Burn Through – Not Out

– mental robustness is trained in everyday life, not in the crisis

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Stress and burnout are often treated as the individual's problem – and only once the damage is done. Sick leave, recovery and a plan for returning to work. That is necessary, but it is firefighting.

Firefighters do dry runs long before there is a fire. In the same way, mental robustness can be trained in small ways, every day – in the individual leader and across the whole organisation.

This article is about the difference between burning out and burning through – and why inner readiness goes further than resilience.

Burning out or burning through

It is rarely the indifferent who burn out. It is those who burn for something. Passion is an enormous driving force, but passion without direction and without recovery sooner or later turns into an empty battery.

Burning through is something else. It is striving for a shining, clear purpose with a clear direction that you have chosen yourself – and with great passion living it out and overcoming even the most impossible along the way, igniting the enormous inherent creative power that enables us to go the distance and reach the finish line. Purpose, passion and power – in that order.

The difference rarely lies in how much you work. It lies in whether you have trained the ability to look after yourself along the way, and whether you know what you burn for.

In the project "Fremtidens lederberedskab" (Future Leadership Readiness), we trained 32 young people on expeditions around Europe. The focus was exactly the same as in our OLTC programmes for leaders: The ability to care for oneself, effective collaboration and team leadership under pressure. It showed me that burning through can be trained from an early age – and that it is never too late to start.

Resilience is not enough

Resilience has become a popular concept. It is about the ability to bounce back after adversity – to get up again when you have been knocked down. It is an important ability. But resilience is fundamentally reactive and responsive: A defence mechanism that kicks in once the damage is done.

Inner readiness is something else. It is the surplus mindset and mobilisation of focused energy that make it possible to proactively meet challenges – and to design and create the future you want, instead of merely recovering from a past you did not choose.

That is an important difference. Resilience helps you endure and survive the storm. Inner readiness enables you to hold your course and reach a safe harbour. And robustness and the power to innovate actually come from the same place. I have written more about this in "Ready to Be Ready".

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Psychosocial dry runs

Firefighters practise dry runs with no water in the hoses – again and again – gradually stepping up until the training is close to reality. When there is a real fire, everyone knows their role. They have trained what has to work when it really matters.

The same principle can be used against stress. I call it psychosocial dry runs: Small, repeated exercises in everyday life where you train yourself to notice your own signals, say no in time, prioritise and recover – before the pressure becomes too great. Not a course once things have gone wrong, but a habit built up while things are going well.

In critical situations, you do exactly what you have trained. That also applies when the pressure is mental.

On our outdoor team and leadership development programmes, a simulated rescue exercise may start at 4.30 in the morning after a night in a self-built bivouac. The point is not to tire participants out, but to let them experience how they react, collaborate and lead when their reserves are low – and what makes them keep going.

Many say that you learn from your mistakes. My experience is different: You learn from not giving up.

Self-care can be trained

On a plane, the safety instructions say: "Put your own mask on first." That is not selfishness. It is a prerequisite for being able to help others. A leader who does not look after themselves cannot look after their team in the long run.

The good news is that self-care and self-control can be trained. Psychologist Walter Mischel's famous marshmallow experiment showed that the ability to delay gratification is linked to later success – and later research has shown that the ability can be strengthened.

Integrity, one of the most important leadership qualities, is in this context about bringing your actions into line with what you have said – including the agreements you make with yourself. It is the foundation of self-trust: You can rely on yourself. That kind of training is the foundation of self-care.

For me, part of it is "Mads time": Time set aside to recover – for example walks with all senses open. Because you cannot think your way out of stress. The body has to be involved. That is also why our programmes always work with head, hands and heart.

Leadership at new heights

In 1998 I was involved in a plane crash. It could have kept me on the ground for the rest of my life. Instead I chose to face what I was afraid of: Face your demons. In 2018 I got my pilot's licence in my spare time, and today I have my own plane.

It was also the beginning of what I call Leadership Elevation – leadership at new heights. When you rise above everyday life, your view of the world becomes bigger, more nuanced and more colourful. A broader view creates deeper insight. And for me, "the sky is not the limit – it's a wonderful playground".

The idea developed into a training concept about helping people find surplus energy and direction, and it shapes the way we train teams and leaders.

On Anholt, my moment-of-zen place that I often fly to, I walk out into the desert, along the sea or up Nordbjerg to experience the silence. A moment where nothing has to be performed, and where body and mind are allowed to settle. Both – daring to rise and daring to settle – are part of inner readiness.

When the organisation trains robustness

Robustness is not only an individual matter. At Christiansen & Essenbæk we combined health, well-being, working environment and competence development with leadership training. The concrete workers did "site-hut yoga" out on the construction sites and conflict management through interactive forum theatre – while the leaders completed a wide range of training activities that markedly raised the overall quality of leadership.

Among other things, we worked with something many leaders shy away from: The ability to make difficult decisions under pressure and get things executed despite insufficient data. Paralysis, or "analyze

to paralyze", is typical when leaders face the unmanageable, where there is no textbook solution. That is why it must be trained.

The result: Sickness absence fell by two thirds, and well-being rose by seven percentage points. The project "Trivsel – 360 grader" (Well-being – 360 degrees) first won the Danish Working Environment Award and then Børsen's CSR Communication Award, based on my book "Lederens inspirationsguide" (in Danish).

Surplus is a mindset

Viktor Frankl described how people who have a purpose and see meaning can endure almost anything. The Danish author Tor Nørretranders calls it the handicap principle in "Det generøse menneske" (The Generous Human): Doing something good for others that you do not really have to do is a sign of surplus – and, as nature knows, effort is what wins a mate.

A surplus mindset is not about having time to spare. It is a mindset that makes it possible to give, learn and create – even under great pressure. And it can be trained, like a muscle.

In "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People", Stephen Covey challenged zero-sum thinking: The idea that one person's gain is another's loss. A surplus mindset is the opposite. Helping others is self-help for personal development and growth – and that is exactly what makes it possible to keep going without burning out.

Five everyday exercises

How to train your inner readiness:

- **Know your purpose:** Write down what you burn for – and what you do not want to burn out on.
- **Set aside time for recovery:** Book it in your calendar like an important meeting – for example a walk without your phone.
- **Notice your signals:** Stop daily and ask: What is my body telling me? What do I need right now?
- **Say no in time:** Practise prioritising and saying no to what does not move anything.
- **Make it a shared habit:** Talk about pressure and robustness in the leadership team before it becomes acute.

Three questions for the leadership team

Ask yourselves:

- Do we train robustness while things are going well – or only once someone has gone down?
- Do we talk openly about stress in the leadership team, or do we shy away from it?
- Do we burn for what we do – and do we have the surplus to keep going?

Conclusion – train the surplus

Burning out is not a sign of weakness. It is often a sign that you have burned for something without having trained the ability to endure. Resilience helps you back. Inner readiness helps you forward.

Mental robustness is trained in everyday life – not in the crisis. With small exercises, with time for recovery and with leaders who lead by example by looking after themselves. Then you can burn through instead of burning out.

This article builds on my LinkedIn articles "Purpose–Passion–Power" (2016), "Det indre beredskab" (2015), "Selvkontrol og egenomsorgsevnen" (2016), "Balance" (2023), "Moment of zen" (2023) and "Leadership elevation" (2018).

Do you want to strengthen the inner readiness of your leadership team?

Cronquist Consult ApS trains leaders and leadership teams in personal leadership, robustness and a surplus mindset. Read more here:
Inner readiness · Executive coaching · Leadership development