

CAREER ADVICE OPINION

Are School Leaders Contributing to Their Own Stress and Burnout?

Finding balance in a work-obsessed culture



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— Canva



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Obsessed is a good word for all of this. We seem to be obsessed with working harder and making personal sacrifices to show how much we care about our jobs. Unfortunately, that can lead to self-induced stress and burnout. Don't get me wrong, we all have times when we may need to work extra hours, but in this time of email, texting, and other 24/7 connections, we seem to have lost our balance and expect instant answers.

There is a popular phrase that is being spread around social media. It simply says, "No one cares. Work harder." Perhaps I'm taking the statement out of context, but many of the people posting it are, too. Recently, I am finding that statement to be a mix of unempathetic, arrogant, and completely misguided, and I would guess that some of the people posting it are not seeing what their obsessive work habits have done to those around them.

For full disclosure, this is a personal topic for me because I recently I had a jarring moment that forced me to pause and reflect. In the last six months, I have been on the road 84 days. In the last 25 days, I have only been home 7. I stepped off a plane and got home at 12:30 one afternoon and had to be on a webinar at 12:45. It was later that night that I struggled with how I was feeling.

Last year, I began my own company and I'm really proud of that fact. After all, I am the youngest of five children and the first to go to college. After barely graduating from high school and dropping out of two different community colleges, I found my way. Being a teacher, school principal, author, and consultant have all brought me profoundly impactful personal and professional experiences. I don't like to just show up but to engage with those we work with.

Every coaching session, workshop I get to facilitate, or podcast I get to co-host offers me a time to be grateful, which is also part of the issue. Feeling grateful for the opportunity to create and do what you love is one side of the coin; not turning it off is the other. I found myself constantly running on fumes, fueled by adrenaline and caffeine, trying to meet every deadline and expectation. The lines between work and personal life blurred until I could no longer distinguish one from the other.

Here are actions I took to move forward from the jarring moment and get back on a better track:

There are certain actions we can take to prevent burnout and maintain a healthier work-life balance:

Connected with Friends: Having a great circle of trusted friends is important. I took time to share how I was feeling. In fact, with one of them, I sent a text that said, “Do you have about 20 minutes to talk?” And they did.

Mindfulness and Meditation: Practicing mindfulness techniques like deep breathing, meditation, or even just taking a few moments to be present can help reduce stress and improve focus.

Time-Management Skills: Learning to prioritize tasks, set realistic goals, and say “no” when needed can prevent overwhelm and overcommitment.

Physical Activity: Regular exercise has been proved to reduce stress levels, boost mood, and increase energy.

Healthy Eating Habits: Proper nutrition fuels our bodies and minds, enabling us to function at our best.

Setting Boundaries: It’s crucial to establish clear boundaries between work and personal time and to respect those boundaries.

Social Support: Connecting with loved ones, friends, or support groups can provide a much-needed outlet and sense of community.

Professional Help: In some cases, seeking guidance from a therapist or counselor may be necessary to manage stress, anxiety, or burnout effectively.

Relaxation Techniques: Find activities that help you unwind, whether it’s reading, listening to music, or taking a relaxing bath.

Hobbies and Interests: Pursuing personal interests and passions outside of work can provide a sense of balance and fulfillment.

Reflective Practices: Journaling, meditation, or simply taking time to reflect on your experiences can offer valuable insights and perspective.

To me, it’s about looking at what is at the heart of the issue. Workaholism and burnout often stem from deeper emotional factor, such as a need for validation, fear of failure, or a distorted

sense of self-worth. By addressing these underlying causes, we can break the cycle of overworking and find a healthier, more sustainable approach to our careers and personal lives.

It's a journey, one that requires conscious effort and self-awareness. But by prioritizing our well-being and striking a balance between work and life, we can not only prevent burnout but also cultivate a sense of fulfillment and joy in all aspects of our existence. The road may be long, but it's a path worth taking.

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