

1 TIP X: HOW DO I MANAGE AGAINST TEAM BURNOUT?

2 Why do some teams succeed widely while others merely get by? Why do some teams eat
3 change, stress and drama for lunch while others stay away from it like the plague? The answer
4 may lie in the ability of the team leader, sometimes known in agile teams as the ScrumMaster. A
5 good team leader has the uncanny ability to detect the non-verbal warning signs that show a team
6 is in danger.

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8 Reading the signs correctly can help prevent one of the most dangerous things that can happen to
9 a team—burnout.

10 ***The Story***

11 Not too long ago, a co-worker, Edgar, asked me to lunch. I was not sure why he wanted to have
12 an extended talk with me; aside from the occasional "hello" in the hallway, we had not spoken to
13 each other in the past. Nevertheless, I accepted his invitation and waited with barely suppressed
14 curiosity until lunchtime arrived.

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16 As we were walking to the restaurant, there was this uneasy tension between us. He was making
17 small talk, asking how my project was going, asking me how the team was doing and how they
18 were coming along, that sort of thing. Because mine was a new team, these questions weren't out
19 of the ordinary, yet I couldn't help but wonder where it was all leading.

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21 Once we sat down to eat, Edgar asked me, "How do you do it?"

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23 I was perplexed. "How do I do what?"

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25 "Your team, how do you keep them happy? My team is a dysfunctional mess and your team does
26 not want to leave at night!"

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28 As flattered as I was, I knew this was simply not true. Many members of the team, we'll call
29 them the Soda team, were die-hard World of Warcraft players. They were more than ready to
30 leave at night; they had quests to perform.

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32 Edgar went on to tell me that his perception was not based on the fact that he saw the Soda team
33 staying late at night, it was based on the energy that was present when he walked by, through or
34 near the team space. Now the conversation started to get interesting.

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36 "So Edgar," I said, "you're telling me that you *feel* something when you walk by the team
37 space?"

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39 "Absolutely. The team is continually challenging itself," he said. "The team members want to
40 learn something new, something outside their comfort zone."

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42 Edgar went on. He had discovered through talking to and watching the Soda team that each team
43 member had the knowledge and capacity to work on any part of the codebase. He was

44 particularly impressed with this ability, a result of the pair programming diligently practiced by
45 the team.

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47 I went back to probing Edgar as to why he felt this energy coming from the team. He said he
48 noticed elements of the Soda team that were not present in his teams. I found this of particular
49 interest, because frankly, the only thing I did differently was empower the team to get the work
50 done, and I managed them to the commitments they made, not to line items on a Gantt chart.

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52 Edgar said he noticed that the Soda team had no trust issues, that its members *appeared* to be in a
53 constant state of either conflict or joy, that they had a vested interest in each other and the overall
54 success of the team and that they were committed—very committed—to seeing the project
55 succeed.

56
57 At first I had my doubts. Yet my instincts told me that what Edgar was saying was correct
58 because I had felt this energy myself, and it was an energy that I only felt on teams that exhibited
59 the behaviors that Edgar described. As I began to listen to my gut, my doubts started to erode.

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61 Later that week, I began to test this theory. I started by telling co-workers about the conversation
62 I had with Edgar and asked if they would be willing to help me validate it. Further, to make sure
63 I was not a contributing factor, I asked a client that I had been working with on agile adoption to
64 keep an eye out for the traits Edgar and I had discussed.

65
66 Indeed, the results confirmed my suspicions. Each person I talked to, both internal and external
67 to our company, said they felt an energy being given off by the team.

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69 This got me thinking, why don't all teams give off that energy? I began to look at projects that
70 were not going well to see if I could find a pattern. I watched countless daily standup meetings. I
71 helped facilitate end-of-sprint retrospectives and I bought a lot of people lunch.

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73 It didn't take long to solve the riddle because the answer was so obvious. Team members on the
74 struggling projects were exhausted and burned out. How *could* they give off any energy?

75 ***The Model***

76 Team burnout happens when people are expected to work at a pace that is not sustainable on a
77 routine basis. This is all too common on many waterfall projects where there may only be two or
78 three milestones on a year-long project. This is even evident on some agile projects whose
79 iterations are too long, for instance, two to three months.

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81 It is natural for people to work harder the closer they get to a milestone. Think about a typical
82 software delivery schedule. Let's say a team has a set of deliverables due every three months.
83 For the first month, their pace is a bit slow and not very productive. The team may be resting
84 their brains and bodies from the last deadline push or they may just be mulling over their
85 approach to a problem whose deliverable seems far away. During the second month, they realize
86 they are running a bit behind and start to pick up the pace, approaching what appears to be
87 optimal efficiency.

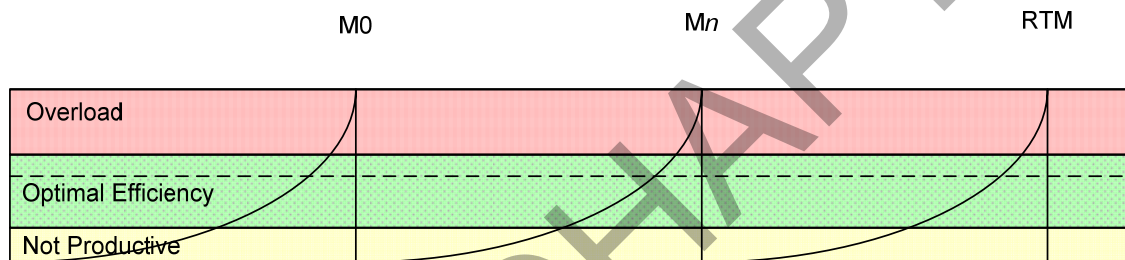
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89 By the time the third month rolls around, the team realizes it is terribly behind and will have to
90 ramp up its efforts considerably to hit the committed milestones. Faced with a ton of unfinished
91 work, the team works double-time to complete the tasks by the milestone date. It works twelve-
92 hour days and weekends. It sacrifices work-life balance to hit the date, realizing that after the
93 date, it will have another three months to hit the next milestone. After the exhaustive run up to a
94 milestone, the team collapses. Time to relax.

