

Burnout: Nonprofits' Five-Alarm Worry

07.30.23 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



In late June, we [reported on](#) an 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.”

A month later, the CEO and president of the National Council of Nonprofits, Tim Delaney, wrote an [insightful response](#) which CEP kindly published on its own blog: [A Note of Gratitude and a Word of Warning from Nonprofits](#) (July 20, 2023). We discussed it last week in [Thank You, Funders.](#)” [But There’s More Work To Do](#) (July 25, 2023), concluding: “The issue of burnout – and particularly the type specific to the nonprofit sector – is the next topic we’ll explore. Stay tuned.”

Top Challenges

“Burnout” is a word that figures prominently in the June 20th CEP Report, in Tim Delaney’s July 20th “open letter,” and in nervous conversations all around the nonprofit community. Often, it pops up in the same discussions as worries about “staff-related issues.”

For instance, in the CEP Report, [Finding 2](#) states: “Issues related to staff — including burnout, filling staff positions, and retaining staff — are the top challenge facing nonprofit leaders,” with about half reporting that “staff-related issues were the biggest challenge facing their organization.”

The text section following it is titled “[Staff Burnout](#)”: “Almost all nonprofit leaders surveyed indicated concern about burnout, with more than one-third of them stating it was “very much” a concern—the highest level of concern referenced in the question. ‘We have a solid culture and team, but burnout is real,’ one leader said. ‘Our challenge is balancing the health and well-being [of] our team and the organization.’”

Tim Delaney, characterizing Finding 2 as “spot on,” elaborated with additional evidence from his own organization’s surveys. NCN’s research confirms that nonprofit leaders see “a range of contributors to burnout, including funder practices that continue to challenge organizations.’ The consequence, one leader observed, is that ‘people... leave the sector — that brain drain hurts our communities.’” Funders have been generous during the pandemic, but are still too stingy with general operating support or with targeted money to beef up staff.

The Chronicle of Philanthropy’s Drew Linskey, in an earlier article that we haven’t previously mentioned, had already presented anecdotal evidence from nonprofit leaders around the nation on the ubiquitous tie-ins of burnout and severe staffing shortages. See *The Post-Covid Nonprofit: Burnout, Chaos, and the Grinding Hunt for Staff and New Revenue* (April 4, 2023).

There’s Peter Smerud, for instance, CEO of Finland, Minnesota’s, Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center. The affable and dedicated 59-year-old has worked there since the 1980’s but “rarely a day goes by that [his] wife, Sue, doesn’t suggest he retire. ‘Just get out,’ she says.”

The nonprofit has survived the pandemic; it’s “in no danger of closing.” There are “new lines of revenue” and a fundraising campaign in the works. But, “[i]n the meantime, ... to find two recent hires, Smerud had to recruit from Louisiana. The job of office manager has been empty for months,” so he has taken up that slack. But he and the board are frustrated: ‘Something’s got to give,’ he says.”

Chicken-or-Egg Conundrum

Reporter Drew Lindsay, in his April 4th article, notes: “Reflecting on the past three years, nonprofit leaders talk about how one crisis bled into the next Not surprisingly, burnout is an oft-cited pandemic legacy.” Mr. Lindsay reports that’s what Tim Delaney hears as well. Frazzled nonprofit veterans often tell the NCN head: “‘I don’t think I can take another step. I’ve loved what I’ve done, but I can’t do it anymore.’”

There seems to be some understandable chicken-or-egg rhetorical confusion in these conversations. Does burnout cause or significantly contribute to staffing woes? Or do dire, top-to-bottom, worker shortages cause or substantially lead to burnout?

Perhaps the answer doesn’t really matter.

Burnout, particularly in the nonprofit sector, is much broader and deeper than the problem of insufficient staff (or the money to find and keep them.) It is now a multi-headed Hydra, and it presents an existential threat.

“Burnout” is Relatively New

Burnout, you may be surprised to learn, is no more than fifty years old.

It’s just the *word* “burnout,” of course, that’s relatively new, having been first coined in the late 1970s by a New York psychologist, Dr. Herbert Freudenberger. Long before then, people were “exhausted, listless, and unable to cope” in a way that’s different from “‘normal exhaustion’ or depression.”

Dr. Freudenberger, himself, was a textbook case of being “burned out,” as he came to realize after a long and intense journey of self-analysis.

He had survived the Holocaust as a child, but then was so cruelly treated by an American aunt that he ran away in his teens, living on the streets for a while. Dr. Freudenberger “grew up to become someone who was always pushing himself to help more people” After a full day at his private practice on the Upper West Side, he put in long nights at a clinic he’d opened on skid row.

He couldn’t get out of his head the image of one particular drug-addicted 12-year-old patient, repeatedly holding lit cigarettes, and staring blankly at them until burned down to the tips.

In his 1980 best-seller, Burnout: The High Cost Of High Achievement, Dr. Freudenberger described “... the consequences of severe stress and high ideals in ‘helping’ professions: ‘Doctors and nurses, for example, who sacrifice themselves for others, would often end up being ‘burned out.’”

“We Know It When We See It”

“Nowadays,” according to the latest (June 18, 2020) entry in a National Library of Medicine publication, “the term [burnout] is not only used for these helping professions, or for the dark side of self-sacrifice. It can affect anyone, from stressed-out career-driven people and celebrities to overworked employees and homemakers.”

But, “[s]urprisingly,” note the NLM writers, “experts don’t always agree on what burnout actually is. This has consequences: Because it’s not exactly clear what burnout is and how it can be diagnosed, it’s also not possible to say how common it is.”

Since that June 2020 description in an official U.S. government publication, we’ve all been through a catastrophic upheaval unprecedented in our lifetimes. It’s likely that the scheduled 2023 update to that NLM “Burnout” entry will acknowledge that it is – indeed – quite “common.”

But is it clear, even now in mid-2023, “what burnout is and how it can be diagnosed....”? Perhaps not precisely. But after our trauma (individual and collective) of the past three years, it may well be like Justice Potter Stewart’s comment about “hardcore pornography” in Jacobellis v. Ohio. We can’t necessarily define it but “we know it when we see it.”

Conclusion

Burnout is at – or near – the top of the list of nonprofit leaders’ worries, not just in the United States but all around the world. And psychologists warn it’s at a “five-alarm” level of urgency.

That’s where we’ll pick up this important discussion next time.

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