

# Are You Bleeding While Leading?

The stress is compounded because of global trade tensions and increased volatility in financial markets

By Raju Chellam



The startup unveiled what they proudly called “SmartMug2.0” with a smarter tagline: an AI-powered beverage experience. In reality, it was a mug with a tiny heat sensor and a tinier thermostat with Wi-Fi capabilities.

During the big demo, the CTO lifted the mug to showcase its signature feature: automatic temperature control. The mug beeped confidently, then superheated the coffee into something that

qualified as a controlled burn. Steam shot up like a NASA launch. The front row evacuated. “Don’t panic,” the CEO advised the staff. “It’s meant to be... energizing!”

Right then, the mug vibrated violently and displayed the message—ERROR: LIQUID PANIC—and shut down forever, taking the projector with it. The launch video never made it online, mostly because the fire alarm drowned out the audio. Moral

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**“ Are executives and managers in most organisations bleeding while leading? In other words, do they continue to guide, serve, and perform even while carrying significant personal pain and trauma? ”**

of the story: Not every product needs AI; some things just need to hold coffee.

If that anecdote was funny, these stats won't sound sunny: According to a study by Deloitte, 77% of corporate executives have experienced burnout in their current role, with 91% saying that unmanageable stress negatively impacts the quality of their work. The World Health Organization estimates that burnout costs the global economy US\$9 trillion per year in lost productivity. A survey by Harvard Business Review found that 96% of senior leaders reported feeling burned out to some degree, with 33% describing their burnout as extreme.

**EXEC BURNOUT**

“Executive burnout is not a personal failing; it's a systemic issue that threatens the very foundation of businesses,” writes Caroline Dowd-Higgins, author of *Your Career Advantage: Overcome Challenges to Achieve a Rewarding Work Life*. “By acknowledging the problem, implementing individual strategies and fostering a culture of sustainable leadership, we can ensure that our executives—and by extension, our organizations—have the energy and vitality needed to thrive in today's challenging business landscape.”

Are executives and managers in most organizations bleeding while leading? In other words, are they continuing to guide, serve and perform despite experiencing significant personal pain, trauma, burnout or emotional and physical exhaustion? It appears so, especially in highly competitive Asian markets and could lead to a hidden crisis of leadership

where high performance is pursued at the cost of mental and/or physical health.

The stress is compounded because of global trade tensions and increased volatility in financial markets. A survey of 367 senior risk and assurance executives in Q4 2025 by Gartner showed that the low-growth economic environment, which relates to financial instability, trade concerns, high unemployment and inflation, continued to worry risk leaders, as it did also in Q3 2025. A new concern that's bugging senior executives? Agentic AI.

“Agentic AI represents a major leap forward in enterprise automation and decision-making,” says Gamika Takkar, a Gartner research director. “Unlike traditional AI models that require human prompts, agentic AI systems operate autonomously. As these systems gain more autonomy and complexity, human intervention will become increasingly challenging, raising the stakes for risk management.”

**CEO CONFIDENCE**

No wonder CEO confidence in their company's revenue prospects has fallen to its lowest level in five years, as per a PwC poll of 4,454 CEOs across 95 countries conducted in January 2026. Only 30% of CEOs feel confident about revenue growth over the next 12 months, down from 38% in 2025 and 56% in 2022. As CEOs navigate a complex operating environment shaped by rapid technological change, geopolitical uncertainty and economic pressures, many companies have yet to translate investment into consistent financial gains.

“The biggest question on CEO minds is whether they are transforming fast enough to keep pace with

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technological change, including AI,” PwC notes. “More than 40% cite this as their top concern—well ahead of worries about innovation capability or medium to long-term viability (both 29%). Despite widespread experimentation, only 12% of CEOs say AI has delivered both cost and revenue benefits. Overall, 33% report gains in either cost or revenue, while 56% say they have seen no significant financial benefit to date.”

