

# Dealing with Long-Term Burnout

In the last edition we dealt with short term burn-out. Short-term burn-out happens to all of us. One can sometimes get burned out two weeks after taking a vacation. Nor can one always predict when one is going to get burned out. Therefore, for some, it may be better not to schedule my vacations. Instead, take emergency days whenever burnout takes over. Nor can one know how long it will take to recover. Sometimes you may feel fine again after two days. Sometimes you may need four or five. One outreach worker takes a hotel room and learns, writes, exercises and reads newspapers. He does not keep his cell phone on and only his wife knows where he is. He calls in, once a day to ask one question and one question only – Are there any emergencies which only he can handle? (The answer to this should always be no.) He does not ask for messages.

Long-term burn-out is a different story, however. In a revealing analysis, Boyatzis, McKee and Goleman describe how one can lose one's bearings and meaning in one's job<sup>1</sup>, i.e. suffer from long-term burnout. (We have adapted their analysis to someone running a kiruv mosad.) In this scenario, a person finds himself in a job which started out as fulfilling but which has gradually become less meaningful. Often this feeling creeps up on one, one begins to feel bored and can even feel trapped. You lose all motivation and, if the phone is not ringing or you are not giving a shiur you just feel like you want to get out of there. Since most kiruv people are high achievers, these feelings may be masked for years, hidden under the frenzy of activity. As a leader, you may even think that you are exhibiting a trait of effective leaders: adaptability. But without strong self-awareness, people risk adapting to such an extent that they no longer recognize themselves. And self-awareness in these situations is hard to come by. Once you've lost touch with your passion and dreams, the very routine of work and the habits of your mind can make it difficult to reconnect.

The first reaction to all of this is to begin to say, "Look, it's a job, better than most. All jobs have their downside. I'll do what I have to do and get my meaning out of life elsewhere. Besides, I can't just pick up and allow what I built up over the last 20 years to collapse. Besides, I have a family to feed. Anyway, who is going to take a 50 year old, with seven kids?" The problem with this is that we spend so much time involved in kiruv that there isn't much else to our lives. For most of us, there are no hobbies, side-projects or serious learning sedarim to take care of our deeper needs for self-fulfillment. We are left with kiruv and family (with learning always falling short of our needs) as the central pillars of our life and woe betide us if our kiruv becomes just a job.

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<sup>1</sup> *Reawakening Your Passion for Work*, By Richard Boyatzis, Annie McKee, and Daniel Goleman  
Harvard Business Review April 2002

There is no problem if this happens in the short term, say a few months. But longer than that requires action. It requires that you follow your heart. Many kiruv professionals have been so used to the idea that they will simply be doing this for the rest of their lives that they gradually adjust to the letdowns, frustrations, and even boredom of their work until they surrender to a routine that's incompatible with who they are and what they truly want. This is truly a tragic situation. In such situations, it is time to follow your heart and, in consultation with Daas Torah, to follow it to new and unusual places. This does not mean that you have to leave altogether, but you must follow some tried and tested strategies for renewal.

The first thing that you must do is to call a time-out. The time-out must involve a complete removal from the Mosad for a period of 6 months to a year. During this time, you should work not only on renewing your private life, (e.g. going back to learning two sedarim a day and catching up on some of those Torah areas you felt you were lacking) but to renewing your professional life as well. Take some MBA courses at the local university or on-line, read business books on leadership and management, learn how to do PowerPoint, and catch up on your history of American Jewry. Most important, spend a few weeks visiting other successful outreach organizations and see what you can learn from them.

Now go back to making a new plan for yourself. Check your vision, redo your goals, and work out how you are going to implement them. Build into this structure time to think and time to learn. Do the same for your mosad. Work out whether your job dissatisfaction had to do with a lack of success. Identify the problem and take whatever brave steps are necessary. If you think that your staff is not up to your new goals, then consider a clean sweep and start again.

BOYATZIS, MCKEE AND GOLEMAN PROVIDE  
SEVERAL USEFUL TOOLS FOR REFLECTION  
TO HELP YOU TO REFORMULATE YOUR VISION:

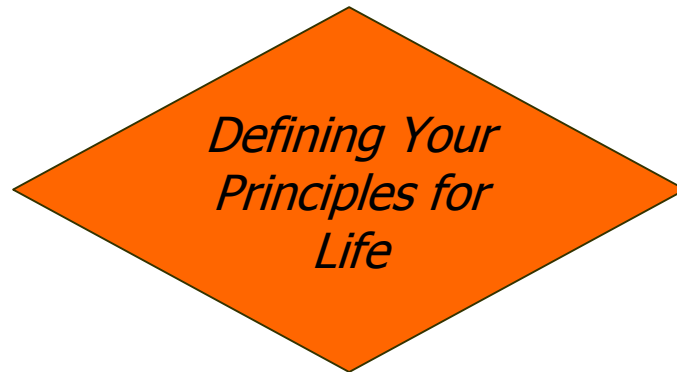


## *Reflecting on the Past*

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Take an hour or two and draw your “lifeline.” Beginning with childhood, plot the high points and the low points – the events that caused you great joy and great sorrow. Note the times you were most proud, most excited, and most strong and clear. Note also the times you felt lost and alone. Point out for yourself the transitions – times when things fundamentally changed for you. Now, look at the whole. What are some of the underlying themes? What seems to be ever present, no matter the situations? What values seem to weigh in most often and most heavily when you make changes in your life? Are you generally on a positive track, or have there been lots of ups and downs?

