



Ashley Kate
HR & Finance

HR Director Boardroom Summary

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PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGY

Hosted by

EVERSHEDS
SUTHERLAND



Guest Speaker:



Glenn Mead

Director
Face Value Performance
Psychology Ltd

Discussing the topic:

"It's good to talk: how dialogue reduces stress, halts burnout and leads to better decisions"

Our recent HR Director Boardroom was an informative and engaging discussion hosted by Glenn Mead, Director of Face Value Performance Psychology Ltd. and chaired by Suzanne Caveney, Legal Director at Eversheds Sutherland International LLP.

Glenn began by sharing some of his background, including establishing his company, Face Value Performance Psychology. His journey involved psychology studies, particularly occupational psychology, coaching, and problem-solving. He shared he had worked with corporations like Ernst & Young, Cap Gemini, Accenture, and Operations Management before venturing into psychology and eventually establishing his own company in 2017.

Glenn recounted reading a book authored by a former GCHQ spy, which discussed preparing for challenging scenarios. The author of the book emphasised the importance of being unfazed by surprises, even when surrounded by chaos and blame. To put it in the words of Kipling, the key isn't losing control but rather remaining aware in the face of difficulties. Stress, worries, and unsettling emotions might arise, but being conscious of these reactions offers a degree of control. This self-awareness allows one to acknowledge the situation, recognise fatigue or stress, and consider necessary breaks or actions, instead of being in a state of frantic confusion. Glenn highlighted that achieving a state of mental calmness forms the initial step toward grasping how to optimise one's potential for performance.



Stress, Burnout and Exhaustion

The discussion transitioned into examining the interconnections between stress, burnout, and exhaustion. Glenn proposes the need to explore these concepts and their relationships, as they form a progressive sequence. Stress is introduced, with its definition derived from cognitive behavioural therapy, emphasising the role of perception. Glenn underscores that everyone's experiences are unique and shaped by their perceptions. Under pressure, the perception of demands becomes pivotal—what is expected of them, what tasks need completion, and the standards to meet. Also highlighted was the challenge of finding time to think amidst stress, particularly for professionals in managerial and leadership roles, who may perceive introspection as self-indulgence. This could lead to distorted opinions about their performance - ranging from negative self-assessments to over-optimistic beliefs. The discourse then shifts towards understanding the connection between these factors and the development of burnout.



Preventing Burnout

Chronic workplace stress that isn't effectively managed is identified as the root cause of burnout. Glenn emphasises that an understanding of stress management, coupled with adherence to HSE (Health and Safety Executive) management standards, can potentially prevent burnout. If stress is monitored and controlled, the progression to burnout can be averted. However, if stress is allowed to accumulate unchecked over time, burnout can manifest with its associated consequences. The symptoms of burnout are then addressed, including feelings of energy depletion and exhaustion.

Emergence of Cynicism

Glenn discusses the concept of increased mental distance from one's job and the emergence of cynicism. This transition is described as a shift toward denial, refutation, and a problematic mindset of cynicism. He highlighted how this mindset is characterised by a tendency to anticipate negative outcomes and expresses the link between cynicism and coronary heart



disease, emphasising the influence of one's mindset on overall well-being. The third identifiable symptom explored is reduced professional efficacy, which pertains to a diminished sense of urgency and competence in performing job tasks. This includes difficulty managing workloads, a sense of being overwhelmed, and challenges in recognising personal achievements amidst numerous responsibilities and pressures.

Exploring Workplace Factors

Glenn then delved into research conducted by Gallup that examines the workplace's contribution to these issues and identifies potential causes attributable to employers. The initial factor highlighted is the impact of unfair treatment in the workplace, which can result in feelings of stress and pressure over time, ultimately leading to burnout. He continued with an exploration of factors such as an unmanageable workload and a lack of role clarity. The division of labour is particularly problematic for individuals who possess a strong sense of conscientiousness and reluctance to delegate tasks, which can lead to them becoming overstretched. The concept of duplication of effort is also mentioned, whereby individuals might find themselves duplicating tasks due to poor delegation and direction. He underscored the significance of lacking support from one's manager as a contributing factor to burnout.

