

5 Warning Signs of Leader Burnout

Burnout is a real risk for many pastors and ministry executives. In an effort to satisfy external or self-made expectations for advancing the Kingdom, leaders may consciously or unconsciously make tradeoffs against their holistic health over months and years—ignoring the fact that God designed them to need rest and rejuvenation in order to truly flourish. Eventually, to one degree or another, they might find that their physical, mental, and even spiritual strength is sapped.

Sadly, a dramatic flameout is easy to spot. But how can a leader or a board charged with pursuing leader care recognize earlier symptoms of approaching or low-grade burnout—and better guard against such a fall? While the warning signs below are not exclusive to this problem, leaders and boards should pay attention to:

1. Declining Motivation

Remember that heart-felt zeal the leader could feel inside and that the board couldn't help but see? What happened to it? The leader no longer seems to be energized by the unique mission of the church or ministry. Of course, leadership is more than feelings and all at the helm of a Christ-centered organization will go through seasons of trial. But motivation that has disappeared for an extended period or has redirected itself to self-promotion is worth further attention by a leader and a board.

2. Declining Productivity

Is it becoming harder to get through daily tasks? Perhaps a leader is working more hours in a week, but he or she has less results to show for it. Or maybe, despite spending significant time in deliberations, necessary decisions are being indefinitely delayed as the executive struggles with confidence to make a call. Leaders should **not** be treated as machines or a means of production. But if a leader's efficiency and effectiveness in meeting ministry goals seems to suddenly or inexplicably drop, it is wise to dig deeper for the causes.

3. Emotional Exhaustion

Leaders experiencing the onset of burnout may find their once formidable EQ has dissipated. Far from being able to communicate, empathize, or defuse conflict emotionally with employees and other colleagues, a church or ministry leader now seems constantly drained by those around him or her. Don't disregard the warning sign of a leader becoming

quick to outbursts of anger, losing a proclivity to good-humored laughter, or retreating to a place of numbness and detachment.

4. Physical Exhaustion

Everyone gets tired, and healthy leaders will certainly go through difficult and demanding seasons. But those approaching burnout are likely to find that a weekend or holiday no longer helps them recuperate and refuel. Their minds might increasingly be prone to brain fog and their bodies may feel regularly run-down—even incapacitated for some exertions. They may struggle with insomnia and find that the sleep they do get no longer brings refreshment. Seemingly incurable low energy and exhaustion should not be ignored. Nor should fraught attempts to self-medicate such as overeating, excessive spending, or the abuse of drugs or alcohol.

5. Cynicism

“Healthy cynicism” is usually a misnomer for leaders. Leaders should be prudent, curious, and both “as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves” as they carry out Kingdom work. However, a red flag for impending burnout is exhaustion and lack of motivation turning into pessimism, mistrust, and perhaps hostility toward work colleagues, those their ministry serves, or even the organization itself. If a once-healthy leader begins to struggle with bitterness, demoralization, or resentment, it’s time to seek help.

These warning signs may feel ominous, especially as they seem so common in our world. However, we know that the Lord has a better way for the leaders, churches, and ministries that He has uniquely called. We know, too, that leaders and their boards are not helpless bystanders. [*Leader care is ministry care*](#), and we can take steps to support one another and our work together for the Kingdom. Imagine where Christian leaders could take their ministries if they were leading from positions of holistic strength rather than the precipice of burnout.

As you work to identify and combat this danger, please explore “[*Avoiding Burnout and Other Integrity Traps*](#),” an episode of ECFA’s *Behind the Seal* podcast featuring a conversation with leadership expert Carey Nieuwhof. In addition, please read, “[*7 Leader Care Questions Boards Can Ask*](#)” and find out more about ECFA’s efforts to support proactive and effective leader care in churches and ministries at [ECFA.org/LeaderCare](https://ecfa.org/LeaderCare).