

Burned Out By Design

How Companies Push Workers Past the Limit and Call It Loyalty



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Preface

I didn't write this book from a desk. I wrote it after years on factory floors, drilling sites, and midnight shifts – watching good people wear themselves down in the name of “loyalty.” Most of what gets called burnout isn't a personal failure. It's the system doing what it was built to do: squeeze every drop of effort, then replace the worker and move on.

Companies will call it “commitment,” “excellence,” or “drive,” but those words are camouflage. The truth is simpler – the system runs better for them when workers are too tired to question it. This book isn't about theory.

It's about pattern recognition. Once you see how burnout is built into the structure – not just tolerated, but rewarded – you can stop blaming yourself and start seeing clearly.

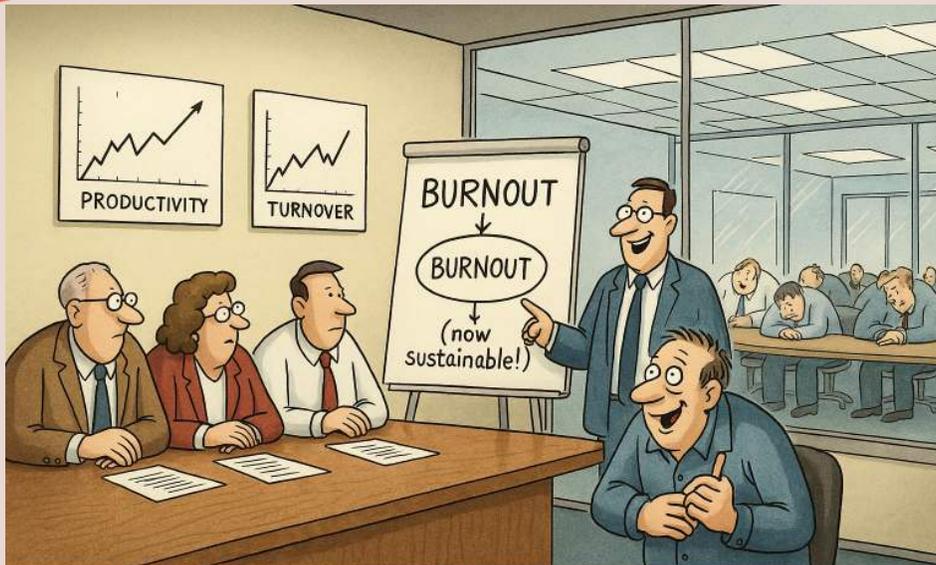
If you've ever felt alone in that exhaustion, this is for you.

– **Jeremiah Satterlee**

Realworktruth.com



Chapter 1 – How Burnout Gets Built Into the System



“I know—let’s just build it into the system!”



The Feature, Not the Flaw

Burnout doesn't happen because one manager wakes up saying, "I'm going to run my crew into the ground today." It happens because the system is built to do exactly that.

Companies set the bar by pointing to their "top performer." If one worker can run at 120%, management makes that the new 100%. The exception becomes the rule. The impossible becomes the expectation. And the result is predictable:

- ✔ Workers stretch themselves thin just to meet "the new normal."
- ✔ Fatigue piles up while the bar never comes back down.
- ✔ Anyone who can't keep pace gets labeled as weak or lazy.

But here's the real trick: often that "top performer" doesn't even exist. It's a projection – a story, a highlight reel, or a fantasy cooked up by management. They build a standard out of an illusion.

When Burnout Gets Called Lazy



The system never admits burnout. It rebrands it. Instead of acknowledging exhaustion, companies dip into their corporate dictionary:

- ✔ "He's lazy."
- ✔ "She's not committed."
- ✔ "They don't want it bad enough."

It costs money to fix understaffing or broken scheduling. It costs nothing to call people lazy.

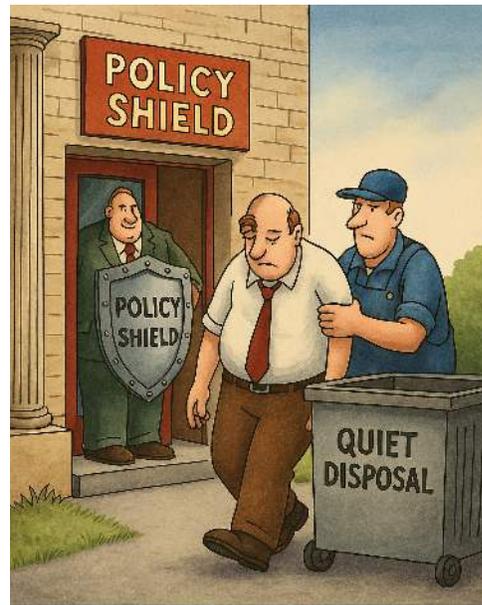




The Moral Shield of Policy

Companies go further: they write policies, handbooks, and training modules that declare their system is “fair” and “correct” by default. If you collapse under it, the failure is yours.

This moral shield protects the company while pushing out anyone who doesn't fit. It's not a manager's whim – it's culture.



The company's 'burnout policy' leaves something to be desired.

The Quiet Disposal

Once you're marked, the push-out begins:

- ✔ More criticism over small mistakes.
- ✔ Passed over for overtime, training, or advancement.
- ✔ “Maybe this isn't the right fit.”

Jeffrey Pfeffer called it “the disposal of human capital” – **workers aren't fixed; they're replaced [2].**

- ✔ Raise the bar to match the “top performer” – real or imagined.
- ✔ Rebrand exhaustion as laziness.
- ✔ Policies rewrite morality to protect the system.
- ✔ Burned-out workers are quietly cycled out.

