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OVERCLOCKING

THE UGLY TRUTH BEHIND EXECUTIVE BURNOUT

1 September 2013

By Barbara Wright-Avlitis



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Overclocking: The Ugly Truth Behind Executive Burnout

A few months ago, we read about Swisscom's CEO Carsten Schloter's suicide. In his suicide note, he absolved this company from responsibility for him taking his own life but those close to him reported that he was in a state of burnout from his job that had also led to heavy depression. The following week, across Europe, we read about the suicide of Pierre Wauthier, finance director of Zurich Insurance. Mr. Wauthier made it clear in his suicide note that intolerable pressure and a tough management style drove him 'into a corner' and he took the only route he felt he could to end his own life. I regret having to use these two good men as examples and my heart goes out to their families. Still, we must face reality that executive demands and corporate culture can kill, whether it is from a stroke, a heart attack or even suicide.

What's Overclocking?

Pushing anything beyond its limits is called overclocking. Increasing the operating frequency of a computer, beyond its capacity, will make it explode. It might not happen right away but it will start crashing, then it won't boot up at all. At the very least overclocking shortens the life span of the computer components and it will just stop working.

If you consider that the human body is like a very complex computer system, what do you think happens when humans overclock themselves? If we use sports as an analogy, how long do you think sprinter can run at top speed before his or her body collapses? The current international world record holder, Usain Bolt (2008) was able to sustain 95% of his top speed for 8 seconds (100m), 90% of top speed for 18 seconds (200m) and 80% of his top speed for 30 seconds (300m). If you push that kind of sprint for much longer, the vital organs will start to shut down. Remember, we're talking about seconds, not hours or days.

Knowing that machines and humans have their mechanical and physical endurance limits, the business world doesn't seem to make the connection when it comes to the demands it puts on executives in all corners of the world. Executives are required to overclock themselves on a daily basis. Demands to PERFORM... DELIVER... INNOVATE... can be heard in the halls of the C-suites and echo deep within the leadership ranks. Executives take this battle cry to heart and get the job done, often without regard for their own well-being.

Overclocking the Executive Hybrid

It takes a certain kind of person to get to the top of a big organization. Generally, large organizations define the 'competencies' they require of their executives and then assess and train the hell out of those leaders so that by the time they reach the top of the corporate food chain, they are super-achieving hybrids.

These hybrids then become the examples for the layer of leadership that aspires to corporate heights. Working 14-hour days becomes a badge of dedication to the corporation; it's something to be admired and you can hear whispers of total commitment to the organization. As these aspiring executives occasionally fall by the wayside, those at the top usually shake their heads and murmur, 'what a shame'. No one really notices the ones who make



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a few extra doctors' appointments during the week. And depression can't really be detected when it's masked by an enthusiastic display of over-working.

Will things be changing anytime soon?

In the meantime, the executive assessments continue. Talent managers keep reporting on and evaluating the stamina of those vying for the top jobs. These high-potentials are measured, categorized, compared and labeled. HR professionals, along with their senior business counterparts, create a more and more competitive culture. They demand more consistency around corporate values and the behaviors they have defined. Armies of external consultants are available to define and build a model of the perfect corporate executive for any company. Aspiring leaders do their best to fall in line with each and every requirement. Drive, compete, perform and above all deliver results. That's how you get to the top!

Considering that 'perform or perish' is today's mantra for senior leaders, let's get real about the people who actually reach the top of an organization. It's certainly not the 'laid back' guy who leaves at 17.00 and turns his or her phone off on holiday? It's usually the most engaged and dedicated manager that has delivered results, time and time again. It's the individual who comes to the office even when he or she is sick, participates in important conference calls from their holiday location and answers emails at 22.30 on a Friday night. Basically, they give it all to the corporation because it gives them a sense of pride, satisfaction and a deep feeling of adding value to something important. It's who they are.

The consequences of overclocking our executives

So, how long can executives maintain this corporate sprint while overclocking themselves? Our brains are real energy guzzlers and use up to 20 percent of our body's total energy. If overclocking drains the brain's energy, where do you think it will find more? It will find it in the rest of the body, at the expense of overall health. Eventually, they will also 'overheat' and explode.

What happens when the standard equation of 'deliver=success' is disrupted? What happens, no matter what the reason, when effort doesn't equal success right now? What happens is the high-achieving individual generally puts him or herself into overdrive and tries even harder. They have always been successful in the past so there's no reason they can't find the solution this time. The adrenalin is flowing and each day becomes a sprint. How long can an executive perform at maximum capacity before collapsing along the track?

For these types of individuals, even the suggestion to 'pace themselves' or slow down is simply ridiculous. It's not in their DNA. They achieve... they succeed... they never give up. The week before last, we read about Swisscom's CEO Carsten Schloter's suicide. In his suicide note, he absolved this company from responsibility for him taking his own life but those close to him reported that he was in a state of burnout from his job that had also led to heavy depression. Last week, across Europe, we read about the suicide of Pierre Wauthier, finance director of Zurich Insurance. Mr. Wauthier made it clear in his suicide note that intolerable pressure and a tough management style drove him 'into a corner' and he took the only route he felt he could to end his own life. I regret having to use these two good men as examples and my heart goes out to their families. Still, we



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Is there a solution?

It's difficult for those who have not experienced the culture at the top a large corporation to understand such desperation. It is even more difficult for those who have never been pushed to feel like there is just no way out of the corporate pressure to even fathom how someone could reach the point of desperation. It's not about offering yoga classes at the company gym or encouraging roundtable discussions about stress. These senior leaders would simply never participate in such activities. They are too busy achieving. They are too consumed with delivering on expectations.

It's far more systemic than creating corporate wellness programs can solve. It's about turning corporate culture on its ear and examining the values and demands it applies to its senior leaders. It's about rewarding authentic 'human behavior' instead of breeding a layer of executives with artificial emotions and behaviors. It's about putting corporate value on diversity and inclusion instead of growing the ranks of potential leaders with 'cookie cutter' behavior and beliefs. Those in charge of corporations need to open their minds and listen to the few experts in the field of executive burnout and be willing to do what it takes to change the systems of selection and development of corporate leaders.

Executive burnout will continue to grow by double digits in industrialized countries until corporations decide to take the subject seriously and bring in experts to help them DO something about it. In most cases, the numbers will be disguised as resigning for personal reasons, extended sabbatical, early retirement or even dying way too young from a heart attack or suicide. There will always be another reason that the corporation can reassure themselves that they are not to blame. Remember, corporations are not people. Individual people make up the corporation and the problem will continue until some of those individual leaders stand up and fix it.

We know how to measure burnout risk in individuals and teams. We even know how to create burnout-free corporate environments, that's not the problem. The problem is that those at the top of major corporations are generally not willing to change a system that has worked well for them in the past. The thing is that the winds of business can shift direction and one day that system might not work so well for them any longer. It's time to bring experts together and find workable solutions, together as a business community and then act on them.

Barbara Wright-Avlitis, has worked as a senior leader in major corporations for the past 35 years in the area of people development. Her opinions are her own and not reflective of any organization with which she has or is affiliated. She is a frequent speaker on the subjects of executive development, executive coaching and creating burnout free working environments. She is also the developer of the Burnout Monitor© for individual and team use, based on extensive research conducted for her academic dissertation on the topic of corporate social responsibility and executive burnout. This blog article is copyright ©BWA and can be reproduced with permission from bwrightavlitis@gmail.com