



WHY PURSUING HIGH PERFORMANCE LEADS TO CORPORATE BURNOUT (AND HOW TO FIX IT)

Organisations want teams that work faster, deliver more and consistently outperform the competition. On the surface, that sounds positive. Ambition drives innovation and growth. But many businesses are discovering a difficult truth: the relentless pursuit of high performance is often creating the exact opposite result. Adolfo Gomez Sanchez, CEO, GOLD Results, discusses how businesses can look to elite athletes to evaluate how to maintain and sustain performance.

‘High performance’ has become a defining ambition for modern organisations. From start-ups to global enterprises, leaders are pushing their teams to work more efficiently and deliver better results, while often under constant pressure. The intention behind this way of working is commendable. The outcome, increasingly, is not.

Across industries, we are seeing record levels of burnout, disengagement and diminishing returns.

The uncomfortable truth is that organisations are not failing despite their pursuit of high performance; they are burning out because of it.

In my work with elite athletes and corporate leaders, I often introduce a simple framework called the Performance Triangle. It is designed to answer a fundamental question: what sustains optimal performance over time? Most leaders assume the answer lies in effort alone. Science tells a different story: performance is built on the interaction between three forces – work, nutrition and rest. This is where many organisations go wrong, because when one of these is overemphasised at the expense of the others, the entire system becomes unstable.

Why businesses trip up in their pursuit of elite performance

Many business leaders, particularly high-achieving, Type A personalities, operate on a



simple assumption that more is better. Regardless of their company's audience, market share or employees' circumstances, they believe in an operational model that strives to achieve more hours, more intensity and more focus.

In the short-term, this approach delivers results. Organisations see an increase in outputs, with deadlines being met and performance appears to improve. However, over time, the system begins to break down.

Scientific research into performance shows that it is not a function that happens through sheer effort. It depends on the balance between stress and recovery. When that balance is lost, performance can deteriorate. In other words, burnout is not an inevitable consequence of ambition. It is a design flaw.

Organisations often look to elite athletes as a model for high performance. But they tend to focus on what is visible from the outside. We often read about how the best runners, tennis players and golfers put in hours of practice, as a testament to their discipline, intensity and relentless work ethic.

What businesses miss when making a comparison to how elite athletes operate is what sustains performance. Athletes do not train at maximum intensity all the time. Their performance is carefully structured around cycles of stress and recovery. Training programmes are designed not only to push limits, but to allow the body and mind to adapt, rebuild and improve.

In business, the opposite is often true. It is far too common for organisations to operate in a constant state of urgency, with little regard for recovery. The result



Adolfo Gomez Sanchez, CEO, GOLD Results

is a workforce that is permanently 'on', yet progressively less effective.

Nutrition is often overlooked

Within the Performance Triangle, work is often the dominant force in corporate environments. But when the pace becomes relentless and never yields, it leads to what performance psychology defines as cognitive overload.

Multitasking, continuous information flow and unrelenting targets overwhelm the brain's ability to function effectively. The prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for managing priorities and decision-making, becomes less efficient. At the same time, the amygdala increases stress responses, reducing emotional control. Communication between different regions of the brain declines, affecting memory, judgement and flexibility.

The consequences are visible in everyday corporate life. People's decision-making becomes slower or more impulsive. They make more errors and even lose the spark that once made them creative. Leaders and teams struggle to prioritise effectively and react emotionally under pressure.

In this state, people may be working more, but they are performing worse.

Nutrition, the second side of the triangle, is often misunderstood or ignored in business contexts. It is typically reduced to food and hydration, even though its impact on performance is significant. Research shows that even mild dehydration can impair cognitive and physical performance, while more severe deficits can dramatically reduce capacity for work.

What is more, nutrition extends beyond what we consume physically. It also includes the environments we operate in and the people we surround ourselves with. A toxic workplace, persistent negativity or constant stress can drain energy as effectively as poor diet. Over time, this erodes both mental resilience and cognitive capacity.

When organisations ignore this dimension, they inadvertently undermine the very performance they are trying to maximise.

Neglecting recovery is costly

The third side of the triangle, rest, is both the most powerful and the most frequently misunderstood element of performance. For many high achievers, the instinct is to push harder, for longer. It becomes a point of identity or even a competitive advantage. Unfortunately, there is a critical threshold that, once crossed, begins to damage performance rather than enhance it.

Rest is not passive, nor is it optional. It must be deliberately designed, with sleep being the most obvious example. While it remains one of the most underutilised performance enhancers available, elite athletes invest heavily in optimising sleep. Sleep is incorporated in their fitness and wellbeing programmes because they have a better understanding of its impact on recovery, cognition and decision-making. In contrast, many executives treat it as a trade-off.

Mental rest is equally important. Humans are not wired to sustain peak focus for extended periods. Long working hours often create the illusion of productivity, when much of that time is spent operating at reduced cognitive capacity. Effort increases while returns diminish.

Most importantly, improvement itself happens during recovery. Whether developing physical or





cognitive skills, it is during rest that the brain and body adapt to stress and grow stronger. Without sufficient recovery, this process is interrupted and performance stagnates or declines.

On top of this lack of concern around sleep, one of the most persistent misconceptions in business is that resilience means endurance. There is a myth that the ability to keep going regardless of the cost is somehow advantageous and shows great character.

In reality, resilience is the ability to recover and adapt. Elite performers do not train to withstand unlimited pressure. They train to manage it, to cycle it and to recover from it effectively. This is what allows them to sustain high performance over time.

In contrast, many organisations reward endurance while neglecting recovery. The result is predictable malaise of burnout, declining performance and disengagement.

Redesign high performance

If burnout is a design flaw, then the solution lies in redesigning how performance is structured. Although business leaders must not worry, as I am not suggested they should lower their

standards or be less ambitious. It requires a more sophisticated understanding of how performance actually works.

Sustainable high performance is not built through constant intensity, but through deliberate cycles of effort and recovery. It is not driven by the number of hours worked, but by the quality of output those hours produce. And it is not achieved by pushing harder indefinitely, but by knowing when to step back in order to move forward more effectively.

In both sport and business, the individuals and organisations that sustain high performance over time are not those who work the hardest. They are those who understand how to balance work, nutrition and rest – and who have the discipline to optimise all three.

Pursuing high performance remains an admirable ambition but trying to achieve it without understanding how it works will only create problems. Rather than demanding more from their workforce, the organisations that succeed in the long-term will be those that design environments in which people can consistently perform at their best. That way, high performance can be achieved without leading a company's most valuable resource – its people – burning out. ☒