

Not managing: Covid piling on pressure at top

Business leaders struggling with heavy workloads due to Covid-19 are at serious risk of burnout, surveys show. At the beginning of Mental Health Awareness Week

Jane Phare reports on the warning signs

“Overwhelmed” is a word executive and senior management coach John Duncan hears all too regularly from leaders and managers these days. He’s become increasingly concerned at the workloads and levels of stress endured by leaders, levels that have magnified since Covid-19.

“After Covid we played catch up and so workloads were really horrific after the first round. And then a lot of organisations have gone into growth strategies on top of that.”

Workload management has not been addressed, he says.

“A lot of executive teams and boards have forgotten that stopping doing things is as much about strategy as doing things.”

“If you use the anecdote of a sausage, they’re putting a lot of meat in one end and hoping like hell that it doesn’t burst. I think senior leaders are feeling it significantly at the moment.”

AskYourTeam CEO and business mentor Chris O’Reilly says leader burnout is becoming a “real crisis” and one that needs to be addressed by boards.

Data collected by his technology and business productivity company since 2019 shows leaders are under increasing stress since Covid-19 added a new layer of difficulty. The surveys are spread across 100,000

employees and executives in more than 250 New Zealand organisations including local government, health, education and the private sector.

“Leader burnout is becoming a real crisis and it’s totally understandable,” O’Reilly says. “You’ve got leaders in organisations where the external environment is radically different.”

Leaders are trying to cope with customer demand, helping the company survive and meeting board expectations on the one hand.

On the other they are trying to lead and support staff who have their own “personal baggage” and challenges.

“Everyone’s got a story; every household’s got a challenge. So the leaders are stuck in the middle of that.”

Auckland Business Chamber chief executive Michael Barnett echoes O’Reilly’s concerns, saying a survey of members he carried out last week was “a huge wake-up call”.

He asked members to rate their health and wellbeing at the end of alert level 4 with a score from one to 10, with 10 being the best score. He was shocked to find that out of the 1200 replies, 86 per cent scored five or less. Twenty-five

per cent scored themselves as a four, 28 per cent scored three and 14 per cent scored two.

“It confirmed to me that it’s quite serious because you can’t manage others if you’re not managing you,” he says.

“I think that it’s a signal that some of the recovery is going to be about human capital and not just the balance sheets of business.”

AskYourTeam data shows that employees have more confidence in their senior team, in the organisation’s ability to adapt and communicate, and in the company’s health and wellbeing performance in 2021 compared with 2019.

But O’Reilly says one of the most worrying aspects is a 50

per cent increase in the number of “blind spots” – comparing a leader’s view of the organisation with that of the staff – in the past two years.

“That’s showing that leaders are becoming increasingly disconnected from what’s

happening in their organisation.”

Of three new blind spots that emerged in 2021, lack of “psychological safety” for employees to feel confident enough to give honest feedback was one of them.

“This disconnection not only

inhibits performance, it’s also a significant risk to the business. Leaders are unaware of threats and opportunities because their teams aren’t raising them.”

O’Reilly’s not surprised at the increase in blind spots, given the increasing amounts of time Kiwis have been separated from their bosses working from home in the past two years. At the same time leaders’ responsibilities have expanded hugely. “As a result, they’re spread too thin with a real danger of burnout.”

The combination means leaders’ self-awareness has decreased leaving them in a “good news bubble”, O’Reilly says, eroding staff confidence in the organisation.

Other concerns include poor project management and planning, not involving people in decisions, not reviewing projects to learn from mistakes, problems with technology which impacted productivity, and lack of management of poor performance which affected other team members.

Urgent attention is needed to make sure leaders are supported, he says.

“What people often forget is that leaders are people too. Boards need to be looking at leader wellbeing and making sure that mechanisms are in place to support leaders’ pastoral care.”

Duncan, who has clients in Auckland, Dunedin,

Invercargill, Wellington, Christchurch and New Plymouth, coaches executives and leaders in how to achieve work-life balance, and how to “switch off” their working day.

He also encourages executives to manage their time by prioritising tasks based on urgency, harking back to 25 years ago when managers learned time-and-priority management skills. Back then it was “The four Ds,” he says, “Do it, dump it, delegate it, or defer it.”

“When we went electronic, all that training went out the window. I’m finding that even senior managers’ ability to manage their time effectiveness and efficiency isn’t anywhere near what I would expect.”

O’Reilly says leaders also need to know when to ask for help and when to delegate.

“To be seen to be asking for help is a sign of weakness. We’ve got to get over that. Boards need to be making sure that they’re looking after their leaders.”

That might include providing a mentor with whom they can discuss their stresses, doubts and challenges that wouldn’t be appropriate at a board level, he says. Boards also need to be questioning if they are giving clear directions and priorities, whether more resources are needed and whether to put a brake on expectations.

“One of the options for boards is to slow down to do

more,” O’Reilly says, “because some short-term slowing down and increased support is going to be radically more effective than risking leadership burnout, demotivation, decreased productivity and replacing leaders.”

● Burnout is officially recognised as an occupational phenomenon in the World Health Organisation’s International Classification of Diseases.

How to avoid burnout

- Think about how to achieve work-life balance
- Find a way to “turn off” at the end of the day
- Turn off electronic notifications and set up a protocol for urgent queries
- Make sure there is clarity around what you are expected to deliver
- If need be, push back if the workload is too great
- Remember to delegate where appropriate

You can’t manage others if you’re not managing you.

Michael Barnett (right), chief executive, Auckland Business Chamber

