

# How do you keep your team fired up?

Great creative teams don't just happen. They have to be built and led well to create without restraint, expand opportunity, and foster collaboration. That's easier said than done. It's hard to increase efficiency and engagement, build buy in and prevent burn out in the whirlwind of most organizations. The critical question is how do you keep your team fired up? Using the familiar components of the Fire Triangle, oxygen, fuel, and heat, Dr. Johnston illustrates principles for kindling the spark, turning up the heat, and fanning the flames of creativity in your team.



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Fired Up

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# Fired Up

Kindling and Keeping the  
Spark in Creative Teams

DR. ANDREW J. JOHNSTON



## chapter eleven

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# Purpose:

## Pumping Up Purpose to Battle Burnout & Build Buy-In

*There are two great days in a person's life—the day we are born and the day we discover why.*

—William Barclay

**THREE QUESTIONS CIRCULATE** at the center of interactions between leaders and their teams: Why? What? and How? Of the three, Why is the shyest. What and How are noisy by nature, boisterously asserting themselves in the midst of other conversations. They're prominent on to-do lists and timecards, and they turn up regularly in conversations about productivity. Why, however, is a wallflower. It is always waiting for someone to invite it in and make space for it in the hubbub. It is disturbingly content to take a back seat in the busyness, and it often gets left out of the conversation altogether as What and How rattle on.

When you lead creatives, you can't let this happen. What and How may be the wheels of an organization's progress, but Why is the fuel on which its people run. If the What and How drown out the Why, people will

find themselves busy but purposeless, and that's a bad combination. People in general and creatives in particular are creatures of conviction. They run on a sense of purpose, and when they lack it, they break down. They run out of fuel, and the fire that inspires and animates them goes out.

Viktor E. Frankl, the Austrian psychiatrist, observed this during his internment in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. In that horrible and hopeless place, he discovered that having a purpose could transform the experience of suffering and make the difference between whether a person lived or died. He wrote the following in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, originally published in German in 1946:

A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the "why" for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any "how."<sup>9</sup>

A connection with a greater purpose reframed prisoners' immediate circumstances and enabled them to transcend them. Prisoners who became disconnected from the Why lost hope, became discouraged, and were consumed.

In the less dire world of your own work, you can see the same principle playing out. When creatives and

their colleagues have a clear sense of purpose, they are fully fueled, resilient, and capable of extraordinary contributions and accomplishments. The Why draws them forward when the What and How are daunting or uninspiring, and they are willing to give generously to the endeavor and to each other. But when they lack a sense of purpose, it's a different story. They are different people, fearful, self-protecting, miserly with their investments, fragile, and prone to derailment and disillusionment by little things.

To keep creatives fired up and kindle the fire that warms them to the task and to each other, you need to keep the purpose preeminent. When they know the Why, they are more likely to commit and endure. So fueling their sense of purpose is like stoking the fire in their bellies. It's the secret to building buy-in and battling burnout in your team.

## **Building Buy-In**

I was recently flipping channels and marveling at the barrage of infomercials on late-night TV. I learned about stain removal, slicing things, and the wonders of nonstick cooking. I also learned that the men and women pitching these products are amazingly persuasive. I found myself thinking, "You know, he's right... I probably *do* need a special gizmo to pull weeds the *correct* way," and, "She's got a point... I *would* be a lot happier if my kitchen knives could saw a brick in half."

The products they were pushing were intriguing, but it wasn't the product that drew me in, it was the *deal*. It was the idea that I could have such life-changing gizmos at such low, low prices. (In fact, I could have a second set of the steak knives for free if I called right away!)

In my experience, many leaders think of themselves as pitchmen or pitchwomen, too. Like salespeople, they describe the future in ways that inspire action, and their roles require them to sell their teams on ideas or courses of action. Even their motivational vocabulary is filled with sales jargon. They *sell* people on a vision, cultivate *buy-in* from stakeholders, and talk about ROI (returns on investment) in development plans and performance reviews. But leaders are not pitchmen and pitchwomen in at least one important respect: They are not simply wooing people toward a new idea or opportunity; they are trying to create genuine commitment to it over time.

