Burnout Isn't a Badge of Honour: Recognising the Early Warning Signs

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A pattern that hides in plain sight

In many leadership cultures, exhaustion is quietly treated as evidence of commitment. Leaders describe being "slammed" or "underwater" almost as a badge of importance, and the early signs of burnout get reframed as simply the cost of a demanding role. This normalisation is precisely what allows burnout to progress so far before it is taken seriously, often not until performance, health, or relationships have already been significantly affected.

The early signals most often missed

A shrinking emotional range. One of the earliest and most reliable signs is not sadness or visible distress, but flatness: less genuine enthusiasm for work that used to be energising, and less irritation too. A leader who notices they simply do not feel much about things anymore, in either direction, is often further along than they realise.

Cynicism that was not previously there. A growing sense that effort does not really matter, that colleagues' concerns are exaggerated, or that initiatives are pointless, is a well-documented early marker of burnout, distinct from ordinary scepticism.

Difficulty with decisions that used to be straightforward. Cognitive fatigue often shows up first in small decisions, not large ones: a leader who finds themselves unusually indecisive about minor matters may be depleted in ways that have not yet reached the more visible, high-stakes decisions.

Sleep that does not restore. Many leaders under pressure sleep a reasonable number of hours but wake up still tired, because the mind remains partially engaged with work even during rest. This is a physiological signal worth taking seriously, not simply a scheduling inconvenience.

Withdrawal from the relationships that usually help. Counter-intuitively, many leaders pull back from the people, colleagues, friends, family, who could actually help them recover, precisely at the point when that support matters most. This withdrawal is itself a signal, not just a side effect.

Why leaders override these signals

Partly identity: many leaders equate slowing down with weakness or letting the team down. Partly structural: organisational rewards rarely account for sustainable pace, only visible output. And partly habit: leaders who have pushed through fatigue successfully in the past often assume they can keep doing so indefinitely, without noticing that the underlying reserves have changed.

What actually helps, before it becomes a crisis

Treat the early signals as data, not weakness. Noticing flatness or cynicism is useful information about capacity, the same way a warning light on a dashboard is useful information about a car, not

a moral failing.

Rebuild recovery into the week deliberately, rather than hoping it will happen once things calm down. This usually means specific, protected time, not a vague intention.

Talk to someone before it is urgent. A coach, a trusted peer, or a doctor, engaged early, can help interrupt the pattern well before it becomes a health issue or a resignation.

Separate your worth from your output, at least enough to allow rest without guilt. This is often the harder, more internal work beneath the practical changes, and the one coaching conversations return to most often.

The leadership case for taking this seriously

Beyond personal wellbeing, a burned-out leader models a pace their whole team eventually absorbs. Taking these early signals seriously is not an indulgence; it is part of leading sustainably, for yourself and for everyone who takes their cues from how you operate.