He made the point that when tasks must be completed within unrealistic time constraints, it exacerbates the challenge of managing one's workload. This can eventually lead to excessive pressure and, if not effectively managed, result in burnout. As a consequence of prolonged stress and mismanagement, individuals may experience emotional depletion, detachment from their work, cynicism, and diminished professional outlook.



The Burnout Cycle

The concept of the "burnout cycle" was referred to. This idea originates from research conducted around the 1980s by psychologist Herbert Freudenberger. He notably collaborated with substance misuse counsellors in New York during the heroin epidemic.

Glenn described the initial phase as a need to validate oneself, driven by the fear of facing consequences if unable to prove worth. This compels individuals to intensify their efforts, leading to a time crunch where priorities must be rearranged. As this unfolds, personal needs often take a back seat, and the tendency to avoid conflict becomes apparent. Challenges are pushed aside rather than confronted directly. Consequently, unresolved issues simmer beneath the surface due to the preoccupation with what's perceived as crucial. Value systems can shift, leading to conflicting priorities; for example, acknowledging the significance of work-life balance but feeling compelled to prioritise work commitments over personal events. This inner dilemma generates considerable distress and mental fatigue. The strategy of denying problems exacerbates the situation, followed by a stage of withdrawal. This withdrawal offers temporary relief but inhibits the recognition of existing problems. Over time, detachment from one's core values ensues, manifesting in altered behaviour, even depersonalisation.

Prioritising Wellbeing

The concept of self-distancing was discussed, where individuals detach themselves from their authentic selves and view their roles as mere performances. This detachment leads to feelings of being insincere and hollow, paving the way for eventual depression and burnout. Glenn addresses the issue of glorifying overexertion, exemplified by the value of "hard work" and its detrimental implications, like fostering a culture of excessive presence and burnout. He recounts a recent workshop with law firm partners, emphasising the importance of prioritising values like smart work, agility, and collaboration instead. Glenn points out that neglecting personal needs often serves as an early indicator of potential burnout and distinguishes burnout from mere exhaustion. While burnout involves complex psychological and behavioural patterns, exhaustion is more about the progression of physiological reactions.

Glenn presented a research study conducted by Maria Åsberg from the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm in 2011, introducing the concept of the "exhaustion funnel." The stages of this funnel, discussed from top to bottom, highlight the progression of burnout. Glenn points out the significance of sleep and its impact on overall well-being. He mentions that sleep deprivation can affect an individual for up to four days after the deprivation occurs. Based on personal experience from his time in the military and as a father, he stresses the importance of recognising the effects of sleep deprivation and taking steps to address it. The stages within the exhaustion funnel include sleep disturbance leading to fatigue and low energy, which then results in physical discomfort and psychological challenges like irritability, guilt, joylessness, and hopelessness. Ultimately, the funnel culminates in exhaustion, where proper functioning becomes difficult. Glenn suggests the importance of addressing burnout by prioritising self-care, such as rest and relaxation, rather than immersing oneself in work or digital distractions.



Understanding Burnout

He went on to combine the insights from the burnout cycle and the exhaustion funnel to shed light on triggers and susceptibilities for burnout and exhaustion. He underscores the connection between the burnout cycle's components, such as the strong need to prove oneself, leading to neglecting needs. This encompasses both physiological requirements like sleep, nutrition, and exercise, as well as psychological needs like engaging in activities that foster a sense of accomplishment and well-being beyond work.

When delving into triggers and susceptibility, Glenn identifies two groups particularly at risk. Those who categorise themselves as highly conscientious, driven to excel and often overextend themselves are prone to burnout. Their keen sense of duty and propensity to spread themselves thin can lead to neglecting their own well-being. Similarly, individuals whose self-confidence is closely tied to their work performance are susceptible. They may define their self-worth based on achievements or failures, which intensifies their drive to work harder and be critical of themselves.

