

In Practice

The Rustout Syndrome

By Richard Leider and Steven Buchholz, partners in the Inventure Group, 8500 Normandale Lake Boulevard, Suite 1750, Minneapolis, MN 55437. Phone 612/921-8686; fax 612/921-8690.

A subtle killer stalks workplaces. It creeps up on its victims and overtakes them, exhausting their energy and crippling their spirit. This insidious force is more prevalent than heart disease, cancer, or alcoholism. Yet, few people even know its name.

We call it rustout.

Rustout is the slow death that follows when we stop making the choices that keep life alive. Rustout means we are no longer growing; at best, we are simply maintaining.

Rustout is the opposite of burnout. Burnout is overdoing. Rustout is "underbeing." Rustout occurs when our lives deteriorate through the disuse of our potential. And just as rust can eventually weaken and destroy the strongest of structures, so can rustout lead to the destruction of even the strongest and most secure human beings.

People who are experiencing rustout feel afraid to act. They're unwilling or unable to do the very things that would make them feel alive. They end up sitting on the sidelines, while the dance of life goes on without them.

Midcareer rustout. We've all seen people who simply seem to run out of gas at midcareer. The reasons are varied. Perhaps life has presented them with bigger challenges than they could solve. Perhaps a failure caused a major blow to their self-esteem, from which they couldn't seem to recover. Or maybe they just



Howard Fine

worked too hard for too long.

Rustout occurs when we feel we're not using our gifts and talents in support of something we believe in. In many cases, it's because we're afraid to let go of what we have, in order to reach for something more. But in the effort to hold on to what we've got, we lose a precious gift—the gift of purpose. Our life lacks purpose; nothing moves us. Our relationships lack commitment; no one touches us. Our work lacks promise; the routine has stifled our growth.

Choices or ruts. When we observe the level of satisfaction people have (or don't have) in their lives, we see the same thing over and over again—the people who are satisfied are those who have made a conscious decision to keep growing and to keep developing new options. Those who are dissatisfied feel stifled and trapped.

More than anything else, people want to feel that life is offering them choices. It's discouraging for us to

You can avoid the slow death that follows when people stop learning and growing.

Tips for Avoiding Rustout

Here are five strategies for avoiding rustout. This is heavy stuff—it's not easy to risk security for a chance at greater fulfillment. On the other hand, there's no such thing as free growth.

Elect Your Board of Directors. Unresolved emotions can make you vulnerable to illness and depression. You don't have to work everything out by yourself; it's critical to talk to others. Choose your own personal board of directors. Who are the people who have wise perspectives? Who can ignite the growth spark in you?

Write Down Your Purpose. Pause occasionally for an "inward" look. Learn from your failures—and your successes. Examine your life in a larger perspective. Unless you have a purpose of your own, you'll always

have to make way for those who have their purpose in mind for you.

Take a "Solo" Every Day. Listen to your inner signals—your inner voice. Spend 15 minutes a day in solo time. Relax. Listen. Breathe. Answers will show up.

Repack Your Bags. Many people who suffer from rustout need a process for examining what they're carrying—what's weighing them down. Books like *Repacking Your Bags: Lighten Your Load for the Rest of Your Life*, by Richard Leider and David Shapiro (Berrett-Koehler, 1995) can help you define the problem.

Lighten Your Load. Take a chance. Ask, "What is this rut trying to teach me?" To grow, we must let go; we must give up something to get something else. We must lighten our load for the journey ahead.

look forward and see nothing but an unending stretch of sameness over which we feel we have no control.

A sign on the Alaska Highway reads, "Choose your rut carefully; you'll be in it for the next 200 miles." In life, the ruts can be much deeper and much longer. We fall into them by not making choices.

Of course, not everything that's routine leads to a rut. Many routines are useful—they save energy. They only become ruts when fear inhibits us from making corrective choices. So, we need to examine our routines periodically to make sure we have chosen them carefully.

Grow or die. Most people experience rustout at some point in their lives. The questions to ask: How long does it last, and how do you deal with it? And can you overcome rustout and feel revitalized?

Perhaps you imagine that by age 35 or 45, or even 55, you have explored your choices pretty fully. Don't kid yourself! The capacities you develop to the fullest are an interplay between you and life's triggering events. And those events keep changing from cradle to grave. Life pulls things out of you.

In our work, we've watched a lot of midcareer people and done extensive studies on late career development and retirement. Our research

with older people indicates that those who report a strong sense of fulfillment in their 60s, 70s, and 80s are the ones who are continuing to take conscious personal risks in their lives. They never stop stepping outside the "comfort zone" and onto the "growth edge."

That is the opposite of rustout. Living or working on one's growth edge means recognizing that we really grow, or we die—every day of our lives.