⚙️ Pattern in Play





End Quote

“Burnout isn’t a bug in the system. It’s the design. Once you see the pattern, you can’t unsee it.”

– Realworktruth.com

Notes for Chapter 1 – How Burnout Gets Built Into the System

1. Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. (2022). *The Burnout Challenge*. Harvard University Press. – Shows that burnout stems from systemic overload, not individual weakness.
2. Pfeffer, J. (2018). *Dying for a Paycheck*. Harper Business. – Documents how unrealistic benchmarks and disposability fuel burnout.
3. Bakan, J. (2004). *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*. Free Press. – Explains how companies create a moral shield through policies that shift blame onto workers.



Chapter 2 – Do Companies Actually Want Burnout?





The Uncomfortable Truth

No executive walks into the office and says, “I want to run my people into the ground today.” But look at the system, and the answer is clear: in practice, companies do want burnout – **because it works for them.**

Burnout isn’t treated as a mistake. It’s treated as fuel. Workers are pushed until they’re drained, then replaced with someone new. It’s the same way a company runs a machine: run it hard, patch it when needed, and replace it when it finally breaks.

Burnout as a Business Model

Why does this model keep rolling? Because short-term gains always outweigh long-term health:

- ✔ **Reports look good** when productivity spikes at low cost.
- ✔ **Investors smile** at high output with cheap labor.
- ✔ **Executives pocket bonuses** tied to results, not sustainability.



As Jeffrey Pfeffer explains, modern organizations succeed by dumping hidden costs onto employees’ health and lives [1]. From the company’s perspective, burnout isn’t failure. It’s strategy.





Loyalty Tests in Disguise

The trick is in the spin:

- ✔ Long hours become “dedication.”
- ✔ Skipped breaks become “commitment.”
- ✔ Collapse becomes “not tough enough.”

Christina Maslach shows how these extreme workloads are reframed as loyalty tests [2].

You’re “good” if you give it all. You’re “lazy” if you breathe.

I’ve seen it myself. The hardest workers are praised until they collapse. Then the story flips: it’s no longer the system’s fault. It’s theirs.

Why It Never Gets Fixed

If companies really wanted to fix burnout, they’d:

- ✔ Lower quotas.
- ✔ Staff properly.
- ✔ Let people be human.



But those steps cost money – and worse, they loosen control. Silence and exhaustion are more profitable. Burnout weeds out anyone who resists, and constant pressure keeps everyone else in line.

Joel Bakan describes how corporations invent their own morality through policies and handbooks: the company always comes first, and workers are measured by how much they sacrifice [3]. Inside that moral universe, pushing people to the edge isn’t abuse. It’s loyalty.





Pattern in Play

-  Burnout is reframed as proof of commitment.
-  Loyalty gets tested through exhaustion.
-  Replacement is cheaper than redesign.
-  The company's morality justifies the abuse.

End Quote

"The posters say 'we care about our people.' The system says otherwise. Burnout isn't failure – it's fuel."

– Realworktruth.com



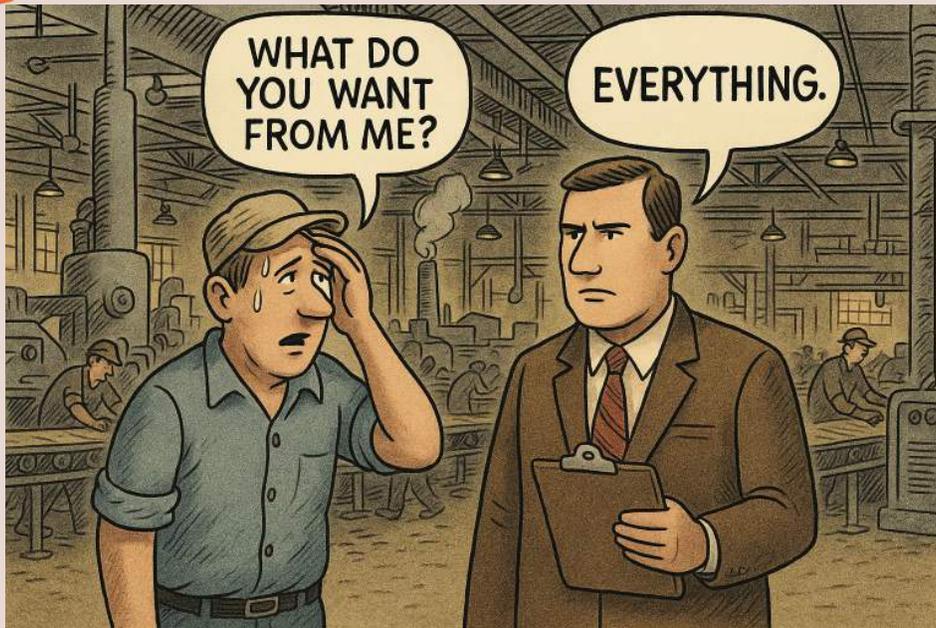


Notes for Chapter 2 – Do Companies Actually Want Burnout?

1. Pfeffer, J. (2018). *Dying for a Paycheck*. Harper Business. – Shows how companies profit by shifting burnout's cost onto workers' health.
2. Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. (2022). *The Burnout Challenge*. Harvard University Press. – Explains how extreme workloads are turned into loyalty tests.
3. Bakan, J. (2004). *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*. Free Press. – Describes how corporations build their own moral framework, placing the company above workers.



Chapter 3 – The Culture of Endless Expectations





The Extra Mile That Never Ends

If burnout has a fuel source, this is it: the constant push to do more. The corporate slogan “go the extra mile” sounds noble – but in real life, it’s a treadmill. The extra mile never ends.