Glenn highlights the significance of recognising these risk factors and fostering a broader perspective to counter the potential negative impacts of burnout and exhaustion.

Proactive Strategies

Glenn's insights provide valuable lessons on proactive strategies for improved well-being. Encouraging open conversations and considering alternative approaches in the face of challenges is highlighted to enhance resilience. Notably, individuals who view success as a driving force and avoid failure are more susceptible to burnout and exhaustion. Glenn underscores that even mild physical danger can trigger stress responses, leading to heightened arousal and further exacerbating the risk.

Uncertainty and the desire to excel also play a role in burnout triggers. The mounting pressure to manage multiple tasks, coupled with decision overload, can lead to a sense of being stretched too thin. This can create a cycle where individuals feel they are not performing at their best, leading to a downward spiral of negative self-perception. The cumulative effect of work overload and the associated feelings of inadequacy can contribute to burnout. Glenn mentions the importance of recognising these patterns and fostering a more balanced approach to workload and self-evaluation to mitigate the risk of burnout.

He stressed the importance of addressing workloads that become overwhelming due to limited bandwidth. He prompts discussions about prioritising, delegating, or even declining tasks, which can vary in emotional impact based on cultural norms. Glenn also highlights the importance of receiving feedback and evidence to counter initial perceptions. Positive feedback can serve to counter the loop of negative self-perception caused by burnout. Glenn hopes that attendees do not identify too closely with these dysfunctional behaviours and suggests that everyone, to some extent, may exhibit such tendencies.



Embracing Dysfunctionality

Glenn asserts that nobody is exempt from moments of dysfunctionality in their daily lives. These instances often lead to unwanted and unhelpful emotions, even with the best of intentions. He uses relatable examples, like arguments or temper outbursts, to illustrate his point. Glenn emphasises that reflection and learning from these experiences are crucial but often overlooked steps. He encourages humility and vulnerability in acknowledging mistakes and striving to improve.

It was discussed how these patterns of dysfunctionality can affect businesses and individuals. In the context of business, such behaviour can hinder employee engagement and growth, lead to client dissatisfaction, and impact profitability. At a personal level, this can contribute to negative self-perception and self-criticism.

The Power of Expectations

Glenn explains the driving force behind human actions and reactions, emphasising the connection between expectations and outcomes. He breaks down this process into two components: firstly, the anticipation of consequences and causes, and secondly, the assessment of one's own influence and control over the situation. Glenn acknowledges the inherent unpredictability of the future and work challenges, but he emphasises the authority individuals possess over their thoughts, emotions, and actions. He challenges the notion of being functional and in control, cautioning against assuming mastery over one's responses.



Individuals enduring prolonged stress and burnout might deny their state, masking it as coping. The outward behaviour appears normal, yet beneath lies a different truth. Glenn explains that this sense of control is deceptive, potentially giving rise to damaging emotions and detrimental beliefs about health and life quality. The drive to excel as a lawyer, HR director, or parent can lead to self-criticism for not meeting those expectations. Glenn delves into the complex interplay of emotions, time, and

identity. He notes how the brain's perception of self can deceive, perpetuating cycles of labelling and anticipation. He advises breaking free from this cycle and fostering an open mindset to reshape behaviours towards more constructive outcomes.

Overestimating Coping Abilities

Glenn addresses those who assert their control and lack of dysfunctionality, suggesting they might be trapped in a mindset that overestimates their coping abilities.

Glenn explains that individuals who experience intense fear before tasks like giving presentations may find memories resurfacing, connecting certain sensory cues or moments of apprehension with those past experiences. These memories can shape their responses, making them feel anxious and nervous again. He cautions against allowing emotions to dictate reactions and assumptions about present situations. For instance, believing that a forthcoming meeting with senior business members will result in looking foolish is a form of mind reading, predicting a future outcome that hasn't occurred yet.



