

FEELING THE BURNOUT

The last couple years have been a breeding ground for anxiety, stress and crisis fatigue in the workplace—and CEOs are just as vulnerable as their people. BY DALE BUSS



Quote from Brenneman Orum
dolesequi aut inus voluptate simod
enimagnim alit essintium num volorae
earitate est eume velent.
Ut maxim eum ea int acitiaie. Nem ha-
rum ditium quiditi scimped molorem
as sit assed eicius aci volorehe

MICHAEL SINENSKY USED TO MEET REGULARLY WITH business-leader peer groups at the board of the Manhattan Chamber of Commerce, the New York City Hospitality Alliance, and the local Young Jewish Professionals chapter. The pandemic put an abrupt stop to what had long been a venue to share war stories and bat around solutions with sympathetic peers.

“I don’t remember the last time I had an in-person meeting with any of these groups, where I used to go and lean on people,” says the CEO of WeShield, a medical-equipment provider he launched in the shadow of the pandemic after the coronavirus shut his three restaurants. “That has removed all the human interactions and feelings that help me cope.”

Sinensky isn’t alone in dealing with the stresses and strains creating an unprecedented era of CEO burnout. Today’s business leaders answer to a wider range of stakeholders who wield greater influence than ever before, and do so in a global ecosystem vulnerable to domestic and foreign market gyrations. And recent years have added a host of new hurdles to their plates, including pandemic chaos, the remote-work imperative, pushes to improve diversity initiatives and address social issues, supply-chain difficulties and acute squeezes from inflation and labor shortages. What’s more, all of this must be accomplished while also rallying employees around the mission at hand.

“CEOs are burning out from trying to be strong and optimistic for employees over the past two years and feeling like they can’t be their authentic selves and show their own fears and vulnerabilities,” says Teresa Hopke, CEO for the Americas of Talking Talent, an executive-coaching firm.

Greg Brenneman, who turned around failing Continental Airlines in the 2000s as CEO, has written about his own struggles in the corner office. “You’re 24x7 and a lot of people are depending on you. It’s often fairly lonely. The pandemic made that a little tougher.” Part of the problem, he says, is that CEOs’ main role is to “absorb fear and exude hope.” Lately they’ve had to max out on both.

So how are CEOs coping—and how should you be coping? *Chief Executive* reached out to CEOs, performance experts and coaches for tips on staying fresh and avoiding the burn in a very stressful time. Here’s some of what we heard:

Care for yourself.

Glen Hartman, North America president for Accenture Interactive, advises fellow chiefs to “prioritize and embrace self-care and caring for others in what’s sure to be another unpredictable year.”

That may seem like common sense advice, but many CEOs “haven’t been prioritizing putting on their own oxygen masks first through self-care and restoration,” Hopke WHO? says. “You can’t pour from an empty cup, so the impact of self-neglect is that they have nothing left to give others or themselves.”

The bare minimum in that regard is getting enough rest, having proper nutrition and providing a dedicated time for exercise and meditation, says Tim Russell, partner with the Tolan Group HR consultancy.

But some chiefs go way beyond. Casey Watkins, CEO of Quility, an online provider of life insurance, gets on his mountain bike at least three to four times a week. “It forces me to take my brain and not concentrate on anything else but what I’m doing,” he says. “And it happens to be good for me physically. You can’t underestimate the value of the energy and the clarity you can get from that.”

He also schedules a few week-long vacations throughout the year. “I’m refueled by

the disconnect and I re-charge. Every single time I come back I have clarity about something very important in our business.”

Sanjay Rishi includes himself in his “no-meetings Fridays” policy for Work Dynamics, a consulting division of the JLL real-estate firm, which “help create the space for deep work time to focus on pressing tasks.” The CEO also accesses Headspace, a meditation app which is free to JLL employees, “to help manage feelings of stress and anxiety as they come.”

Hold on to purpose.

“Every CEO works hard,” says Cameron Yarbrough, CEO of the Torch leadership-development firm. “But if you’re working hard on something that you don’t genuinely love, you’re much more likely to burn out doing it.”

