



by Jason Reynado

We need to talk about leader burnout. With over a year of COVID-related restrictions while trying to maintain normal mission demands, I'm sure many of us are feeling the threat of burnout or worse - already running on fumes. Like me, many of us continue to bear the burden of leadership over years and years. And it takes a toll on us, but it's not like we can just stop what we're doing - we're irreplaceable right? *Or at least many of us think we are...* There is not a single person that can do this job like we can, no matter how depleted we may be, right? Even on our worst day, we are still better than many other people out there. But as you read this, you can begin to see the fallacy in this mindset.

Coming Clean About Our Burnout

Many leaders in the Army, including myself, spend a lot of time running on "empty." Then we are rewarded for our hard work and dedication by taking on more responsibility! Leading is what we are trained to do, but it takes a physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual toll on us. We adapt to leading on an empty fuel tank and normalize it. We begin to take pride in how much we work, how overwhelmed we are, and how tired we consistently are. We don't take the time we need to recharge.

Unfortunately, this has become normal for many Army leaders and it's leading to negative impacts. For senior leaders, the effects can be detrimental to a unit's morale. We think we are giving our best advice, and maybe we are for that moment. What if it could have been better? When we accept an empty tank as the norm, we subconsciously require the same dedication from our junior leaders. This leads to early burnout, and in many cases, high-quality junior leaders leave the service unnecessarily premature.

A few years ago, I was talking to a very good friend that does missionary work in South America. I was telling him how tired I was and how it was leading to mistakes in my

professional and personal life. He asked me something profound that I didn't even understand until very recently, *"What are you doing to take care of yourself?"*

For many, this may seem to be a common-sense question. However, for the rest of us that don't have an answer to it, let me ask you a few follow-on questions. What actual actions are you doing to take care of yourself? What does "taking care of yourself" even mean? You may respond saying, "Yeah, I do PT, I eat clean, and I have a hobby I do when I have time." But how often are you deliberately making time? Is that time uninterrupted? Do you still allow yourself to be bothered or distracted during that time, or does someone take the reins from you for those hours or days that you take for yourself? If you are like me, you still have your phone on you all the time because you are just too important to go off the grid. It's not healthy.

My Decompression Gone Wrong

I was in Cinque Terre, Italy before everything became locked down due to COVID early in 2020. I was visiting to run a 25km trail with spectacular views and unique villages to run through; views of the Mediterranean Sea and running through vineyards on the side of a cliff were going to be the highlights of my trip. I was there to decompress, and nothing was going to stop me. Then, halfway through my run, I received a phone call from work. A Soldier had been in a terrible accident. My first question was about his prognosis (he was pretty beat up but would recover in time). After that phone call, that was it for my run. I did not want to run anymore. I became distracted, consumed with wanting to be there for my Soldier. However, there was really nothing I could do in the immediate moment, even if I were in the area.

The next few days I spent glued to my phone as if someone was going to call me to update me on the situation, but they never did. Then, a few short days later, I received another phone call about a different incident that I could do nothing about immediately. I was so

focused on work, that I lost all ability to decompress. Then, once COVID-19 hit, that was it for vacations, even to this day for many. I missed my opportunity to let it all go for a week! It's not that I didn't trust my stand-in; it's that I made the mistake of saying, "I always have my phone on me, so call if you need ANYTHING." I didn't set my boundaries before I left.

What is Leading from the Overflow?

Picture yourself as a cup. When your cup is empty, you'll find it impossible to pour out any liquid to the cups stacked under yours. Now picture an 8-ounce cup getting 24 ounces of water poured into it. Out of that overflow, the two cups beneath yours are now getting replenished.

In order to get there, we must actually make time to take care of ourselves. For me, it started with weekly behavioral health appointments. That evolved into a more intense treatment for some stuff that I had been neglecting for over a decade. This won't be the case for everyone. Our circumstances are as diverse as our Army. I urge you to act before you get to where I was! Find ways to fill your own cup and make yourself a priority. I know it sounds counterproductive to what you were taught, but I promise it will make you a better leader for your Soldiers. If you truly support "People First," take care of yourself first, so you can care for others out of your abundance.

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