Glenn continues by illustrating how these assumed emotions lead to specific actions, such as nervousness, withdrawal, or aggression. These behaviours can impact others, influencing their perceptions and reactions in return. He describes how this interaction creates a social dynamic influenced by nonverbal cues, as humans are inherently social beings attuned to nonverbal communication.

The Power Struggle

Glenn explains that the brain's functioning can be boiled down to two major components: the powerful and instinctive emotional brain and the relatively less powerful logical thinking brain. The emotional brain operates with an all-or-nothing approach, directing fight, flight, or freeze responses. In contrast, the logical brain is deliberate and considers perspective. When

emotions are heightened due to factors like sleep deprivation, poor diet, lack of exercise, or a sense of purposelessness, the emotional brain can override the frontal lobe, leading to a feeling of mere survival. People experiencing burnout and exhaustion often struggle to determine their next steps because they feel incapable of making decisions. This emotional thinking process forms the basis of various models, including concepts like the "chimpanzee brain" from "The Chimp Paradox", "system one and system two" from "Thinking, Fast and Slow" And Walter Mischel's "Hot and cool thinking".

Glenn referred to the primitive self that emerges under pressure, focusing on basic tasks. Despite this, people tend to deny this regression, clinging to a perception of sophistication and control. Glenn emphasises that past achievements aren't necessarily predictive of future performance. He advocates for addressing present emotions instead. Emotions wield influence by aligning with expectations of positive outcomes, prompting actions that lead to rewards. Conversely, when expectations lead to frustration, negative emotions arise, driving corresponding reactions. Ultimately, emotions prompt individuals to act based on fundamental physical and emotional needs.

Understanding Emotional Needs

Physically, individuals require essentials like breathing, eating, drinking, sleeping, exercising, and seeking stimulation. Emotional needs encompass feelings of security, belonging within a group, autonomy, meaningfulness, privacy, and status recognition. Neglecting these aspects can lead to feelings of worthlessness. The desire for attention, control, and the fear of challenges to these needs can trigger fight, flight, freeze, or even tend-and-befriend responses. Research suggests that females tend to display more recognition of emotional signals and initiate interactions concerning well-being, while males may often deny or withdraw from such discussions, prioritising avoidance or dominance.

Regarding burnout and stress, Glenn observes that it's often challenging to engage males in conversations about their feelings and actions in such situations. He points out three key emotional needs that surface under pressure: the need for belonging, meaning, and control. The desire to belong to a team is vital, as feeling excluded can lead to emotional pain. Seeking understanding and making sense of circumstances are also crucial to finding meaning in one's experiences. Control over one's situation is important for a sense of stability. The absence of control, regardless of fault, can

trigger emotions like anger. These emotions—grief, fear, and anger—arise when emotional needs feel threatened, influencing the emotional thinking brain, or "System one."

The Pitfalls of Emotional Thinking

In emergency survival mode, individuals quickly perceive and assess situations, relying on feelings and impressions rather than factual evidence. This intuitive sense often leads to gut feelings and hasty judgments, which can be inaccurate. Glenn notes that people tend to perceive situations in binary terms—black or white—and draw causal connections without evidence. They focus on immediate details without considering the bigger picture or possible alternatives. When faced with ambiguity, individuals often deny uncertainty, asserting their certainty even when conclusions are illogical. Strong emotions drive this behaviour. Catastrophising can occur, magnifying minor issues into all-or-nothing scenarios. This leads to emotive judgment, where current emotions shape predictions about the future. Past negative experiences can also influence this judgment, causing individuals to repeat past mistakes due to similar emotions resurfacing.

Ideally, the goal is to cultivate a calm and rational thinking process. This mindset embraces perspective, logic, and flexibility. However, when confronted with pressure and stress, the emotional thinking brain takes over, often categorising situations in binary terms of good or bad. This categorisation extends to language usage, where opposites are expressed, but not necessarily categorised as good or bad. Glenn illustrates this pattern with phrases like "all or nothing," "always or never," and "everyone or no one." Such thinking eliminates the possibility of alternative explanations. This trend is evident in language, like the nursery rhyme where children sing, "Nobody loves me, everybody hates me, I'm going down the garden to eat worms," reflecting a victim mindset.