Doing your job isn’t enough. Meeting the quota isn’t enough. The bar always moves, and the message is clear: whatever you gave yesterday, today demands more.

More Is the Default Mode

The culture of endless expectations shows up everywhere:

- ☑ Last month’s numbers become this month’s baseline.
- ☑ Doing your job isn’t enough – you must “add value.”
- ☑ Working hard isn’t enough – you must “show passion.”



Barry Schwartz explains that modern workplaces don’t just demand labor – **they demand your passion, energy, and even identity [1]. Once you give that, burnout isn’t far behind.**





The Shifting Bar, The Polished Excuses

Every time the line moves, leaders roll out the same justifications:

- ☑ "We just need to push a little harder this quarter."
- ☑ "This is about excellence."
- ☑ "Our customers deserve our very best."

But once a higher bar is hit, it never really comes back down. Christina Maslach calls this the cycle of "escalating job demands" [2]. Yesterday's miracle becomes today's minimum.





Selling Burnout as Pride

Companies can't admit the system is abusive. So they repackage it as pride:

- ✔ "Our people go above and beyond."
- ✔ "We don't settle for average."
- ✔ "We hold ourselves to the highest standards."

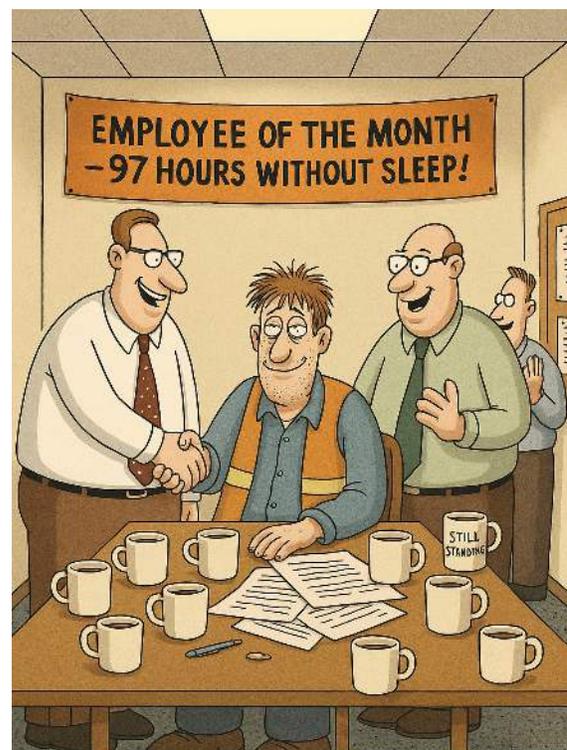
It sounds inspiring, but it's a trick. Arlie Hochschild describes how organizations reframe exhaustion as proof of emotional commitment [3]. **If you're drained, it means you didn't care enough.**

Personal Note: The Praise That Turns

I've lived this pattern myself. The harder I worked, the louder the praise – until I finally hit the wall. Suddenly, I wasn't "dedicated." I was "negative." The same system that clapped for me rewrote the story overnight. That's how endless expectations really work: they cheer you up the ladder, then blame you when you fall.

⚙️ Pattern in Play

- ✔ Yesterday's miracle becomes today's baseline.
- ✔ Overwork is reframed as excellence.
- ✔ Collapse is labeled weakness, not system failure.
- ✔ Endless pressure is sold as pride.



**'He didn't just give 110%.
He gave everything he had left.'**





End Quote

“The extra mile never ends – and when you collapse on the road, the company calls it weakness, not proof the road was broken.”

– Realworktruth.com

Notes for Chapter 3 – The Culture of Endless Expectations

1. Schwartz, B. (2015). *Why We Work*. Simon & Schuster. – Shows how companies demand meaning, passion, and identity on top of labor.
2. Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. (2022). *The Burnout Challenge*. Harvard University Press. – Explains how escalating job demands create burnout cycles.
3. Hochschild, A. R. (2012). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. University of California Press. – Describes how organizations repackage overwork as emotional commitment.



Chapter 4 – Burnout as Control





The Loyalty Test You Can't Win

Burnout isn't just a side effect of bad systems. It's a control mechanism. Companies don't just measure your output – they measure your willingness to sacrifice yourself.

In this system, compliance becomes morality. If you push yourself past the limit, you're "good." If you protect yourself, you're "negative." Burnout gets rebranded as proof of loyalty.

How the Test Works

Inside the corporate moral code, exhaustion is recast as virtue:

- ✔ Long hours are called "commitment."
- ✔ Skipped breaks are called "sacrifice."
- ✔ Speaking up about exhaustion is called "not being a team player."



Joel Bakan explains that corporations invent their own ethical framework – one where sacrifice becomes duty and loyalty becomes morality [1]. Within that world, burnout isn't failure. It's proof of faith.

Subtle Punishments

The punishment for resisting isn't always open. Sometimes it's smaller raises, ignored requests, or lost opportunities. I've seen it firsthand: the moment you say "no" to the system, the quiet penalties start to fall.





Christina Maslach's research shows how these escalating demands act as loyalty tests [2]. Workers who keep saying yes are praised; those who draw a line are punished.

Why Burnout Works as Control

The system works because companies tie your identity to their definition of loyalty. Arlie Hochschild showed how workplaces manipulate emotions to make workers feel guilty if they don't give enough [3]. Barry Schwartz adds that modern jobs don't just demand labor – they demand identity itself [4].

That's the hook. If your sense of worth is tied to their approval, you'll burn yourself out just to keep it. And when you finally collapse, the system shrugs and replaces you.



