

## **Book Review**

### **Learning from Burnout**

Tim Casserley and David Megginson (2008), Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann.

Burnout, or a high potential for experiencing burnout, is a situation most executive coaches will encounter in a client at some point in their practice. The effective and safe coach needs to be able to recognise the symptoms of burnout, at both its incipient and its active stages, and have a practical toolkit to help the client recognise and manage what is happening, within the ethical boundaries of a non-therapeutic intervention. Although this expectation of appropriate practice is identified and discussed briefly in coaching texts and in some coach education, the topic is rarely addressed in depth.

The immediate value in reading this book, written by two highly experienced coaches, is to dispel a number of myths, which may prevent coaches from understanding and recognising burnout. For example, while it may be a common assumption that burnout affects mainly middle aged senior executives, the stark reality is that the most likely victims are in their mid-twenties rather than their mid-forties. And while various sources lay the blame either at the feet of the employee, assuming some personality or character flaw, or at the foot of the organisation, which creates the pressures that drive employees into burnout, the evidence indicates that burnout typically occurs when employees and employer collude in creating the conditions for this serious and career shattering phenomenon to occur.

In their detailed analysis of burnout victims and their work colleagues, the authors find that many high flyers are able to survive and even thrive in conditions that cause burnout in colleagues. The authors identify that the personal characteristics distinguishing these two groups are how they derive their sense of identity (from work or from a much wider perspective) and how reflexive they are (their capacity to step back from activity and look critically at themselves and how they interact with their environment.) Companies exacerbate the problem by encouraging employees to identify with their work and by creating unrealistic working demands.

The sadness is that in many cases, the authors find, neither the individual nor the organisation learns from burnout. The outcome for the individual is all too often permanent career derailment. And here, they say, is the opportunity to enrich both stakeholders. By recognising that burnout happens and by helping high flyers through the experience in a way that cushions their fall and helps them reflect on it and gain greater self-knowledge, companies can produce “fire-tested” leaders, who future lives and work are more grounded.

Here, then, is an opportunity and a challenge for the coach – to support high flyers through the journey into and beyond burnout, helping them extract and apply the maximum learning from the experience. This emphasis on the developmental potential of burnout, rather than upon the provision of remedial support, is perhaps controversial, but it positions coaching firmly at the centre of burnout management. It does not offer a detailed prescription of how coaches can develop the skills of working with burnout victims – but perhaps this belongs to a future volume.

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