The Mind Games of Self-Labeling

Glenn highlights how individuals label themselves as either good or bad, magnify negative information while filtering out positive feedback, and engage in fortune-telling, making absolute predictions about outcomes. They also engage in mind-reading, presuming they know others' thoughts, and amplify problems unnecessarily while downplaying personal achievements. Emotional reasoning plays a role, where feelings determine whether something is perceived as good or bad. Blame is assigned either internally or externally, demanding perfection and sometimes experiencing imposter syndrome—fearing exposure as a fraud. In moments of intense emotional distress, individuals may resort to erratic behaviour due to low tolerance thresholds, reflecting the impact of burnout and stress.



Unlocking Clarity

Glenn introduces a solution to counter these thinking errors. The approach originates from cognitive behavioural therapy and is straightforward to apply. By questioning the accuracy of thoughts, individuals can challenge the validity of their assumptions. Instead of accepting thoughts as facts, the suggestion is to initiate open-ended conversations by asking probing questions to uncover the underlying truths and potential distortions. This technique encourages a more rational and balanced perspective on one's thoughts.

The Power of Questions

The significance of closed and open questions was brought to light. Although the topic may seem familiar, he acknowledges that even those trained as coaches sometimes fall into the trap of employing closed questions or offering advice. Closed questions, he explains, confine responses to binary choices, limiting possibilities and discouraging extensive dialogue. On the contrary, open questions, like those beginning with what, why, when, how, where, and who, broaden the spectrum of



responses, fostering meaningful conversations and exploration. While the time constraint is acknowledged, Glenn underscores the importance of open questions in promoting dialogue and language-driven discovery.

Unraveling Fixed Mindsets

The significance of thinking errors is characterised by fixed mindsets, wherein individuals believe their experiences are unchangeable, widespread, and personal. This explanatory style, as explained by researchers like Martin Seligman, is linked to depression and learned helplessness. If someone constantly thinks, "I'm rubbish," and assumes this condition is permanent, they may withdraw from trying again. This mindset extends beyond a single area, leading them to believe they are inadequate in various aspects of life. This pervasive self-perception isolates them, making them feel as though they alone experience failure. Such a mindset clouds perspective and obstructs the ability to see a broader context.

Enhancing Emotional Management

In 2010, researchers Ethan Kross and Özlem Ayduk introduced the concept of psychological distance as a technique to reduce emotional thinking and the brain's stress response. They found that by employing this technique, individuals could enhance their physical endurance, decrease feelings of exhaustion and burnout, and bolster resistance to impulses. Psychological distance involves gaining perspective on emotions and situations to promote better emotional management. The researchers' unexpected discovery highlighted that resisting temptations empowers individuals with a sense of control and choice over their actions, contributing to increased self-efficacy over time.

Concrete thoughts and perceptions, often referred to as lower order thinking, are rooted in the present moment and evoke strong emotional responses due to their tangible nature. These thoughts are immediate and visceral, generating emotions that are closely linked to the current experience. Conversely, abstract thoughts, which are higher order, pertain to events further in the past or future, making them less emotionally charged. However, one can manipulate the emotional intensity of abstract thoughts by bringing them closer or pushing them away. By reducing emotional involvement, individuals create mental space to consider alternative perspectives, possibilities, and options.

Four Key Domains of Thinking

Four key domains of thinking can be adjusted to shift one's perspective and restore a sense of control. These domains include time perspective, problem size, personal involvement, and probability. When it comes to time, emotional reactions often stem from the perception that the issue is urgent and imminent. Individuals can reorder their priorities by questioning the immediacy and considering whether a task could be tackled soon. For example, one might enquire about a pressing project, asking if it truly needs to be addressed right at this moment or if it could be managed next week. Organising tasks in a temporal and spatial manner allows individuals to differentiate between immediate concerns and those that can be addressed later, thereby managing their focus and relieving pressure.