The employee said 'no.'





Personal Note: The Cost of Saying No

I remember the year I tried to put family first. Overtime vanished. Opportunities dried up. My paycheck shrank overnight – not because my work had changed, but because I refused to collapse for them. That’s how the control test works: resist, and you pay for it.

Pattern in Play

-  Compliance is redefined as virtue.
-  Resistance is redefined as weakness.
-  Burnout is redefined as loyalty.
-  The company builds the test, enforces it, and rewrites the results.





End Quote

“Burnout isn’t proof of loyalty – it’s proof the system owns you. And the only way to win is to stop playing the test.”

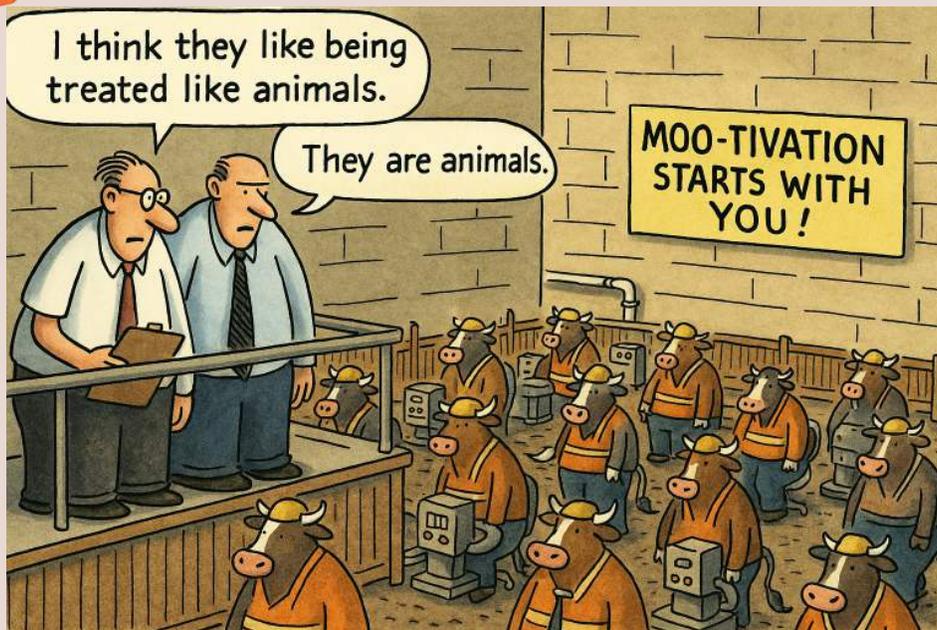
– Realworktruth.com

Notes for Chapter 4 – Burnout as Control

1. Bakan, J. (2004). *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*. Free Press. – Explains how companies invent their own morality, putting the system above workers.
2. Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. (2022). *The Burnout Challenge*. Harvard University Press. – Shows how escalating demands become loyalty tests.
3. Hochschild, A. R. (2012). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. University of California Press. – Demonstrates how companies manipulate emotions to guilt workers into overwork.
4. Schwartz, B. (2015). *Why We Work*. Simon & Schuster. – Explains how companies demand not just labor, but identity and meaning.



Chapter 5 – The Cost of Silent Compliance





Silence Isn't Neutral — It's Fuel

Burnout doesn't just spread because companies push too hard. It spreads because workers stay quiet. And most of the time, that silence isn't by choice — **it's survival.**

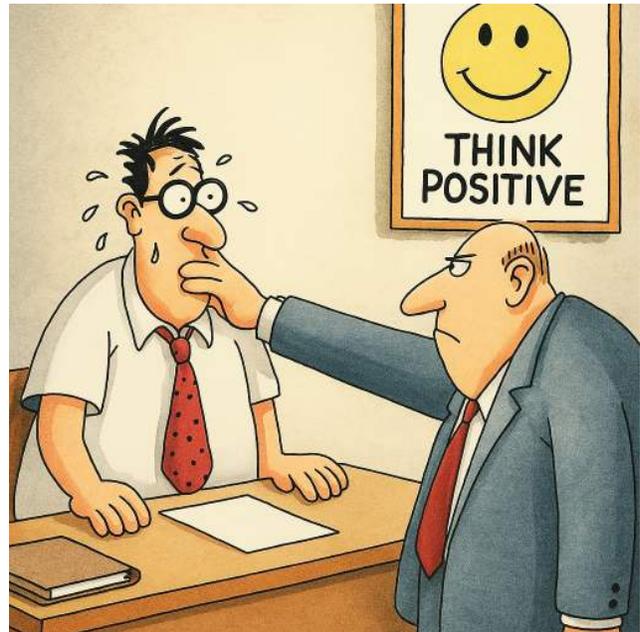
Everyone learns fast that speaking up about exhaustion, broken systems, or unfair demands can cost you your reputation, your raise, or your job. So people stay quiet. That silence is what keeps burnout alive.

The Pressure to Stay Quiet

Workers who say “this is too much” are branded as:

- ☑ Negative.
- ☑ Not a team player.
- ☑ A “bad fit” for the culture.

Some even get accused of “creating a negative work environment.” But here's the irony: the environment was already toxic. Staying quiet doesn't fix it — it just protects it.



The Punishment for Balance

Punishment doesn't always come as a write-up. Sometimes it's smaller raises, ignored needs, or losing overtime.

I've lived it. When I tried to put family first, the system cut me off. My overtime vanished, and with it, a big chunk of my paycheck. The message was clear: how dare I balance life outside of work?