Rustout in the workplace. The rustout syndrome is a widespread ailment in many organizations today. Look around at your workplace. How many people—people even younger than you—are already rusting out?

The condition is chronic, and the impact is twofold. From the organization's perspective, rustout means less productivity and less ability to respond to emerging challenges. From a personal perspective, rustout means that employees feel passive and unwilling to grow and change.

In our personal lives, rustout is typically a result of lack of change;

in organizations, rustout often follows significant change.

These days, change has become a constant feature in the business environment. Employees are subject to continuing "workquakes." Each upheaval leaves no room for recovery before the next one begins.

Over time, a new pattern emerges. The initial changes create aftershocks. Eventually, shock is replaced by fatigue. People come to accept that there is simply "too much to do and too little time to do it." They feel that they're never able to keep up—no matter how hard they try. This overwhelming feeling leads to overdoing—and to the condition we call burnout.

But it doesn't end there. Ultimately, yet another pattern develops. The effects of burnout are usually visible, but the consequences of this next pattern tend to remain hidden. That's because people have moved beyond merely being less productive. They have gone over the edge, to apathy. They've given up.

In short, they've rusted out.

We see this pattern more and more. It goes something like this:

- ▶ A workquake strikes.
 - ▶ Aftershocks occur unexpectedly.
 - ▶ Human downtime becomes evident.
 - ▶ Repeated workquakes lead to fatigue.
 - ▶ Fatigue leads to burnout.
 - ▶ Burnout is replaced by numbness.
 - ▶ Over time, numbness becomes rustout.
- Facing fears, sharing stories.** To live with vitality, we need to face our fears. We need to let go. To let

go, we have to turn our feelings into words. We have to talk about our situation—to share our stories.

In a recent letter, an insurance-agent client did just that:

"Enjoy everything life has to offer, right up front," he said, "because tomorrow may not get here. This feeling has come out in me stronger since Hurricane Andrew. If you'd seen the destruction—the trailer



"WHAT IS THIS RUT TRYING TO TEACH ME?"

courts were gone, my house was damaged, my office windows blown out. It made me realize how short life really is, and there's nothing I want to miss in the future.

"I was going 90 miles an hour (perhaps like the hurricane), 365 days a year, 24 hours a day. But I didn't know where I was going or why. Now I realize, if I'm going to die, I want to be a happy person about whom people say, 'He made a difference in my life today.'

"I think it's important to do these things so you live and die happy. Most people spend their whole lives practicing being unhappy."

He's right. But it doesn't have to be that way. We can see our problems as our teachers. As Richard Bach in his book, *Illusions*, stated, "Every tragedy has a gift for you in its hands."

Playing Hardball

By Rebecca Thomas, a free-lance writer and the former manager of chapter services at the American Society for Training and Development.

Do you want to increase your chances of winning the office sports pool? How about your chances of hiring and promoting the people who are most likely to succeed and excel? You probably could do both—if you could tap the private files of Caliper Management, a psychological testing firm for pro athletes, based in Princeton, New Jersey.

Using a series of simple tests that cost next to nothing to administer and score, Caliper executives help sports managers quantify a player's potential sports success. In the same way, Caliper believes it can help corporate managers select, develop, and manage their people.

Today, with millions of dollars riding on ticket sales and salaries, knowing how to win is a premium skill in the business of sports. Caliper has assessed more than 4,000 athletes, documenting with hard data the quintessential truth of coaching—if you think you can win, then you probably will.

Armed only with the test and with the team's choice of position for the player, Caliper psychologists rate

each pro to pinpoint the core qualities that are teamed up in the very best athletes, giving them the necessary edge to win. Caliper cautions that the tests work well only in conjunction with traditional scouting and fitness tests.

"In the pros, where all the athletes have enormous talents," says Caliper CEO Herbert Greenberg, "psychology is the edge."

Using its assessment methods in basketball, Caliper has been able to predict the rise of several NBA stars and to help coaches place rookies effectively. Caliper stats show that basketball players who tested well score almost three times as many points per season as players who did not make the grade on Caliper's instrument.

The results are also striking in the ultimate game of statistics: baseball. Caliper-recommended baseball players average 146 hits per season, compared to 71 hits by players who were not recommended. And Caliper's picks average 10 home runs, twice as many as are scored by players who didn't make Caliper's grade.

Implications for business management are strong. Corporate executives can use the same kind of psychological profiling to build their work teams. The instruments can ease their worries about picking up "no-sweat players at high prices."

As the stakes rise for enhancing the bottom line, it's likely that business leaders will turn more and more to Caliper-like methods for ferreting out the superstars from the ranks of the merely talented.

Communicating Takes More Than Words

"Communicating in a foreign language can be an embarrassing, exhausting, humorous, or even exhilarating component of the overall experience of doing business abroad," writes Amy Kahn in *Trade & Culture's* fall 1993 issue.

