3590 The Burnout Myth

People Book · https://kb.jeffreysummers.com/docs/3590-the-burnout-myth/

Operator's Playbook | People arc

Status: DRAFT

The word does not appear in this book.

Not because it is never used in the industry. It is used constantly — in exit conversations, in owner forums, in the explanation an operator gives themselves at two in the morning when a good person just handed in notice. "Burnout" is the industry's favorite story about what happens to people who leave.

The problem is that it locates the cause inside the hire's head. They couldn't handle it. They lacked resilience. They got overwhelmed. That framing lets the operator skip every question that actually matters — and there are five of them.

Did you micromanage them? Not in the dramatic sense. In the daily sense. Were you in their decisions before they had a chance to make them? Did they stop trying because trying meant getting corrected?

Did you give them the authority to be accountable for what you were holding them accountable for? Accountability without authority is not accountability — it is blame. If you held them responsible for outcomes they had no structural power to produce, the failure was designed in before they started.

Did you build the systems that would have made the work sustainable? Or did you hand them a role held together by institutional memory, tribal knowledge, and the memory of the person who left before them? Unsustainable work produces exits. That is not burnout. That is math.

Did you do the work that would have let you evaluate by output instead of by hovering? If you never built the muscle to read results and trust them, you supervised someone into leaving. Every check-in that was not necessary, every question that was really an audit, every "just making sure" that was really "I don't trust you" — those accumulate. People leave accumulation.

Did you hire them into a domain you didn't understand and hold them accountable when it broke? The operator who hires a marketing person without knowing what good marketing looks like, or a kitchen manager without knowing what a well-run kitchen produces, has hired someone into a covered side. When it goes wrong, the hire gets blamed for the operator's blind spot.

Five questions. Every one of them is the operator's failure. "Burnout" covers all of them with one word, routes the cause outside the building, and clears the operator's account before any of the real work gets done.

There is a companion phrase that runs with it. The operator who says "burnout" about someone who left is the same operator who tells the next candidate "good help is hard to find." Both phrases are stories told to avoid the actual work. Both locate the problem in the labor market, in the generation, in the hire — anywhere but in the building and the person running it.

When a hire leaves before they should have, the operator owns the diagnosis. Not the exit interview. Not the HR form. The operator's honest answer to five questions they probably did not ask while the person was still there.

The honest diagnoses:

They were managed out — by micromanagement, neglect, or supervision they could not function under.

They were set up to fail — hired into a role without the authority to deliver on what they were being held accountable for.

They were trained by tribal knowledge — no systems underneath them, so the work was unsustainable by design.

They were hovered to death — the operator never built the muscle to evaluate by output, so the hire was supervised into leaving.

They were blamed for a covered side — hired into a domain the operator didn't understand and held accountable for breaks the operator couldn't read.

Those are honest. "Burnout" is none of them.