Jeffrey Pfeffer shows that workers who speak up about unreasonable demands often get labeled as troublemakers [1]. The system rewrites the rules so that even trying to live a balanced life looks like failure.

The Old Morality Behind the System

This isn't just modern management. It's cultural. Max Weber showed how Western work culture tied sacrifice to moral worth [2]. Hard work wasn't just survival – it became proof of being “good.” That old belief still lingers.

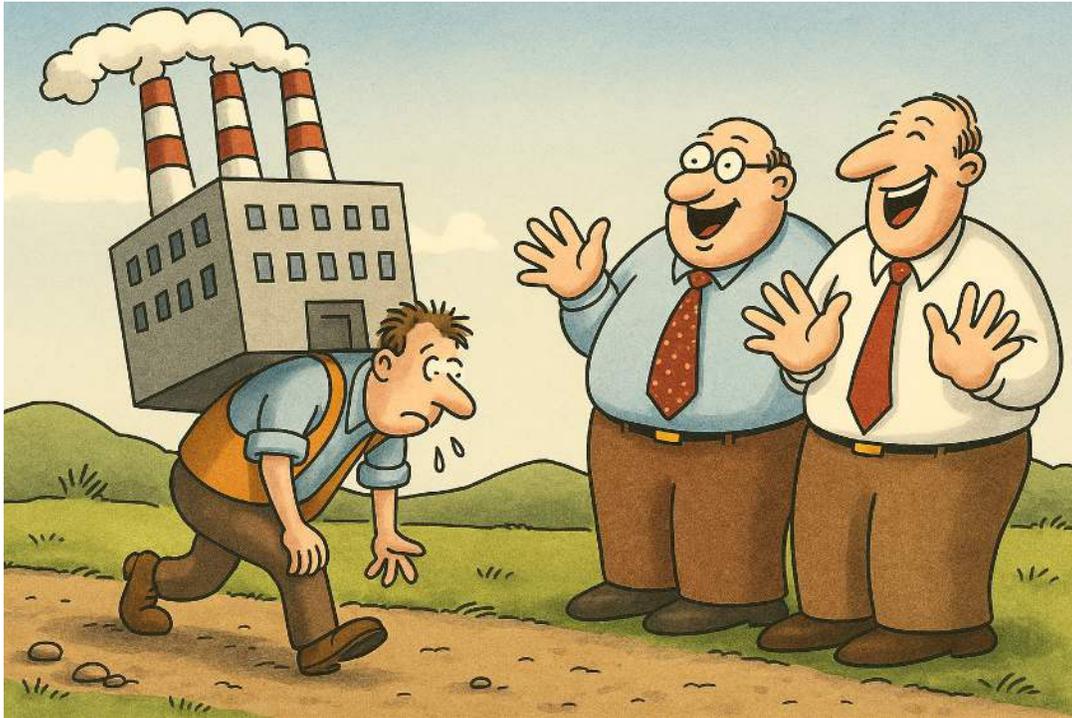
Companies use the same morality today: complain, and you're lazy. Sacrifice, and you're moral. Burnout becomes a badge of loyalty, not a warning sign.

How Silence Becomes Control

Once silence is normal, the cycle locks in:

- ☑ Complaints get reframed as weakness.
- ☑ Quotas keep rising unchecked.
- ☑ Burnout gets normalized as the cost of “commitment.”





The Real Cost of Compliance

Maslach documented how escalating demands grow stronger when nobody pushes back [3]. And Hochschild showed how companies even manipulate emotions to make workers feel guilty for resisting [4]. Silence doesn't just protect your job – it makes you believe silence is the right thing.

The cost doesn't just land on workers. It lands on families, health systems, and communities. Pfeffer's research ties long hours and chronic stress to higher risks of heart disease, depression, and even early death [5].

And here's the kicker: silence doesn't buy you safety. You can burn yourself out, stay quiet, do everything right – and still get replaced the moment you're no longer useful. Silence buys time, not protection.





Pattern in Play

-  Speaking up gets punished.
-  Staying quiet keeps the cycle alive.
-  Burnout gets reframed as loyalty.
-  Families and communities carry the cost while companies walk free.

End Quote

“Silence isn’t safety. It’s the very thing that keeps burnout alive.”

