

Prevent Your Star Performers from Losing Passion for Their Work



[Michael E. Kibler](#)-Harvard Business School Review.

When Mohamed El-Erian abruptly resigned from his high-profile, and highly lucrative, position as Pimco's co-chief investment officer a year ago, most observers were shocked. I wasn't.

As a researcher and consultant to executives across diverse industries, I know how common it is for successful, high-performing people to lose their passion for work — and their commitment to their organizations — over time. I call this phenomenon “executive brownout” and [the details of El-Erian's departure](#) (not to mention [more recent reporting](#) on the conduct of his co-CIO Bill Gross, who has also since resigned) only confirmed my opinion that he was very likely suffering from it. El-Erian said he decided to leave after receiving a note from his 10-year old daughter outlining 22 milestones in her life that he had missed.

Brownout, a term also used to describe part of the life cycle of a star, is different from burnout because knowledge workers afflicted by it are *not* in obvious crisis. They seem to be performing fine: putting in massive hours in meetings and calls across time zones, grinding out work while leading or contributing to global teams, and saying all the right things in meetings (though not in side-bar conversations). However, these executives are often operating in a silent state of continual overwhelm, and the predictable consequence is disengagement.

Virtually every executive client with whom we engage is by all outward measures a superstar of their firm, but that status comes with consequences. They tell us they worry about:

- Feeling drained from continuous, 24/7 obligations.
- Physical deterioration due to years of sub-optimal sleep and self-care.
- Tenuous relationships with immediate family members.
- Distant relationships with old friends.
- The atrophy of personal interests.
- A diminishing ability to concentrate in non-business conversations.

While these are clearly “personal” issues, the effects to a company are quietly, but perniciously, toxic because they inevitably bleed into professional behavior. We’ve seen leaders in brownout spread the malaise by, for example, subconsciously protecting their own turf, shutting down brave new ideas for growth, losing track of talented staff (especially “B” players), and by being a role model that the next generation grudgingly respects, but finds deeply unappealing.

How can organizations begin to address this problem?

More money won’t cut it. Bigger payouts will either make it easier for these executives to leave — as in El-Erian’s case — or, for those in less senior roles, create incentives to “hang on” in a state of passive disaffection.

Companies must instead provide a *new* kind of currency to engage their professionals – one we call “active partnering.” The first step is to create a system that allows executives to talk candidly with their managers about what is most important to them professionally and personally and how their organizations might support these goals given their key work responsibilities. A natural time for this to be positioned is during the annual review process. Personal objectives might range from the sublime (adopting a child, writing a book, reconnecting with a disenfranchised family member, starting a non-profit) to the prosaic (running a 10K, coaching a child’s soccer team, volunteering as a mentor.) Professional objectives might include initiating a new product or service, building more powerful relationships, or tackling a business-critical need in the organization. The point is to foster a dialogue that allows bosses (and therefore businesses) to build true partnerships with their most important people.

When firms do so, it dramatically increases the commitment and impact of its stars. Think about it: if I’m your boss and, in addition to helping you develop professionally, I also actively support you in adopting a child, or becoming fit, or taking a service trip with your daughter to Africa, I have profoundly changed the nature of our relationship and your advocacy for and loyalty to our team and organization.

Naysayers will dismiss this idea as too unwieldy to implement, but elite managers are *already doing it* on an ad hoc basis, and we’ve seen it work to powerful effect on a systemic scale. For example, a Big 4 professional services firm engaged us to provide a year-long holistic executive development program focused on work excellence, health, and family success to 473 senior leaders. During the process, more than 60 of these high performers confidentially identified themselves as either actively planning to leave the firm or considering a departure in the year ahead. But following their participation in our active partnering plan, which involved one-on-one coaching sessions over several months, *only two* departed within the next five years. Several of the 62 went on to attain even more elevated positions at the firm.

The company retained its experienced executives and their deep institutional and market knowledge. These professionals were revitalized in the ways that were most important to each of them — and newly equipped to sustain high performance in today’s ultra-challenging business environment. As one example, we worked with a rising-star 40-something executive, who had reached a career crisis — feeling deeply unhappy at work (despite being fast-tracked and assigned to critical firm initiatives) and underappreciated at home. He had also suffered from weight gain brought on by continual travel and client work. After an active partnering development process, he had shed 40 lbs and had a clear vision of how to take his performance and contribution to the next level. Ten years later, he was the global CFO of his firm.

Could Pimco have worked with El-Erian to develop a more sustainable strategy for success – one that would have enabled him to be successful in *both* his personal and professional life? Yes, of course. A better question is: Why doesn’t every organization do that for its key executives?



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Ten signs you're experiencing brownout

1. You work long hours, but without any real interest in your job. The work itself is a dull slog and lacks intellectual challenge or stimulation.
2. You feel as if you never really finish tasks. There's always more to do.
3. You no longer know where your career is going and don't make important decisions.
4. You contribute the minimum in meetings and have little interest in new suggestions. You're the person who pours cold water on other people's ideas.
5. You'll use any excuse not to show up. A headache becomes a migraine and a cold is always flu.
6. You check emails when you get up in the morning and in bed before you to sleep. You are glued to your smartphone on holidays, on weekends and even during social occasions.
7. Physically you've started to suffer. You're out of shape, you eat junk food, you don't get enough sleep and you've given up exercising.
8. You've lost your sense of humour and tend towards passive aggressiveness and surliness. If anyone (in work or outside) asks you how things are going, you tend to snap or answer in monosyllables.
9. Family life is no longer what it once was. You come home late to watch TV and show little interest in your spouse and children. Friendships have withered on the vine and outside interests have been forgotten.
10. You don't hate your boss, but they're moody and unpredictable. You never know whether they'll like or hate a given piece of work.