The notion of scale, size, or proximity pertains to how substantial and close these concerns feel. When someone describes an issue as significant, it's important to discern what "significant" means to them personally. Understanding the individual's perception of the problem's size and impact and its proximity in time can help provide context. Analogously, when faced with a group of nearby crocodiles, the one that appears closest to the boat is the immediate target for action. In a similar vein, gauging the size and closeness of various issues aids in determining their priority and managing emotional reactions.



The social-emotional dimension involves feeling overwhelmed and out of one's depth as if sinking in deep waters without the ability to cope. This sensation of drowning can be emotionally distressing. To address this, Glenn suggests questioning the depth of this feeling of being in too deep. How profound is it? How much further into this metaphorical pool must one go before regaining control and security? The logical progression of starting in the shallows and gradually moving to deeper waters is often favoured, mirroring a common approach to learning. In contrast, being suddenly thrown into the deep end can be overwhelming and reminiscent of situations where one was inadequately prepared. Another consideration is identifying those who have faced

similar challenges and managed to overcome them. Acknowledging that others have taken the plunge and succeeded can help dispel the notion of isolation. Creating a culture where asking for assistance is encouraged and where people take a genuine interest in each other's well-being further supports managing feelings of being overwhelmed.

The fourth domain concerns the sense of probability, prompting questions about how likely an event is to occur. Glenn emphasises the danger of being completely convinced of an outcome and preparing solely for that. He suggests considering the possibility that it might not happen and how one would respond to alternate scenarios. The four domains—time scale, size of the problem, personal involvement, and probability—work collectively to offer perspective. Even though these questions might appear straightforward, they engage the brain's rational faculties. By prompting people to assess the immediacy, impact, personal connection, and likelihood of events, these enquiries facilitate a connection with the frontal lobes. This engagement allows individuals to organise their thoughts, prioritise tasks, and reduce impulsive reactions, ultimately helping them regain a sense of control and balance amidst emotional states.



Balancing Demands & Capabilities

Glenn emphasises the importance of aligning the demands of a situation with one's ability to cope by using a scaling approach. He suggests matching demands with capabilities and then extracting evidence to determine the next steps. When facing seemingly immovable challenges, he recommends questioning what factors could potentially influence or change the situation. These questions are particularly powerful when used during intense moments. For longer-term scenarios, the conversation may take a different direction. Glenn also acknowledges that men often find it difficult to open up and share their feelings. To encourage more meaningful responses, he suggests asking nuanced questions such as "Are you OK?" or "How OK are you?" to engage individuals in a qualitative discussion that goes beyond the surface.

The Power of Nuanced Questions

There's a need for specific and nuanced questions to engage individuals in meaningful conversations. He suggests using time indicators like "at the moment" to introduce perspective and acknowledge potential changes in the future. By asking about the biggest challenge someone is facing, he encourages a comparative view of challenges and their handling. Drawing on past experiences, he prompts individuals to reflect on their own efficacy and consider how they've managed similar situations before. Glenn also highlights the value of learning from others' experiences and suggests seeking help from team members. To address overwhelming workloads, he proposes hypothetical scenarios for prioritisation and delegation, emphasising collaborative and mature decision-making. This approach aims to empower individuals to regain control and make choices that align with their well-being.

By utilising open questions that touch upon time scale, social involvement, and probability, individuals can engage in productive conversations and foster awareness in as little as five minutes. He emphasises that effective communication doesn't require lengthy coaching sessions and encourages self-awareness through thoughtful questioning. Glenn underscores the role of language in mitigating stress and preventing it from evolving into chronic issues like burnout and exhaustion.

Suzanne Caveney, chair of the event and legal director at Eversheds Sutherland, drew a close to what was an insightful and informative event. Attendees were grateful and thanked Glenn for what they felt was an extremely valuable session for them.





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