– Realworktruth.com



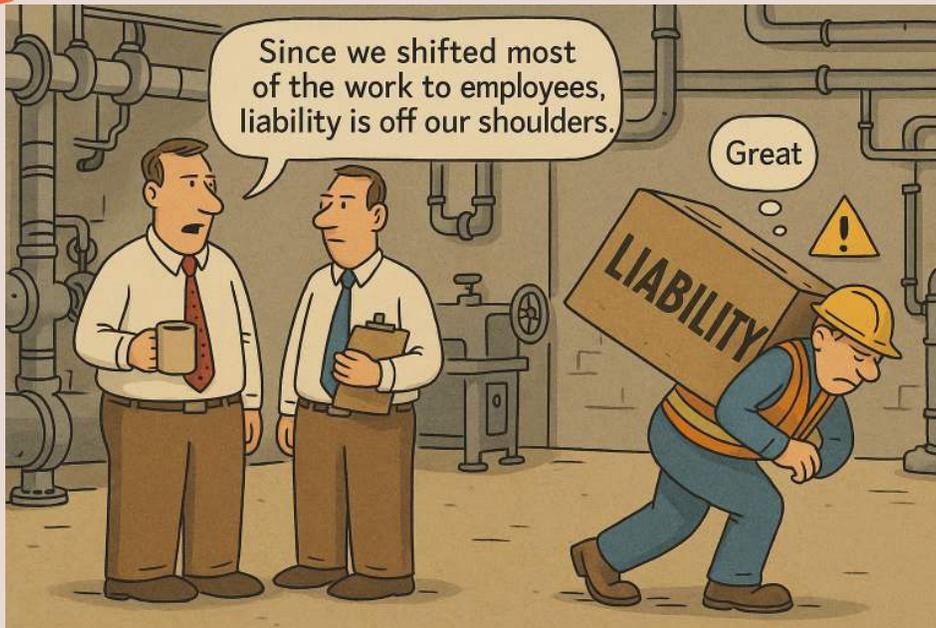


Notes for Chapter 5 – The Cost of Silent Compliance

1. Pfeffer, J. (2018). *Dying for a Paycheck*. Harper Business. – Shows how workers who resist unhealthy demands are labeled troublemakers.
2. Weber, M. (1905). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Routledge. – Explains how sacrifice and moral worth became tied to work.
3. Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. (2022). *The Burnout Challenge*. Harvard University Press. – Documents how escalating demands grow unchecked when silence prevents pushback.
4. Hochschild, A. R. (2012). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. University of California Press. – Demonstrates how emotional manipulation keeps workers quiet.
5. Pfeffer, J. (2018). *Dying for a Paycheck*. Harper Business. – Connects workplace stress and silence to measurable health consequences.



Chapter 6 – Burnout Protects the Company





The Shield That Hides the Cracks

By now it's clear: burnout isn't an accident. It isn't just sloppy planning. Burnout is useful — **because it protects the company.**

Every time a worker collapses, the company brings in “fresh meat,” wipes its hands clean, and calls the old worker “not a fit.” The cracks in the system stay hidden, while the damage lands on the people holding it up.

How Burnout Shields the System

When the pressure breaks a worker, the fallout doesn't hit management. It hits:

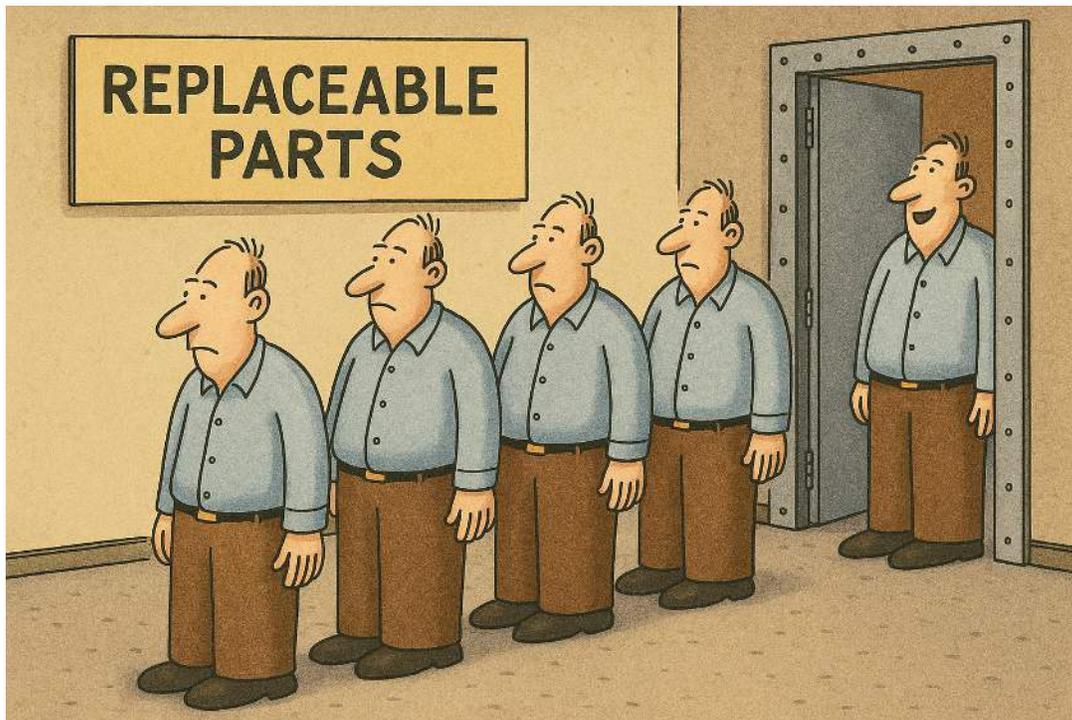
- ☑ Your health.
- ☑ Your family routines.
- ☑ Your sleep, your body, your life.

Executives who wrote the quotas walk away untouched. Burnout acts like armor: it keeps the company image polished while shifting the cost onto you.



Jeffrey Pfeffer showed that companies save millions by ignoring burnout, letting workers absorb the health costs while profits stay intact [1]. One person's collapse isn't a failure. It's a built-in feature.





The Replaceable Worker Myth

The system rewrites every story of collapse:

- ☑ "They weren't committed enough."
- ☑ "They couldn't handle the pressure."
- ☑ "We need someone stronger in that role."

I've seen top performers pushed until they broke – only to be discarded and replaced. The company learned nothing. It didn't have to.

Maslach and Leiter show how burnout is consistently framed as an individual weakness instead of a system failure [2]. That framing protects the company from ever taking blame.





The Revolving Door

Burnout survives because it keeps the cycle turning:

- ✔ Push the willing until they break.
- ✔ Replace them with someone new.
- ✔ Call it “normal turnover.”

Arlie Hochschild explains how companies even make you feel guilty when you're exhausted – as if collapse means you didn't care enough [3]. That guilt keeps people in line while the cycle resets.

