

SKIP LEVEL

strategic leadership for leaders ready to think two levels up

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Burnout Is Contagious. So Is Steadiness.

Your team does not catch your intentions. They catch your state. Drawing on research from Thomas Sy, Sigal Barsade, and Arnold Bakker, Maya and Marcus show how mood spreads, how burnout itself crosses over, and how a leader transmits steadiness instead of strain — with four steps for this week.

KEY STRATEGIES & IDEAS

1. Two Definitions of Burnout

The American Psychological Association describes burnout broadly: physical, emotional, or mental exhaustion, with motivation and performance dropping and attitudes turning negative, toward yourself and others. The World Health Organization revised its own definition and narrowed it: an occupational phenomenon from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed, showing up as exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy.

2. Mood Contagion

In Thomas Sy's study, leaders in a positive mood passed that mood to their group members, and the groups coordinated better with less effort. Sigal Barsade called it the ripple effect: groups that caught positive emotions cooperated more, fought less, and rated their own performance higher. Flip the mood, and you flip the result.

3. Burnout Crossover

Arnold Bakker and colleagues studied nearly two thousand nurses in eighty intensive care units, and the burnout of colleagues was the strongest predictor of a nurse's own burnout, even after accounting for the usual workplace stressors. The same pattern showed up in office teams at a bank and insurance company.

4. Two Routes of Spread

The direct route is catching the feelings: cynicism, exhaustion, the sense that nothing matters. The indirect route is workload: a burned-out colleague performs worse, so their work slides onto your desk, and your autonomy shrinks because you are covering for them. Their burnout becomes your workload, and your workload becomes your burnout.

5. Steadiness Transmits Too

Contagion runs both ways. The same research that shows negative states spreading also shows positive states spreading. You do not have to be fully recovered to change what you transmit. Steadiness is a decision you make before it is a feeling you have, and to the level above, it is evidence of capacity.

The picture: a leader walking into the next room, and the team catching the state, not the plan.

Joe Dutkiewicz

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ACTION & REFLECTION STEPS

- [ ] **Step one — audit your transmission.** Look back at your last three situations with your team and ask what mood you actually brought into each one. Not what you intended. What they saw. If you cannot answer, ask someone you trust. The audit comes before the fix.

The mood I brought into each one:

- [ ] **Step two — reset before you enter the room.** Two minutes before your next important situation, stop, breathe, and decide what state you want to bring in. You would not walk into an important conversation without preparing your message. Prepare your mood the same way.

The state I will bring into my next situation:

- [ ] **Step three — stop the indirect spread.** Find one overloaded commitment of yours that is quietly becoming your team's overload, and renegotiate it this week. Redistribute it, re-scope it, or say it out loud before it slides onto someone else's desk. Your backlog should not become their burnout.

The commitment I will renegotiate:

- [ ] **Step four — transmit steadiness on purpose.** Pick one high-stakes moment this week, the situation where you would normally vent or rush, and deliberately bring calm and clarity instead. Steadiness is a choice before it is a habit, and your team will notice the choice before they notice the habit.

My high-stakes situation this week:

Think two levels up. — Maya & Marcus

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