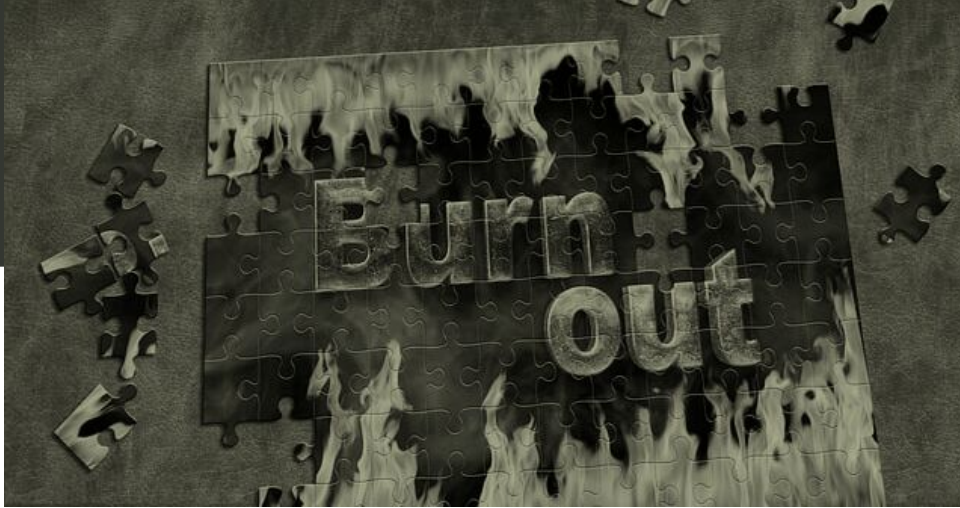


Burnout is Still the Story for Nonprofits in 2024

09.16.24 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



“For anyone hoping that burnout in the nonprofit sector was a pandemic-era phenomenon that would recede like mask-wearing and social distancing...,” the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*’s Ben Gose had bad news at the beginning of the summer. See his reporting and analysis at [Burnout Still Plagues Nonprofits, New Study Finds](#) (May 29, 2024).

The Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) had just released its second annual look at the charitable sector: [State of Nonprofits 2024: What Funders Need to Know](#). This report, according to Mr. Gose, “...offers little reason for hope.” There is “... [continuing worry ...about burnout](#). Sixty-nine percent of charity leaders said they were somewhat or very concerned about staff burnout, a *slightly higher share* than last year, when the center surveyed the same group of charities.” (emph. added)

Just a few weeks later, in a separate publication titled [How Foundations Are Supporting Grantee Staff Well-Being](#) (June 2024), CEP framed the burnout issue sector-wide as (at least nearly) chronic. This report is the second in the Center for Effective Philanthropy’s Research Snapshot Series: brief, data-informed publications “designed to answer timely, specific questions that are relevant to funders....” The purpose of this Snapshot is “to understand foundation leaders’ perspectives and actions related to the well-being and burnout of staff at the organizations they fund.”

The expert commentary through the summer – on these reports as well as from other sources including anecdotal evidence – has continued the drumbeat of alarm. See, for instance: [CEP’s Latest Report on Nonprofits Reveals “A Wild World” of Burnout, Raising Questions for Funders](#) (June 17, 2024) Dawn Wolfe, *insidephilanthropy.com*; [What Nonprofit Burnout Looks Like from the Funders’ Point of View](#) (June 26, 2024) Dawn Wolfe, *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*; and [Burnout and Staffing Shortages Continue to Challenge Nonprofits](#) (July 2, 2024) Isaiah Thompson, *The Nonprofit Quarterly*.

Before diving into the troubling 2024 findings – we’ll do that in the next post – let’s briefly recap the dire sector-wide conversation about burnout during 2023.

Why?

In [Readings on Nonprofit Burnout](#) (August 2, 2023) *FPLG Blog*, we recommended research and commentary from 2021-2023 including – most particularly – a study from Australia: [Supporting resilience and preventing burnout in nonprofits](#) (April 11, 2023) *Social Sector Insights*, *mckinsey.com*. According to Dr. Jamie King, University of Queensland psychology research fellow, “[w]hat’s more concerning than the sky-high levels of burnout reported by nonprofit leaders in a recent survey [is] how many respondents indicated they’ve ‘felt like this for extended periods of time – many months on end.’”