Personal Note: Collateral Damage

I've watched crews rotate through the same jobs, each one pushed past the limit, each one burned out and gone. The system never slowed down. On paper, production kept moving. In real life, the wreckage was people. That's how burnout protects the company – it sacrifices you to keep the illusion alive.

⚙️ Pattern in Play



- ✔ Burnout shifts costs away from the company and onto workers.
- ✔ Collapse is reframed as personal weakness.
- ✔ The revolving door of “fresh hires” keeps production moving.
- ✔ Guilt keeps workers from questioning the cycle.





End Quote

“Burnout doesn’t break the system – it protects it. The only thing sacrificed is the worker.”

– Realworktruth.com

Notes for Chapter 6 – Burnout Protects the Company

1. Pfeffer, J. (2018). *Dying for a Paycheck*. Harper Business. – Shows how companies offload health costs of burnout onto workers while profits stay intact.
2. Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. (2022). *The Burnout Challenge*. Harvard University Press. – Documents how burnout is reframed as individual weakness instead of a system failure.
3. Hochschild, A. R. (2012). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. University of California Press. – Explains how emotional manipulation turns exhaustion into guilt, keeping the cycle alive.



Chapter 7 – Struggle as Identity: Why Workers Protect Burnout





When Hardship Becomes a Badge

Burnout doesn't just survive because companies design it. **It survives because workers protect it.**

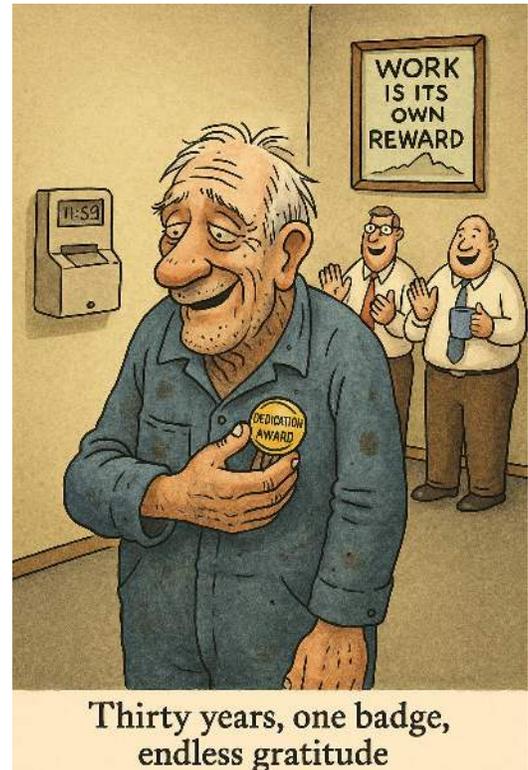
Over time, hardship becomes part of identity. The long hours, the missed family events, the exhaustion – they stop being red flags and start being bragging rights.

- ☑ "I made it through the 80-hour weeks."
- ☑ "I never called in sick."
- ☑ "If I had to tough it out, so should you."

In this frame, struggle equals value. Question burnout, and you're not just questioning the company's system – you're questioning the worker's self-worth.

Why Struggle Gets Worshipped

The workplace is the last place you should worship struggle. Here, struggle isn't noble – it's dangerous.



- ☑ It means **safety shortcuts** taken just to prove toughness.
- ☑ It means **silence instead of teaching**, so the next worker has to "earn it the hard way."
- ☑ It means **wasted energy** that only companies profit from.

Max Weber's Protestant Ethic tied morality to sacrifice [1]. That cultural shadow still lingers: pain is proof you're "good." But in reality, sacrifice here doesn't serve workers. It serves the company.





The Cruel Genius of Burnout by Design

This is the genius of burnout: it convinces people to guard the very system that's breaking them. The cycle doesn't just live in handbooks and quotas – **it lives in pride.**

- ☑ The pride of never missing a shift.
- ☑ The pride of running on fumes.
- ☑ The pride of surviving conditions that should have been fixed.

And once struggle becomes identity, workers enforce the cycle themselves. Abuse becomes tradition. Exhaustion becomes inheritance.





Personal Note: Inheriting Exhaustion

I've worked alongside guys who wore their burnout like armor. They weren't just surviving it — they defended it. If you suggested a safer way, or an easier process, they'd laugh: "That's not how it's done."

The saddest part? They thought they were protecting pride. But what they were really protecting was the system that profited from their pain.

I also remember working at a drilling company where I asked the company man how he got the opportunity to work overseas — because I wanted to do that too. He looked at me with disdain and said I would have to earn it, that it would take years. He spoke as if I wasn't good enough. Two years later, I was overseas doing the very work he dismissed me from. That moment showed me how struggle is used not only as control but also as a gatekeeping tool — one more way the system convinces workers to carry and defend their own exhaustion.

Pattern in Play

-  Struggle is reframed as proof of worth.
-  Burnout becomes a badge of honor.
-  Criticism of burnout feels personal, not systemic.
-  Workers themselves help pass the cycle down.





End Quote

“Burnout lasts not just because companies design it – but because workers defend it as who they are.”