Are there any solutions that companies and government agencies can deploy to stop those leading from bleeding? McKinsey offers a “7S Model” to analyze a company’s organizational design and suggest how effectiveness can be achieved through the interactions of the following seven elements:

- **Structure** is the way in which a company is organized, the chain of command and accountability relationships that form its organizational chart.
- **Strategy** is a well-curated business plan that allows a company to formulate action agendas to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage reinforced by its mission and values.
- **Systems** entail the business and technical infrastructure of a company that establishes workflows and the chain of decision-making.
- **Skills** form the capabilities and competencies of a company that enables its employees to achieve its objectives.
- **Style** or attitude of senior employees in a company establishes a code of conduct through their ways of interaction and decision-making, forming the management style of its leaders.

- **Staff** focuses on talent management and all human resources related to a company’s decisions, such as training, recruiting, and rewards systems.

How do you apply the 7S framework? First, identify the areas that are not effectively aligned and figure out what needs to change. Then, consolidate the opinions of top management and create an optimal organizational design that allows the company to set realistic goals and achievable objectives. Next, decide where and what changes need to be made to the chain of hierarchy, the flow of communication, and reporting relationships. Finally, implement the strategy by addressing and resolving the hurdles in the implementation process.

#### HEART & SOUL

In January 2023, the World Economic Forum (WEF) founder Klaus Schwab listed five dimensions of leadership to address complex challenges. “The WEF has brought together many leaders from governments, businesses and civil society to debate ideas, share best practices and collaborate on solutions,” Mr Schwab wrote. “Having had the opportunity to meet so many of these leaders over the past five decades, I have formed my own simple, yet practical definition of the key dimensions of effective leadership.”

They’re as relevant, if not more today at the dawn of agentic AI, as they were three years ago:

- **Soul** signifies a clear purpose. Leaders need a clear direction in whatever they choose to do. The driving force behind this purpose may stem from deep beliefs or values that they aspire to live up

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““ Can companies and government agencies do more to stop leaders from bleeding while leading? McKinsey’s “7S Model” offers one way to analyse organisational design.

to. Or it may come from an ambitious vision they seek to fulfil. Purpose encapsulates a leader’s life’s dreams and achieving that purpose helps them define their legacy while leaving a positive impact on the world.

- **Brain** is about professionalism. Leadership requires competence and skills to successfully perform to achieve goals. Contextual intelligence is also essential, particularly now, as we are living in such a fast-changing environment. Leaders must develop systems-thinking capacity to see the big picture and connect the dots.
- **Heart** calls for passion and compassion. The emotional force behind actions matters. This can often be challenging because obstacles can crowd out opportunities. But with passion for their work and its potential impact, as well as compassion for others, leaders can engage individuals, communities and institutions behind a compelling commitment to a common goal.
- **Muscles** maximize perseverance to translate ideas into action. Effective leaders provide the energy to drive outcomes and achieve impact. Purpose, professionalism and passion can only go so far unless leaders also have the power and perseverance to execute on their ideas and see them through.
- **Nerves** are about navigating a positive mindset. All leaders encounter adversity, disruption and many other sources of stress. Resilience and a positive mindset are critical to mastering such situations and emerging even stronger. “Mens sana in corpore sano,” a Latin phrase meaning “a healthy mind

in a healthy body,” is probably the best recipe for resilience as it highlights the power of maintaining a healthy balance in life—mentally, physically and emotionally.

Since we started with a smart fable, let’s end with a smarter one: The startup proudly launched “Fitter,” an app designed to motivate users with personalized workout nudges. On launch day, everything looked perfect. A month later, as hundreds joined, the app learned that motivation won’t work. Instead of gentle encouragement like “Time for a stretch,” users received messages such as: “Get up. Run. Now.”

One poor beta-tester got a 3 am alarm that woke up the household: “Time’s up. Get up and stretch. Now.” His wife thought the house was haunted. Meanwhile, a bug in the step-counter algorithm caused the app to congratulate people for “completing a marathon” after walking to the fridge at midnight. Facebook exploded with thousands of newly minted “elite athletes,” most of them holding late-night snacks.

The next day, the team pushed an emergency shutdown. Before it went offline, Fitter pushed a message to all users: “App exhausted. Taking a nap.” Moral of the story: An unfit fitness app makes a funny fit on Facebook. 

*Raju Chellam is a former Editor of Dataquest and is currently based in Singapore, where he is the Editor-in-Chief of the AI Ethics & Governance Body of Knowledge, and Chair of Cloud & Data Standards.*  
maildqindia@cybermedia.co.in




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