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Battling Burnout & Restoring Resiliency

A Guest Article by Dr. Thom Mayer

We live and practice in turbulent times in the “Perpetual Whitewater of Change, cursed by cataclysmic change, but blessed by the possibility of innovation and hope. Leadership is worthless...but leading is priceless. Why? “Leadership” is a noun, a subject for academics, books, lectures, and slide sets. But “leading” is not only a verb, but a verb in the active voice-it is what all of us do daily. As Aristotle noted, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence is not a virtue, but a habit.”

The habits of leading start with the need to “Think, Act, and Innovate,” since the way we’re working isn’t working, as attested to by the extraordinary burnout rates among our teams. I will challenge the audience to think about leading in times of crisis and the role of battling burnout and restoring resiliency in a radically different way. Then we must act on those thoughts within a week because if new thoughts do not result in action within a week, they won’t be acted upon at all. In other words, leading within a week, not just a set of ideas on leadership. Finally, the last challenge is to innovate your way through the whitewater of change, since as Dr. Paul Batalden noted, “Every system is perfectly designed to get precisely the results it gets.” Leading requires the courage to change the

system-and to engage the entire team in the redesign, since “If they aren’t with you on the take-off, they won’t be with you on the landing.” That is why innovation doesn’t occur at the speed of creativity or intelligence-innovation occurs at the speed of trust. Without trust, people won’t feel comfortable sharing their great ideas.

From a lifetime of leading in times of crisis comes a pathway to leading effectively to help the team “Think, Act, and Innovate” their way into a future full of hope and possibility. These lessons are shared in case studies, historical and literary examples, and hard-won lessons in the crucible of leading.

When healthcare leaders are queried as to the biggest challenges, workforce issues top every list, including recruitment, retention, and dealing with burnout. Three insights are critical in this regard:

1. Every healthcare team member is a leader, so lead yourself and lead your team.
2. Every healthcare team member is a performance athlete (no different from my NFL players, engaged in a constant cycle of performance, rest, and recovery). Invest in yourself and invest in your team.
3. The work begins within!

Many experts have made burnout too complicated, but I believe that “Definitions Drive Solutions,” meaning that the definition itself needs to be terse and pragmatic, holding within that definition a course of action. The best definition of burnout is that it is a simple ration of job stressors divided by the adaptive capacity or resilience to deal with those stressors, which produce the cardinal symptoms of:

- Emotional and physician exhaustion
- Cynicism
- Loss of meaning at work

With that definition, how do we battle burnout and restore resiliency? Simple, decrease job stressor, increase adaptive capacity, or both simultaneously. This all occurs in the setting of our worklife, including:

1. A Culture of Meaning and Fulfillment
2. Systems and Processes in which we Hardwire Flow (meaning to “Stop Doing Stupid Stuff” and “Start Doing Smart Stuff”)
3. Personal Resilience and Fulfillment

The first two of those are organizational resilience, while the latter is personal resilience, which is why “The work begins within!”

Dr. Mayer is the medical director for the National Football League Players Association (NFLPA); the founder of BestPractices, Inc.; the chief executive officer (CEO) of Survival Skills Solutions; a medical director for Huron | Studer Group; a clinical professor of emergency medicine at George Washington University; and a senior lecturing fellow at Duke University. He has published over 100 peer-reviewed articles and 120 book chapters, and has edited or written 20 textbooks, including *Battling Healthcare Burnout: Learning to Love the Job You Have While Creating the Job You Love*. He will be a featured presenter at **mhca**'s Summer Conference in Raleigh. Both the opening keynote and the afternoon breakout will provide a solid foundation for discussing and implementing the "9 Tools of Leadership" and "22 Tools for Battling Burnout and Restoring Resiliency."

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