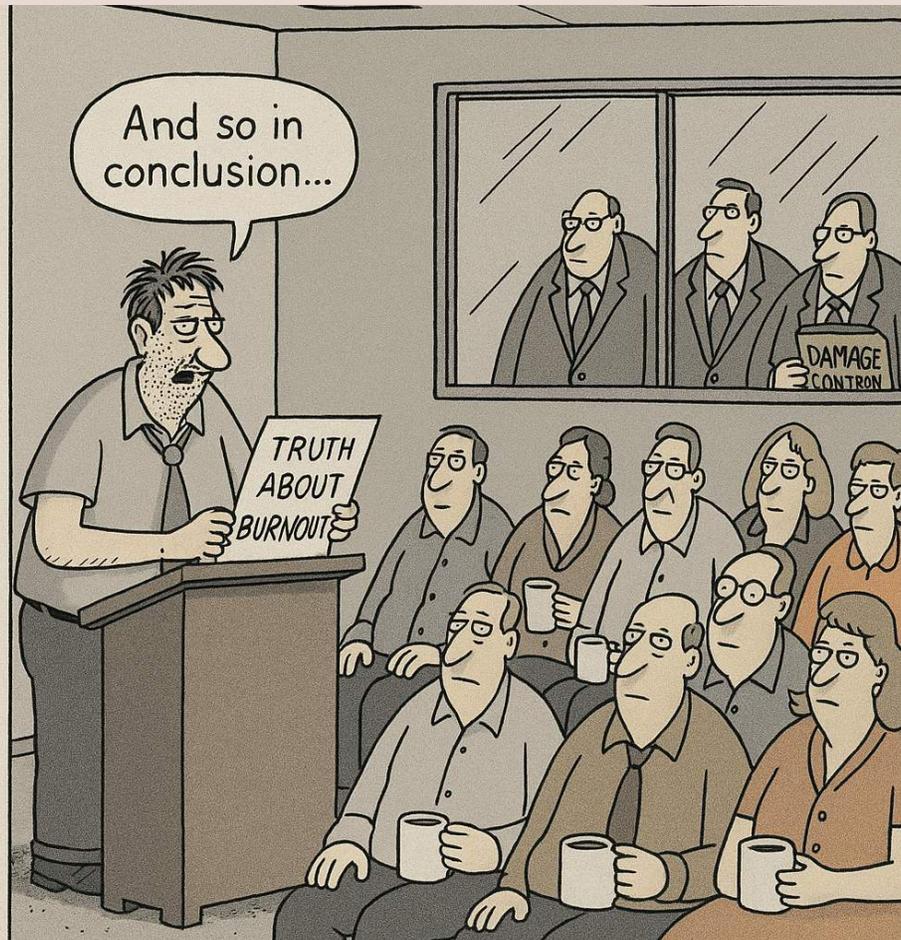
– Realworktruth.com

Notes for Chapter 7 – Struggle as Identity

1. Weber, M. (1905). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Routledge. – Shows how sacrifice became tied to moral worth, a cultural root of burnout-as-identity.
2. Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. (2022). *The Burnout Challenge*. Harvard University Press. – Explains how burnout gets normalized when individuals internalize escalating demands.
3. Hochschild, A. R. (2012). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. University of California Press. – Documents how workers defend emotional overwork as loyalty.



Epilogue – The Truth About Burnout





The System Was Built This Way

Burnout isn't an accident. It isn't a glitch caused by "bad managers" or a few poor choices. It's the system working exactly as designed.

The posters on the wall say "we care about our people." The numbers on the floor tell another story: impossible quotas, broken families, health traded for deadlines. Burnout hides the cracks, protects the illusion, and keeps the machine running.

Why You Can't Outwork It

You can give more hours, take fewer breaks, and grind yourself into the ground – but the bar will always move again. And when you collapse, the same system that praised you will quietly replace you and call you "weak." That's not failure. That's design.

Jeffrey Pfeffer showed how companies shift the costs of this cycle onto workers and families while keeping profits intact [1]. Maslach and Leiter proved that burnout is framed as individual weakness to dodge accountability [2]. History is clear: the system doesn't fix itself – **because it was never broken in the first place.**

The hope isn't in "working harder." It's in seeing the pattern for what it is. Once you stop blaming yourself, the power of the cycle breaks. Burnout lasts because workers carry the blame. It ends when people put it back where it belongs: on the system.

Max Weber's old ethic of sacrifice may have tied morality to work [3], but that doesn't mean you have to live inside it. The spell breaks the moment you say: "This isn't weakness. This is design."





⚙️ Pattern in Play

- ✔️ Burnout protects the illusion of a healthy system.
- ✔️ The bar always moves, no matter how much you give.
- ✔️ Collapse is reframed as personal weakness.
- ✔️ The cycle ends only when workers name it for what it is.

End Quote

“The truth is, you can’t outwork a system built to drain you. But you can outlive it by refusing to carry its blame.”

– Realworktruth.com

Notes – Epilogue

1. Pfeffer, J. (2018). *Dying for a Paycheck*. Harper Business. – Documents how burnout’s real costs are dumped on workers while companies protect profits.
2. Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. (2022). *The Burnout Challenge*. Harvard University Press. – Shows how organizations consistently reframe burnout as individual weakness.
3. Weber, M. (1905). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Routledge. – Explains the cultural roots of sacrifice-as-morality in work.





Where Hope Actually Lives

Join the Real Work Truth Community

The corporate machine runs on silence, burnout, and broken promises. Real Work Truth exists to call it out – with the stories, tools, and research no one else is putting in front of you.

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Share your story. Spread the truth. Because once you see what's really going on, you can't unsee it.





About the Author

Jeremiah Satterlee is a veteran, tradesman, and writer who spent decades working in the real world of maintenance, drilling, and industrial systems.

He's seen how companies build loyalty programs while burning through people, how "safety culture" gets used as cover, and how workers keep showing up anyway – not out of obedience, but pride. Through Real Work Truth, Jeremiah writes for those who keep the lights on and the machines running – the workers who fix problems no one else understands.

His goal is simple: bring honesty back to conversations about work, burnout, and respect. He believes in straight talk over slogans, proof over promises, and systems that protect time instead of stealing it.

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