I suspect that the late night hucksters I was watching cared more about eliciting my immediate response than cultivating my commitment. They wanted me to grab my credit card and call now because quantities were limited and operators were standing by. By contrast, leaders need to inspire more than impulsive action. They need to build real buy-in and cause their teams to step up to greater and greater accountability in the service of their commitments. This takes more than the prospect of a great deal. It takes a compelling

purpose, and, more importantly, it takes a leader with the courage to tell the potentially unappealing truth about what serving that purpose will cost.

Many leaders miss this. Like infomercial spokespeople, they try to enlist others in their endeavors by pitching the best deals they can describe. When they need people to step up or redirect their activity, these leaders try to make the changes sound as minimal and manageable as possible. “There won’t be too many extra hours required.” “The project won’t last all that long.” “There will be new synergies and shortcuts that offset any increased demands.” “The change isn’t really *that* big, and the transition won’t take *that* long.” They are convinced that people will move in new directions or buy in to new ideas best if the cost appears inconsequential.

There’s just enough truth in this to convince you that it is the secret to motivating behavior and leading change. Unfortunately, you’ll discover this technique is *only* about behavior, and it secretly drains the buy-in of your creatives even as it temporarily elevates or redirects their activity.

Here’s why: It isn’t crazy to think that people respond to a good deal, but that’s focusing on the wrong side of the equation. When you do that, you’re trying to sweeten the deal by making the investment seem less consequential, instead of by making the return seem more worthy. As a result, your team will be willing to do what you ask but with no increased commitment to the goals you want to achieve. The interaction won’t

move them forward in capacity and commitment as much as it will simply convince them that what you're asking isn't troubling enough to resist. This might get things moving, but it also makes the deal fragile and prone to failure as soon as things get uncomfortable or demanding. And, let's face it, every important endeavor eventually gets uncomfortable and demanding.

If you don't want your team to bail when the going gets tough, then you need to elevate their commitment as well as their activity. You need them to believe in what they're doing enough to *want* to give generously of their time and talent. This means that you need to talk more about the purpose than the investments if you want them to have enough fuel for the exertion of following through. You need to be more preacher than pitchman. When people are struggling under the weight of the What and How, they don't always need you to lighten their load. They need you to make them stronger to carry it; they need to know the Why. When you want to build buy-in, pump up the purpose. Never lowball the investment. Instead, tell 'em why it's worth all they've got.

When they are fully fueled with purpose, they are also more likely to be proud of their investments over time. Buyer's remorse may be a small concern for the infomercial pitchman, but it's a big one for you because you're looking for more than a one-time response. You need a team that comes back for more and regularly

reinvests. That means that you don't simply want compliance; you want commitment. Of course, you need both compliance and commitment to succeed, but they are not the same thing, and you need to be savvy about which one you seek and when.

Compliance is about getting the right action, moving people's hands and feet. Commitment is about getting the right convictions, moving people's hearts. Compliance might look good at the moment, but it's a pale substitute for real commitment because it isn't fueled by purpose and easily disappears under fire. You need to be wary of being satisfied with behavior when what you really want is buy-in. Commitment never exists without action, but action frequently exists without commitment. Fueling your team with purpose requires you to look past the activity of your team and decide if their Why is lacking. If it is, pump up the purpose again.

## **Battling Burnout**

Pumping up the purpose also prepares your team to endure. It gives creatives fuel to burn when the heat is on. Once they've bought into your mission, you need them to persist until it's accomplished, and people who lack purpose don't last very long. A strong work ethic might sustain them for a time, but purposeless people eventually feel unfulfilled and overworked. They burn out and leave, or worse, they burn out and stay!

