



## Leadership fatigue is a thing — make time to recharge

By Art Petty

In the best of times, leading and managing is hard work. After all, people are complicated, our business challenges are increasingly complex, and anyone called upon to regularly make tough decisions is bound to feel the strain.

In this era, the demands are unceasing -- ripple effects of this global pandemic -- arriving daily. In some cases, we wrongly point at our tools and technologies as the culprits of our fatigue. While you might be tired of sitting in your home office wearing bunny slippers and your favorite pajama bottoms while talking with colleagues on-screen, I shudder to think of what this would have been like in another era without these technologies.

Yet despite the current environment and visible signs of stress emanating from many grown weary of the strains of their roles, some are persevering and succeeding. When I question those thriving, I hear a common theme: They have a strategy for recharging.

Instead of suffering in silence or joining this non-movement labeled the Great Resignation, find a way that works for you to pause, reflect and recharge. And then come back for the next round and keep solving the problems by being at your best as a leader.

Here are some ideas to help.

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## 1. Center on your purpose as a leader

Your job is challenging by definition. There are many thankless tasks and days, yet leaders play a role in shaping careers and lives through their coaching and guidance. It's easy to lose track of your heartfelt purpose and potential as a leader in the middle of messy situations, yet purpose is what will propel you through troubling times.

An exercise I've used for years now to help leaders remind themselves of their purpose involves creating their Leadership Charter. I encourage them to think about the long view of their role:

How do they want to be remembered at their retirement party?

What impact do they want to have on the lives and careers of those around them?

And what do your current team members need from you to help them succeed?

I encourage leaders to roll up these insights into a brief few sentences or bullets outlining their Leadership Charter. Many of these start with, "My job as a leader is to ..." And while the exercise is helpful, the actual value comes from making your charter visible in the environment, sharing it with your team and asking them to hold you accountable to it.

On a personal note, I prefer to print my charter out and keep it visible in my work environment. A daily review of the charter and my priorities as a leader serves as a potent reminder to not lose track of the impact you are striving to create.

## 2. Adjust your attitude through Beginner's Mind thinking

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Shunryu Suzuki, the author of "Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind," offers: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few." The words are straightforward; however, it's hard work to try and set aside your pre-existing beliefs or snap judgments to look at situations through a beginner's lens. It takes discipline and deliberate thought to force yourself to pause and wonder. The benefits are many.

Approaching issues by suspending judgment and seeking first to understand is a remarkable way to change the tone and tenor of every day for you and your team members. Viewing people and teams and challenges from a fresh perspective leads to inner calm and an endless journey of discovery. Curiosity is contagious across groups, and it sows the seeds of creativity and innovation.

The wisest leaders I've worked around understand that they are beginners with every person and every day.

### 3. Treat the workplace as a living laboratory and start experimenting

One of my favorite pieces of professional guidance came from a program I attended at Kellogg, where Deborah Gruenfeld (now at Stanford) encouraged the executives in the room to "Never quit experimenting."

I took Professor Gruenfeld's advice to heart in my corporate career and, along with my colleagues, found the courage to design and test novel hypotheses for strategy and problem-solving with the tools in front of us. We fought the gravitational pull of the status quo and worked hard to avoid the dominant logic trap that holds too many leaders and management teams hostage. It was through the experience of many misfires or non-results that we ultimately learned to succeed.

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There are few things more energizing in your work than accepting that you can change the variables and try new approaches in search of solutions. Enlist your team in thinking differently about your situation, and then start experimenting!

#### 4. Commit to creating value at every encounter

Many of my clients have employed a tactic to start looking at their workdays as a series of unique encounters where the goal is to create value at each one. As you approach a meeting, hallway or video conversation, remind yourself your goal is to leave the situation better than you found it.

Succeeding at each encounter doesn't mean you have to have all the answers. Rather, your goal is to do those things you can control, including listening fiercely, empathizing, displaying curiosity, prompting ideas or connecting others with potentially helpful resources.

The individuals using this "Create Value at Every Encounter" successfully log their encounters and outcomes in a journal and even quantify successes and misses as part of a personal continuous improvement program.

#### 5. Get physical to rejuvenate the mind and body

In his interview with Tim Ferris, comedian Jerry Seinfeld espoused the benefits of physical activity to fuel creative work -- and yes, leading is creative work. Seinfeld's formula includes regular weight training and cardio exercise combined with meditation.

An article about Seinfeld's mental and physical fitness opens with this passage: "Resistance training and cardio exercise, combined with meditation, builds the body, rekindles creativity, acts as an age retardant and is the greatest system of stress relief known to man."

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Wow, that's one powerful testament to the stress relief powers of getting physical. I'm personally in a gym six days a week or, I'm outdoors moving, chopping, splitting and sweating while smiling. When I make excuses and skip the physical work, I lose energy, creativity – and, according to those closest to me, I grow decidedly grumpy.

If you don't want to take your mental and physical health guidance from a comedian best known for a show about nothing, there are nearly endless sources that back Seinfeld's claims. Movement is the starting goal. Sweating is a target. Recharging the mind and body is an outcome.

## 6. Reinvent your career without resigning

Instead of succumbing to the often mistaken impression that switching firms is key to your happiness, consider reinventing what you do in your current organization. Thanks to our state of affairs, many organizations have diverse unmet needs, and your interest in doing something new offers a potential solution to a big problem.

Success with this approach requires you to reframe career progress less in terms of vertical movement up the ladder and more as a lateral movement in search of new challenges and opportunities to learn and grow. I've observed managers moving to solo contributor roles, as well as people leading projects and teams outside of their traditional functional roles.

While you might not fit the ideal candidate in terms of experience for a particular role, you represent a known quantity and, assuming a positive past, someone worth keeping. You might be pleasantly surprised by how willing your firm is to keep you engaged and accommodate your vocational exploration. The benefits of reinventing in a place where you have existing relationships and appreciate the people and the organization's mission are many.

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## 7. Do something completely different

I took piano lessons for 10 years as an adult and working professional. It turns out I am a lousy but enthusiastic piano player. The act of playing is priceless for me. When I need a brain break, I spend a few minutes playing and leave the experience energized and somehow better prepared for the challenge in front of me.

It's incredible how pursuing something new -- a new language, a craft or a hobby that takes you entirely out of your working life -- helps you cope with those vexing daily circumstances. While you hate to say that the workday becomes less critical, pursuing a new passion is energizing and creates a halo effect around your workdays.

My clients engage in martial arts, collect comic books, sharpen knives, write poetry and fiction, share hobbies with children and significant others. They all describe the benefits of diversifying their activities and better using the time of their lives.

The bottom line for now:

I've shared different flavors of approaches to help recharge. My personal favorites are those that help us create energy at the moment during our daily travels. Changing routines, reframing problems as opportunities, striving to find success in even the most minor exchanges, and enlisting our colleagues and team members in experimenting to solve problems are always energizing activities.

At the same time, making time to do something completely different and remembering you are human and need variety and fresh experiences is also critically helpful. These activities don't make the world's problems disappear; they make you better able to attack them with vigor and creativity.

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