Dr. King explained that she “... sees time spent at or near burnout “... as analogous to a deep-sea-diver” spending time at depth. “It is a matter of science” and established protocols that divers “... must spend a predetermined amount of time in a decompression chamber to avoid the bends...”

This special feature of the effect of long-term and unrelenting burnout exposure seems not to have been adequately addressed. So the new data about burnout in 2024 should be considered as the ongoing and *cumulative* emergency that it is: a problem needing truly out-of-the-box solutions.

The 2023 Data and Analyses

“Burnout” was already a “five-alarm worry” in 2023:

- [The Post-Covid Nonprofit: Burnout, Chaos, and the Grinding Hunt for Staff and New Revenue](#) (April 4, 2023) Drew Lindsay, *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*. Mr. Lindsay drew a compelling picture of frustration and despair in the sector.
- [Uncertain Economy — and the Nation’s Debt Debate — Snag Nonprofit Finances](#) (May 31, 2023) Sara Herschander, *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*. She quoted Tim Delaney, CEO of the National Council of Nonprofits: “The nonprofit sector has been roasted on the outside.” Mr. Delaney likened the dire situation to “... a hard pretzel rod on the verge of snapping in half That’s how fragile things are right now.”
- [New Surveys: Alarm Bells for Nonprofit Sector](#) (June 26, 2023) *FPLG Blog*. We reported on the “... important [survey and report](#) from the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP): [State of Nonprofits 2023: What Funders Need to Know](#) (June 20, 2023). CEP’s “aim was to explore the state of nonprofit relationships with both foundations and individual donors, how nonprofits are perceiving current challenges, and their recent and projected financial results.”
- [“Thank You, Funders.” But There’s More Work To Do](#) (July 25, 2023) *FPLG Blog*. Here, we discussed an insightful response to the CEP Report from NCN’s Tim Delaney – [A Note of Gratitude and a Word of Warning from Nonprofits](#) (July 20, 2023). CEP had graciously printed Mr. Delaney’s response on its own blog, despite his respectful disagreement with CEP’s study analysis as being a bit too “glass half full.”
- [Burnout: Nonprofits’ Five-Alarm Worry](#) (July 30, 2023) *FPLG Blog*. We explained that the word “...burnout – and particularly the type specific to the nonprofit sector” – had

“...figured prominently throughout this period: in the June 20th CEP Report, in Tim Delaney’s July 20th response, and in nervous conversations all around the nonprofit community,” often popping up “...in the same discussions as worries about ‘staff-related issues.”

A Six-Alarm Fire?

Formal research data and findings so far in 2024 confirm that burnout continues to be an enormous worry for nonprofit leaders. Before considering details and specifics from this recent data and analyses, there are a few pertinent points to mention.

First, the Center for Effective Philanthropy designed its 2024 survey, in part, as a follow-up to the 2023 research and analysis. The CEP research team took “... the pulse of nonprofit leaders again, to understand their perspectives and examine change over time.” See [State of Nonprofits 2024: What Funders Need to Know](#) (May 2024. 28-pages PDF, download [here](#)). They reached out to the “same group of leaders” they had surveyed in 2023 “to learn how their experiences have evolved over the past year....”

Second, two of the three key “findings” offer intriguing information. The “common wisdom” of the nonprofit sector has been that the passage of time and emotional distance from the woes of the pandemic – particularly, the financial ones – would result in steady improvement for everyone.

Finding No. 1 summarizes the situation as reported from early 2024: “Burnout – for both nonprofit staff and leadership – remains a top concern for most nonprofit leaders, with half of nonprofit leaders feeling more concerned *about their own burnout* than this time last year.” (emph. added)

Finding No. 2 is interesting as well, partly because it’s a bit of a head-scratcher: “As in 2023, most nonprofits experienced either a balanced budget or a surplus in the most recently completed fiscal year, and the majority anticipate breaking even or having a surplus this fiscal year.”

Clearly, last year’s five-alarm-fire has not been contained.

Conclusion

It likely won’t be contained, much less controlled in any meaningful way until it’s viewed and tackled through innovative prisms including – for instance – the [deep-sea-divers analogy](#) of Dr. Jamie King.

– Linda J. Rosenthal, J.D., FPLG Information & Research Director