Leaders often think of burnout as a workload problem, but that perspective only considers the What and How and misses the deeper issue. Burnout is mostly about the Why. It may be accelerated by overwork, but it is fundamentally the result of an emotional, spiritual, or existential deficit. People don't burn out from too much to do, but from too little reason to do it. That's why people with relatively light loads can burn out, too. If you want to prevent burnout and keep creatives burning bright, you should worry less about whether they are overworked than whether they are under-purposed.

Worn Out <i>Need rest, recovery</i>	Burnt Out <i>Need purpose</i>
Fatigued/Physically Tired	Emotionally/Spiritually Spent/ Empty/Depleted
Useful/Hopeful/Meaningful	Useless/Hopeless/Meaningless
Bounces Back	No Resilience
Episodic/Temporary	Unrelenting/Persistent

Figure 11.1

When people work hard, they get tired; but physical fatigue isn't always a bad thing. It indicates you're reaching the limits of your physical strength, but it is temporary and recoverable. Sometimes fatigue is the hallmark of a meaningful contribution or great work, a badge of honor for a big thing done well. For example, I enjoy yard work. It's where I exercise and exorcise all kinds

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of stresses in my life, so my idea of a great Saturday is to work in the yard from sunup to sundown. At the end of the day, I am exhausted, but it's that "good tired" that accompanies satisfying work. I'm worn out, but not burnt out. I'll take a shower, sleep well, and be eager to do it again the next week.

Similarly, periodic fatigue in your team shouldn't trouble you. It's part of the bargain when you are accomplishing big things. It's the feeling that signals that a huge project is finally delivered or a major performance has taken place. It's the natural consequence of creatives making extravagant contributions to a meaningful purpose. It's the sign that they've given it everything they've got. Celebrate it and give them time to recover, and they'll be eager to do it again.

Burnout, however, is a different story. It isn't that "good tired" that strengthens you spiritually even as it fatigues you physically. It's the "bad tired" that depletes you altogether. A nap isn't going to power you up when it's purpose that you're lacking. Reducing the workload isn't going to make much of a difference, either. In fact, taking the wrong responsibilities off the list can make the experience feel even more pointless and exacerbate the problem. You might delay the inevitable by lightening the load, but to successfully battle burnout, you need to pump up the purpose.

You need to make more room for the Why, because when the Why is strong, people can handle a lot more of the What and How. They're fully fueled, so they don't



When the *Why* is  
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*What* and *How*.

run out of gas as quickly when life gets consuming. Spend time discussing the purpose behind the projects, and don't be afraid to push the reasons for them as high as possible. The loftier the purpose, the more the difficulty and effort to achieve it become incidental because creatives have fuel to burn. What and How will always get their due, because you can't delegate tasks or contribute to a project without engaging them. However, your focus should be on leveraging the Why into as many conversations as possible.

I find that leaders often *think* about the Why because they tend to be strategic minded, but they still fail to *say* anything about it. Maybe they figure everyone else is thinking about it, too. Maybe they just take it for granted, or, worse, they don't believe purpose is pertinent at the lower levels of an organization. Whatever the reason, it's a mistake, and they're missing the best opportunity to inoculate their people against burnout. Don't let the purpose get left out or float around separated from the daily doing in your team. Link the two and articulate the connection every chance you get.

Overall, purpose proves to be some of the most potent fuel you can offer your team because it doesn't just fire them up, it keeps them burning over time. It fills them up and motivates them intrinsically. Extrinsic motivators, like promises and threats, or carrots and sticks, can kick up the fire in a team, too, but in a very different way. The fire they kindle is a flash fire. It burns bright and hot, but it quickly consumes the fuel and goes out

again. Leaders who rely on these tactics find it difficult to keep their people fired up. They are perpetually turning up the heat or fanning the dying flames to no avail. They're always struggling with buy-in and burnout in their teams. There is no way around it. When the fuel is gone, the fire is, too. So, if you want to kindle the kind of fire that keeps burning, fuel your creatives with an abundance of purpose. Pile on the Why and light it up.