Now, switch to the more recent past and consider these questions: What has or has not changed at work, in life? How am I feeling? How do I see myself these days? Am I living my values? Am I feeling fulfilled? Do my values still fit with what I need to do at work and what my mosad is doing? Have my dreams changed? Do I still believe in my vision of my future? As a way to pull it all together, do a bit of free-form writing, finishing the sentence, “In my life I... and now I...”



### *Defining Your Principles for Life*

Think about the different aspects of your life that are important, such as family, relationships, work, spirituality, and physical health. What are your core values in each of those areas? List five or six principles that guide you in life and think about whether they are values that you truly live by or simply talk about.



### *Extending the Horizon*

Try writing a page or two about what you would like to do with the rest of your life. List all the things you want to do or experience before you die. This exercise is harder than it seems because it's human nature to think more in terms of what we have to do – by tomorrow, next week, or next month. But with such a short horizon, we can focus only on what's urgent, not on what's important. When we think in terms of the extended horizon, such as what we might do before we die, we open up a new range of possibilities. You may be surprised how much of your list has nothing to do with work. When you finish the exercise and study your writing, look for patterns that will help you to crystallize your dreams and aspirations.



### *Envisioning the Future*

Think about where you would be sitting and reading this article if it were 15 years from now and you were living your ideal life. What kinds of people would be around you? How would your environment look and feel? What might you be doing during a typical day or week? Don't worry about the feasibility of creating this life; rather, let the image develop and place yourself in the picture. Try doing some free-form writing about this vision of yourself, speak your vision into a tape recorder, or talk about it with a trusted friend. Many people report that, when doing this exercise, they experience a release of energy and feel more optimistic than they had even moments earlier. Envisioning an ideal future can be a powerful way to connect with the possibilities for change in our lives.

## Coming Back to "Reality" Coming Back to "Reality"

### *Coming Back to Reality*

Once you have done all of this you are ready to identify where there may be clashes between personal agendas and organizational vision

Your organization ought to be a place where you can feel fulfilled. There ought to be a harmony between what you want to be and what the organization ought to become. But there will never be a perfect match. At some point you will feel some tension. You may be tired of giving basic shiurim all of the time, or you may actually find yourself not wanting to be around at all.

If this happens to you, it need not be a crisis. If it is a crisis, it is probably because you have made the mistake of thinking that the mosad was somehow there to serve your self-fulfillment needs, or put differently, of too close an alignment between your own fulfillment needs and the goals of the organization.

*So let us here state two important principles:*

- a. Personal goals always have to be bigger than any organization.*
- b. Organizational goals always have to be bigger than your personal goals*

The first principle means that you should never feel stuck – even if this is the organization that you started. There is plenty of room for mesiras nefesh in the things you want to do. Martyrdom is not part of the deal. And don't try that, "Well, I would leave if I could find someone to replace me," line. If you commit yourself to leaving by a certain date you will find a replacement. But if you don't make it a clear commitment, Mr. Right will just never show up. There are plenty of good people

around who can take over from you if you ever want to get out. (And no, they won't do as good a job as you were doing at first.) (Of course a sheala should be asked, but now the Sheala reads, "I want to leave, and there are lots of people to replace me. Can I leave?")

I was once delivering a session to a group of English community rabbis. We were discussing the difficulties of changing the community, given the resistance of the officers as they call the board there. My response was to say that if I were a part of such a framework, and I felt that I could not achieve satisfying goals, I would leave. I was greeted by a whole lot of "you don't understand". But it was clear that for some of them, their personal goals had clearly been put aside for the sake of what had been dictated to them as the organizational goals of their communities.

The second principle means that you cannot easily change the mandate of the organization, just because it is not fulfilling you. You really do have to think very carefully whether this is in the broader interested of Klal Yisroel. And ultimately, once you have formulated the issue in your own mind, you need to ask a *sheala*.

For example, let us say that for twenty years you were dedicated to doing campus outreach. Now, instead of doing campus kiruv, you want to move to young adults. Perhaps you have been hugely successful on the campus, but you find the fund-raising too tiresome. In addition, you feel that you want to have a community to show for your efforts. But let us say that you were one of those unique people who really is successful in campus outreach. There is a certain uniqueness factor that needs to be factored in.

Part of your sheala is going to be just how effective you will be on campus if you no longer want to be doing it. (And how effective will you be in your new area.) But one thing is for sure: your campus outreach now has a reality which is bigger than you are. By understanding that, you can better take care of it, building continuity into your projects from the start. Continuity means the conscious and focused addressing of how the organization can function without you, even if not as well.

Now let us bring a subtler example. Let us say that you have been running around organizing things and fundraising and now you feel you need to give some more shiurim. Yet you know that the people you have giving the shiurim are doing it better than you can, and they certainly cannot do what you do. The answer to this dilemma may lie in your finding outlets to teach that lie completely outside of your organization, even if it is for another kiruv organization. This fulfills both Principle A and Principle B above.