95

96 What we forget is that the energy that the body has to sustain this pace is limited. When our
97 short-term energy is rapidly being depleted, fatigue sets in. While in this state, we do not make
98 good decisions, we increasingly become unaware of our surroundings and our environment, and
99 we sacrifice our health. That kind of pace is not sustainable; we will eventually have to stop out
100 of sheer exhaustion. Once the milestone is reached, people fall back into a sustainable, or lower-
101 than-sustainable, pace. The cycle begins again. This is illustrated in figure 1. M0 and Mn are
102 scheduled milestones; RTM is short for *release to manufacturing*.

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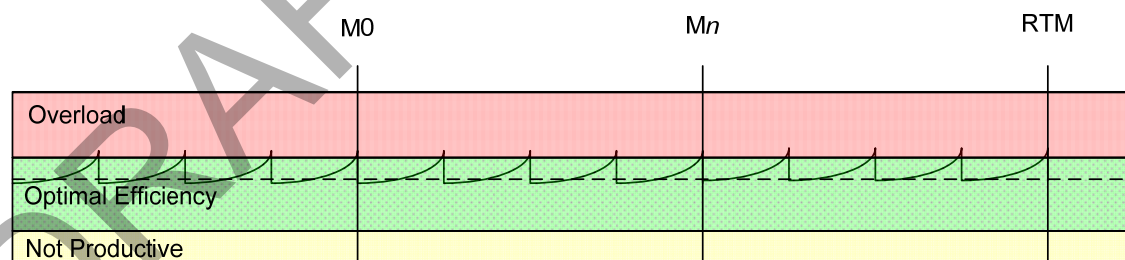
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Figure 1 – long periods between delivery *and* milestones

108 If, on the other hand, we maintain a sustainable pace over a long period of time, we can operate
109 at optimal efficiency. While we are in this state, we are still making good decisions. We are
110 being productive because we are aware of our surroundings in our ever-changing environment.

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Figure 2 – illustrating frequent delivery with the same milestone schedule

115 **Keys to Success**

116 Teams that work at a sustainable pace have energy about them. Teams that work too hard do not.
117 I have found that even the most energetic teams I ran began to fade quickly when I worked them
118 too hard. People quickly became short, terse, easily agitated and not very fun to be around. On
119 the other hand, when I balanced the work the team was delivering and *recognized* the early

120 warning signs of burnout and managed against them, the team maintained a higher level of
121 output.

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123 This understanding led me to identify several keys to successful team leadership.

124

- 125 • Stay on top of the needs of the team. Understand that being a servant leader, a
126 ScrumMaster, a team manager, whatever you call it, requires that many hats be worn,
127 sometimes simultaneously. A leader must be a choreographer, cheerleader, parent,
128 navigator, advisor, investigator, spark-plug and facilitator, depending on team needs.
- 129 • Pace the team. Focus the team on the deliverables it has due over the next two weeks and
130 keep your own eye on the deliverables due over the next three to six months.
- 131 • Divide the work into manageable chunks or mini-milestones. When given an appropriate
132 amount of work and a delivery date that is imminent, teams will work at a pace that is
133 optimal and sustainable. Not only will the team avoid burnout, it also will deliver more
134 value in the process.
- 135 • Help the team set realistic goals. Teams, time and time again, burn out because they want
136 to please their stakeholders, forgetting that there is more to delivering software projects
137 than just writing lines of code. Help the team realize what it takes to deliver software,
138 how to work as a cross-functional unit and how to remain disciplined by learning to say
139 no when aggressive stakeholders or customers demand the impossible.
- 140 • Monitor the health of the team. Look for the following elements in retrospectives, daily
141 stand-ups, team meetings and the working environment. Create opportunities to foster
142 these elements.
 - 143 ○ Trust: Create an atmosphere where people know that what they say or bring to the
144 team will not be ridiculed or disrespected.
 - 145 ○ Conflict: Teams have conflict; that is part of life. Manage the conflict by keeping
146 people focused on the delivery, not the emotion. Over time, as each person on the
147 team becomes comfortable with conflict on the team, trust and respect grow.
 - 148 ○ Compassion: Dale Carnegie wrote, “Become genuinely interested in other
149 people.” [Carnegie01] Follow this principle and encourage others to do so. The
150 bond that will develop on the team will have lasting impacts for years beyond the
151 project.
 - 152 ○ Commitment: The best teams are committed and accountable to success and
153 willing to do what it takes to achieve it. Of course, like anything else, that
154 willingness can be taken too far and can actually be a detriment to team health.
155 Part of your job is to make sure your teams do not overcommit and burn
156 themselves out in an attempt not to fall short.

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159 **References**

Carnegie01 Carnegie, D. 1936. *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Simon and Schuster.

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