

Moving from burnout to renewal in agencies

 By Lana Hindmarch

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In the advertising and marketing industries there remains a level of acceptance about being always-on and rewarding people who work long hours.



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Survival of the fittest. Go big or go home. Always hustling. Booked and busy. Sleep when I'm dead. Always-on.... Do any of these sound familiar? These catchphrases were once badges of honour but they are starting to lose their appeal.

The pandemic has made people rethink their priorities and wellbeing is top of the list. Employees now expect their employers to become partners in their wellbeing - and to fuel their energy, not drain it.

Yet people are anxious, exhausted and overwhelmed. These are all signs of burnout, a syndrome now defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as the inevitable consequence of prolonged, unmanaged stress.

Of course, it existed long before the pandemic. In 2019, the WHO predicted that work-related stress and burnout was going to be one of the world's most prevalent diseases.

The erosion of the human soul

Dr Christina Maslach, a leading researcher globally on burnout, calls it “the erosion of the human soul”.

Burnout is insidious because it doesn't give you a heads-up that it's coming - and it can take years to recover from and it can't be cured with a holiday or weekend off. And, it is now pervasive in advertising and it's getting worse.

Technology: a paradox

The world of advertising is complex and stressful, and agencies have always made high demands on their people. In the last 20 years or so, this demand level has accelerated – and it's changed lives dramatically.

So much more is being asked of employees and, typically, the response to this increased pressure is to put in more hours, juggle more balls and sleep less.

The primary accelerant of this rise in stress is technology. Having the world at our fingertips, and in our pockets, has accelerated the pace of our lives unlike ever before.

While technology was designed to help us, our relationship with technology is a paradox: the same devices that create opportunities for connection, productivity and convenience, make it difficult for us to disconnect.

Time is finite

For workers already running on empty the pandemic placed even more demands on them as they faced with new challenges such as remote working. Burnout and stress levels are at their highest levels ever.

In advertising, factors like more demanding clients, the expectations of faster responses and shorter turnaround times, combined with the fear of retrenchments among employees, and fear of losing clients, has made it more difficult for agency staff and agencies to push back.

This has led to increased workloads and longer hours for agency staff.

But the problem is that there are no more hours. Time is finite. Putting in more hours is not a solution because you begin to get diminishing returns on each incremental hour you invest...and then when you push it too hard, you get collateral damage and time turns against you. That's how burnout happens.

And despite burnout's very real costs, many people don't take steps to prevent it. It's almost as if there's a collective delusion that burnout is simply the price to be paid for success in advertising.

But it's not. There is a way to work more effectively and sustainably, despite what's going on in the external environment.

A focus on energy

After my own experience with burnout a few years ago, I knew things had to change. The way I was working was no longer functioning.

My assumption has always been that the best way to get more work done was to work more hours, but it didn't make me more effective. I got less done.

I have come to realise - and I stand so firmly behind this concept that I now teach these principles to others - that it's not the amount of hours I work that's important, but rather the value I bring to the hours I work. This then shifts the conversation from a focus on time to a focus on energy.

Energy is defined as the capacity to work. Therefore, the more energy we have, the more capacity to work we have.

To increase our energy we need to make a fundamental shift in mindset and remember that the best way to keep our tank full is to actually do less – not more.

Rest like a Roman

The primary way we do this is by getting good at rest. This is difficult because there is still a stigma around rest. So many cliches exist here too. Can you think of a few?

In my own life, I believed that rest was for the lazy. I had to hit rock bottom to realise this wasn't true.

In ancient Greek and Roman times, rest, not busyness, was at the centre of society. There must have been some logic to this – after all, this is when arts and culture was born.

We all need to build more rest into our lives. Not only at night (incidentally, 95% of adults need seven to eight hours of sleep to perform at our best) but also during the day.

Assuming you're getting the basics right, namely sufficient nighttime sleep to fuel your physical energy, the next step is getting good at daytime rest or "renewal." This can take many forms – for example, it can be active (exercise) or passive (taking a power nap). The main thing is that when we renew, we psychologically detach from work.

The reason this seemingly simple concept is so powerful is that humans are not meant to operate like machines. We are designed to move between performance and rest, between expending and renewing our energy.

Professional athletes understand this concept of renewal well. They know that their talent is not enough. Every great athlete understands the concept of work-rest ratios. They prioritise recovery as much as they prioritise performance. Imagine a great athlete pulling a series of all-nighters and then expecting them to perform?

It's time for the advertising industry to think about a shift from "always hustling" to a way of working that elevates renewal. I believe this shift has started, but as with any transformation that involves a whole system though, it takes time.

So, in the meantime, be the change. Make rest cool again.

ABOUT LANA HINDMARCH

A facilitator and leadership development & wellbeing specialist, Lana founded BREATHE, a company on a mission to disrupt traditional wellness and make employee wellbeing a strategic imperative so that workplaces in South Africa can thrive and grow.

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