Craig Scheef understands this. He’s president of Texas Security Bank, where employees spent Covid helping business owners “when many of them literally were gasping for air.” Internal surveys showed employee satisfaction was higher in 2020 than pre-Covid 2019. “Burnout for me is less likely because I feel we’ve got this noble cause and a purpose,” Scheef says. “If you feel like you’re just trying to make money and move into a bigger house in a nicer neighborhood, and you’re on a glide path to retirement, you’ve already reached burnout.”

Ideally, CEOs should anchor to something even deeper, says executive coach and business psychologist Russell Thackeray. “Most organizations have a sense of purpose, but what they miss is a sense of meaning,” he says. “It’s a very good thing for stress reduction to do something bigger than yourself.”

Get rebalanced.

Brenneman, now executive chairman of private equity firm CCMP and lead director at Home Depot, preaches that business leaders neglect faith, family and fitness



“I’m refueled by the disconnect and I re-charge, and every single time I come back I have clarity about something very important in our business.”
– Casey Watkins, CEO of Quility,



Glen Hartman, North America president for Accenture Interactive, advises fellow chiefs to “prioritize and embrace self-care and caring for others in what’s sure to be another unpredictable year.”

at their own risk. “Live life holistically through good and bad times. People who do that have a different aura about them, a different way of carrying themselves and keeping things in perspective.”

“Don’t let your position become who you are,” advises Brenneman, who now consults with business leaders on what he calls “a pathway to purpose and meaning.”

“Stand for what you stand for. Part of that is being CEO and your occupation. But that needs to be what you do, not who you are.”

Scheef believes that if CEOs “are paying attention to all the areas of your life, then the likelihood of burnout is less. If you really get off into just one area, like even health and fitness, that makes you more prone to burnout. Or if your marriage and family are kind of off, that becomes a distraction and work is a bit more difficult.”

Repair your schedule.

Cesar Herrera, CEO of Yuvo Health, says his mental health starts with his calendar. “I’m very intentional with it, or it will rule my life versus the other way around,” he says. “I work out each day between 6:30 and 7:30 a.m., and I make it incredibly clear to everyone on my team at all levels that no one can take that time away from me.”

Achieving a more orderly schedule can be helped by something as simple as “cutting the number of endless meetings,” says Thackeray. “Stop wasting your time and everyone else’s.”

Meet with peers.

Find ways around the lack of physical get-togethers with peers and mentors that have waned since the pandemic. “Physical isolation leads to depression which can ultimately lead to burnout,” Russell says. “Being able to associate and network with those of like title and position can help bring clarity to issues within [CEOs’] respective organizations as well as provide an outlet for a social connection.”

Gather good people.

This means inside and outside the company. Inside, Watkins surrounds himself with, “people who are amazing and supportive.” Hopke

suggests hiring an executive coach who can help a CEO “be more vulnerable, authentic and aware of what they need to manage in a really human way through all of this.”

Senensky talks weekly with a therapist. “If you’re shielding everyone else but yourself from the negativity, you’re going to blow up and collapse,” he says.

Watch your structure.

CEOs can help ward off burnout by how they select, organize and utilize their staffs. “Ninety percent of CEOs are far too much into the details of the jobs of the people at the next level down; they’re always operating at one level too low,” says Thackeray. “Their job is to stand back and pull themselves out of the mess.”

Rajeev Kapur, CEO of 1105 Media, tries to make sure he’s “not the smartest person in the room” at the B2B-marketing firm. “If you are, teams will always defer to you and look to you to always solve problems.” This can fuel exhaustion and burnout—especially if it is taking place across multiple parts of your business at the same time.

Change your status.

A job change may help avoid burnout. Scheef argues that company owners actually can more easily handle stresses than corporate chiefs. “You started a business where you have a mission, a vision and a set of values that you created, so there’s inherent fulfillment that comes from getting out of bed every day to achieve that vision as opposed to working for someone else, and they dictate strategy,” he says.

At Quility, Watkins has a co-CEO. “If you’re doing it all by yourself, you have to struggle. But in partnership, you can lift each other up.”

Acknowledge a problem.

But perhaps the most important tip of all is this: Anyone who feels like they are close to hitting burnout must allow themselves to admit it, Russell says.

“You can’t improve what you won’t acknowledge,” he says. “[Then] take the first step to regaining the necessary balance in your life and watch burnout dissipate.” **CE**