Kahn is president of Culture Link, a Phoenix, Arizona, agency that connects cultural trainers with businesspeople. She offers the following tips for conducting business in another language.

◆ Don't fear the foreign-language

experience. Usually you will be judged by the quality of what you communicate, not the quality of your grammar or accent.

◆ Keep it simple. Native speakers would prefer that you use a three-year-old's vocabulary and get your point across, rather than try in vain to use complex constructions.

◆ Focus on the language of your business. Practice specialized vocabulary appropriate to your business or industry. Don't waste time learning to describe a bullfight if you're traveling to Spain to sell computers.

◆ Use visual aids. Draw a picture if it helps you communicate. Ask others to do the same or to write down important information such as addresses.

◆ Use nonverbal communication. A surprising 65 percent of all communication is nonverbal. (But watch out for gestures that are innocent in one culture, but offensive in another.)

◆ Do business in your native language. If your associates speak your language well enough, there's no reason not to use it. But you might want to speak your colleagues' language enough to show that you have studied it and respect their culture.

◆ Don't expect miracles. It takes time and hard work to develop fluency in another language. But the more languages you study, the easier it becomes.

◆ Laugh at yourself. Others will laugh with you when you make mistakes. And you will make mistakes.

Working Together To Go It Alone

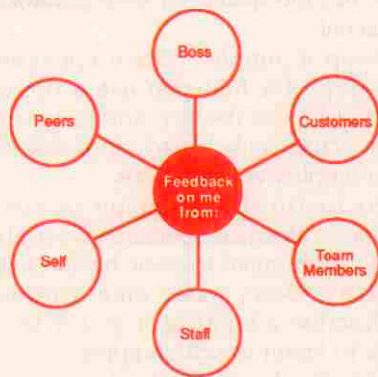
By Deb Gruebele, the Write Source, 1001 Fremont Place, Burnsville, MN 55337; 612/890-8487.

You won't find information about them in your local library under Entrepreneurs or Training. Or Business. Or Education. Yet entrepreneurial trainers are becoming increasingly prevalent—and important.

Companies have cut their staffs in response to economic pressures. But if surviving means whittling down the number of employees on the payroll, it also means providing the remaining staff with training and education to ensure excellence—and

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profitability. So what happens when the training staff is one of the groups that has been eliminated?

That's when entrepreneur trainers and consultants step in.

Many of them are people whose corporate jobs have already been eliminated—or who just got tired of company politics. Entrepreneur trainers are able to provide a wide range of services that are adaptable to every kind of industry and every company size—from the giants to the “mom and pops.” They have the expertise and the low overhead to offer all kinds of organizations much-needed employee education for a fraction of the cost of many in-house productions.

Becoming an entrepreneur is not without frustrations. People who are going it alone sometimes feel alone.

“Independent trainers and consultants make up nearly 10 percent of the training workforce,” says Alice

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Whinnery, president of Financial Visions, a national consumer-education company based in Minneapolis. Despite their numbers, she says, research shows that entrepreneur trainers feel isolated. In addition, she says, as the number of independent trainers increases, so does the importance of professional development in the field.

A new association, the National Entrepreneur Training Association, aims to help. NETA is a nonprofit organization that encourages successful entrepreneurship by providing a professional support and networking structure for independent trainers and consultants.

Together with Judy Cain, also of Financial Visions, Whinnery founded NETA to address the needs of training entrepreneurs. Members receive

discounts on NETA-sponsored seminars and workshops, listings in a directory of speakers, and opportunities to buy special training products and services offered by other members. Scholarships and awards are also planned.

For more information about NETA, write to Cain at 8200 Humboldt Avenue South, Suite 215, Minneapolis, MN 55431.

NAHR Elects First Board

The National Academy of Human Resources recently elected its first slate of officers and directors. NAHR, established in 1991, recognizes the outstanding achievement of researchers, scholars, business practitioners, and others involved in HR activities. The officers and directors:

- ◆ chair—Howard V. Knicely, executive vice-president of TRW
- ◆ vice-chair—Harold W. Burlingame, senior vice-president, AT&T
- ◆ vice-chair and chair emeritus—Walton E. Burdick, former senior vice-president for personnel, IBM
- ◆ secretary and treasurer—William S. Johnson, executive director, NAHR
- ◆ director—Frank P. Boyle, executive vice-president, General Electric
- ◆ director—Michael R. Losey, president and CEO, Society for Human Resource Management.

The board's first task will be to set future direction for NAHR, concentrating on broadening the diversity of membership to reflect the human resources community.

For more information about NAHR, contact William Johnson at NAHR, Box 4577, Santa Fe, NM 87502; 505/988-5603.

This month's “In Practice” was compiled by **Catherine M. Petrini**. Send items of interest to “In Practice,” 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043.