it has always raised expectations instead of lowering work loads. When the washing machine was invented, we suddenly expected to have clean clothes more often, not just once a week. Similarly, modern software and hardware gave us the tools so that everyone can be his or her own secretary and publisher.

Simultaneously, the rise in possible ways to be in touch with one another (the Internet, cell phones, IMing, pagers, text messaging, etc.) apparently means that we have to be in touch with each other continually. We have created a world that assumes responsiveness 24/7 - we have to be available to EVERYONE ALL THE TIME.

Tsunamis

A tsunami wave has hit the business world. The old economic geographies were wiped out, and no one has mapped the new territory effectively. Emerging markets are emerging so fast we have no idea how to think about them. Enormously contradictory pulls towards localism and globalism whipsaw local and regional economies the world over. China has sucked up manufacturing for the entire world. GM is collapsing. The chase for the cheapest everything has India outsourcing software development to China. Wal-Mart has convinced us we should never pay a premium for anything and the middle class, which used to make cars and things in this country, is rapidly disappearing. How do we map this new geography? How do we survive in it?

Cycle Time Compression

Cycle time compression has been a driving force for increasing competitiveness for several decades. Customized products and services, instantly available upon demand, have become the new norm. As consumers, it's pretty attractive. As producers - whether of products or services, hardware or software - it's resulted in work processes in which there are no longer predictable cycles of busy and less busy. August, the traditional slow month for American business, doesn't slow down. People work during Thanksgiving and Christmas. Before you've even finished one project, let alone done an after-action review, the next one is ramping up. There's no longer any breathing room.

Biology

As a species, we're not built for a 24-7 world. Physiologically, we're built for cycles. For days and nights (where we get enough sleep). For seasons. For fast times and slow times. When we stay in the fast times constantly, we're literally poisoning ourselves with chemical infusions that are valuable when you're being attacked by a saber-toothed tiger, but quite harmful when left at

elevated levels in our bloodstream for extended periods of time. Hence the migraines, the insomnia, the heart attacks and high blood pressure.

Going Down

A new economic geography, multiple demands, technology that most of us can't live with or without, constant interruptions, more information than we can digest and a time frame that has shrunk to hours and minutes. do we ever give our full attention to anything? Over-stimulated, exhausted and unbalanced, can we possibly make good decisions or get good work done?

"Successful" people - folks I coach -- are too exhausted to take the steps that would get them ahead of these pressures. Days spent in endless meetings mean "real work" gets done at night. There's less and less time for meaningful connection at home or at work. The conversations that would make sense of it all never happen. We grow more and more disconnected. Any sense of accomplishment is fleeting. And a gaping hole - in our hearts, in our psyches, in our souls -- begins to grow. Unlike our technology, we don't have a little light that comes on that tells us our batteries are dying.

So where does this leave us? Are we becoming a nation of burn outs? Has our business model created a life style that our neurology and physiology simply can't support? Are the demands of 24/7 globalism pushing us into something fundamentally and profoundly unsustainable?

Root Cause

"We have met the enemy and they is us" Root cause is: old mental models, old management practices, old organizational structures, fear and lack of trust. The period in which "fairness" was understood to be some exchange of work for pay with the results procedurally guaranteed, has come to an end, both in China's "Iron Rice Bowl" and in our own big institutions - look at General Motors. There's no more entitlement - whether it's of a manager to her job or a union worker to her pension. What keeps you viable today is a willingness to learn and the capacity to see possibilities that others don't. The predictability and reliability that many of us need isn't to be found externally any more, so we're going to have to create it internally - to trust our own ability to survive and thrive in a chaotic world.

When we're driven by fear, that's a hard thing to do.

Rob Goffee and Gareth Smith noted in a recent *HBR* article that "Hierarchies have always been much more than structural devices. They have also been sources of meaning for people. Moving through stable hierarchies gave the illusion of becoming more of a leader." Yet, last fall, *Business Week* ran a story called "The Real Reasons You're Working So Hard," which noted that, despite all downsizing, right sizing and business process reengineering, there are actually 20% more managers today than there were 15 years ago.

M clients' lives are consumed by meaningless meetings, and they have little imagination for resolving the issue. Has our hunger for hierarchy in order to make meaning of our work lives created the force that strangles productivity? Because managers want to be included, and managers want to approve, and that means meetings and meetings means work isn't getting done.. *The Ultimate Cost: No Time to Lead* This implosion of pressures means that leaders don't have time to think. They're being fire-hosed, and can't get a breath, let alone get strategic, create a compelling story that makes the world make sense, develop leaders or any of the other

things their gut tells them they should be doing. *They can't find time to lead.* In the face of all this, what *could* leaders be doing? Here's my take:

Learn to, as one of my clients says, "Monitor thyself." Know your own burnout signs. Take stock of physical health, family health and spiritual health. And invest time in all three.

Have the guts to say "Time out. We don't know what we're doing here, and we can't make decisions and take actions when we don't know which way is true north. Let's take the time to have the conversations about what everyone is seeing and hearing so that we can jointly make enough meaning out of the situation to re-establish our compass."

Replace the meaning-making function of hierarchies with mean-making of their own, through creative visioning and strategic planning that results in big, rich stories of purpose that everyone in the organization wants to be part of;

If these sound basic, that's right: they are. Unfortunately, they're about as common as common sense -not very. Immigrants to a new country know they'll have to work twice as hard as the country's citizens in order to succeed. Now we *all* need to understand that we're immigrants. That's how profoundly the geography has changed. But instead of having to work harder - because I don't believe a lot of my clients can work any harder than they already are - we have to learn to work simpler, work easier, cut through the noise and stay focused on what really matters.

It's very hard for people to make the elemental moves that can hack away the underbrush and cut through to what really counts. Yet those are the only moves that will allow leaders to find the time to lead. When they make the time to do these things, they'll have learned how to lead 21st Century-style.

Epilogue

My client is recovering, slowly. He's delegated many things that a few short weeks ago he absolutely "had" to do himself, and has sheepishly admitted that they're getting done much better as a result. He's paying attention to life style issues like what he eats, how much he exercises, taking vacations and other forms of self-care. We're having important conversations about what really matters. And he's paying attention to the behaviors at work that got him in to this trouble. He's a gifted leader, and I have high hopes in a few months he'll be in shape to lead again - and the wiser for this experience.

Is a near-death experience necessary for you to learn these same lessons?

Linkage

Linkage is a global organizational development company that specializes in leadership development. We provide clients around the globe with integrated solutions that include strategic consulting services, customized leadership development and training experiences, tailored assessment services, and benchmark research. Linkage's mission is to connect high-performing leaders and organizations to the futures they want to create.

With a relentless commitment to learning, Linkage also offers conferences, institutes, summits, open-enrollment workshops, and distance learning programs on leading-edge topics in leadership, management, human resources, and organizational development. More than 200,000 leaders and managers have attended Linkage programs since 1988.

Linkage
Burlington, MA
781.402.5555
info@linkageinc.com