# When High Performers Burn Out First: Rethinking Who Is Most at Risk During Peak Periods



### The Assumption That Risk Lives at the Bottom

In most organizations, burnout is framed as a capacity issue affecting those who are struggling to keep up. It is associated with overload, lack of capability, or insufficient support. As a result, interventions are often directed toward employees who are visibly under pressure or falling behind.

This framing is intuitive, but it is incomplete.

During peak fiscal periods, the employees most at risk are often not those who are struggling. They are the ones who are excelling. High performers, particularly those with deep institutional knowledge or strong reputations for reliability, become the default solution to rising demand.

They are given more work, more responsibility, and more urgency. They are trusted to deliver when others cannot. They are rarely questioned because they consistently meet expectations.

What is less recognized is that this dynamic places them at the center of structural risk.

### How Organizations Concentrate Work Without Realizing It

Workload during busy periods does not distribute evenly. It follows patterns of trust, competence, and historical performance.

Managers under pressure tend to rely on individuals who have proven themselves capable of handling complex or time-sensitive tasks. This reliance is often reinforced by organizational culture. High performers are seen as dependable, adaptable, and willing to go the extra mile.

Over time, this creates a feedback loop.

The same individuals are repeatedly assigned critical work. Their familiarity with systems, processes, and expectations allows them to complete tasks efficiently, which further reinforces the perception that they are best suited for high-pressure

situations.

Meanwhile, opportunities to distribute workload more broadly are missed. Other employees may not be given the chance to develop the same level of capability, leading to an increasing concentration of responsibility within a smaller group.

During peak periods, this concentration intensifies. High performers become the connective tissue holding multiple processes together, often without formal recognition of the scope of their contribution.

## The Hidden Nature of High Performer Burnout

One of the reasons high performer burnout is difficult to detect is that it does not immediately disrupt output.

These employees continue to deliver. They meet deadlines, solve problems, and maintain a level of performance that masks the strain they are under. Their ability to absorb pressure becomes a liability, not because it is ineffective, but because it is unsustainable.

Unlike employees who are visibly overwhelmed, high performers often internalize stress. They may be less likely to raise concerns, either because they do not want to appear incapable or because they believe the pressure is temporary.

This creates a delayed recognition of risk.

By the time signs of burnout become visible, they are often advanced. Fatigue has accumulated. Engagement has declined. The employee may already be considering exit options.

From an HR perspective, this creates a gap between perception and reality. The individuals who appear most stable may, in fact, be the most at risk.

## The Disproportionate Impact of Losing High Performers

When high performers disengage or leave, the impact extends far beyond their individual role.

They often carry institutional knowledge that is not fully documented. They understand how systems interact, where potential failures may occur, and how to navigate complex processes under pressure. Their departure can create immediate gaps in capability that are difficult to fill.

There is also a ripple effect within teams. High performers often serve as informal leaders, providing guidance and support to others. When they leave, the stability of the team can be disrupted, particularly if others were relying on them during peak periods.

From a financial perspective, the cost is significant. Replacing high performers typically requires more time, higher compensation, and a longer ramp-up period. The loss of productivity during this transition can be substantial.

Despite this, the conditions that lead to their burnout are often not addressed systematically.

## Why Traditional Workload Management Falls Short

Most organizations have some form of workload management, but it is often focused on

task allocation rather than capacity distribution.

Tasks are assigned based on availability and skill, but less attention is paid to cumulative load over time. High performers may appear to have capacity because they complete tasks efficiently, but this can obscure the total volume of work they are handling.

There is also a tendency to prioritize immediate outcomes over long-term sustainability. During peak periods, the focus is on delivery. Questions about balance, recovery, or risk are deferred.

This approach can be effective in the short term, but it creates a structural imbalance. Over time, the same individuals are asked to carry a disproportionate share of the load, increasing their exposure to burnout.

## Rebalancing Work Without Compromising Performance

Addressing high performer burnout requires a shift in how work is distributed and how performance is understood.

The first step is visibility. Organizations need to develop a clearer picture of who is doing what, particularly during peak periods. This includes not only formal assignments but also informal responsibilities that may not be captured in standard tracking systems.

Once this visibility is established, patterns begin to emerge. Certain individuals will consistently appear at the center of critical workflows. Recognizing this concentration is essential to redistributing work more effectively.

Developing broader capability within teams is also critical. This means creating opportunities for other employees to take on more complex tasks outside of peak periods, building redundancy and reducing reliance on a small group.

Importantly, this is not about lowering standards. It is about ensuring that performance is sustainable across the team rather than concentrated within a few individuals.

## The Role of Managers in Protecting High Performers

Managers play a pivotal role in identifying and mitigating high performer burnout.

This requires a shift in attention. Instead of focusing primarily on those who are struggling, managers must also monitor those who are consistently delivering at a high level. Questions about workload, capacity, and sustainability should be directed not only at those who are visibly under pressure, but also at those who appear to be handling it well.

Open conversations are essential. High performers may not volunteer concerns, but they are often willing to engage when asked directly. Creating an environment where these discussions are normalized can help surface issues before they escalate.

Managers must also be willing to make difficult decisions about workload distribution, even when it introduces short-term inefficiencies. Protecting high performers may require reallocating work, adjusting timelines, or investing in additional resources.

## Protecting the People Who Hold the System Together

High performers are often seen as the most resilient part of the workforce. They deliver consistently, adapt quickly, and provide stability during periods of uncertainty.

But resilience has limits.

When organizations rely too heavily on a small group of individuals to carry peak periods, they create a concentration of risk that is both predictable and preventable.

Protecting high performers is not simply a matter of retention. It is a matter of organizational stability. These individuals often hold together the systems, processes, and relationships that enable the organization to function effectively under pressure.

When they burn out, the impact is felt far beyond their individual role.

For HR leaders, the challenge is to recognize this risk before it becomes visible in turnover data. It requires a more deliberate approach to workload distribution, capability development, and managerial awareness.

The goal is not to reduce performance. It is to ensure that performance does not come at the expense of the very people who make it possible.