



Running on Empty

Leader Depletion, the Lukewarm Middle,
and the Redesign of Leadership Work.

The C-Suite is actively managing every enterprise risk except the one executing the strategy

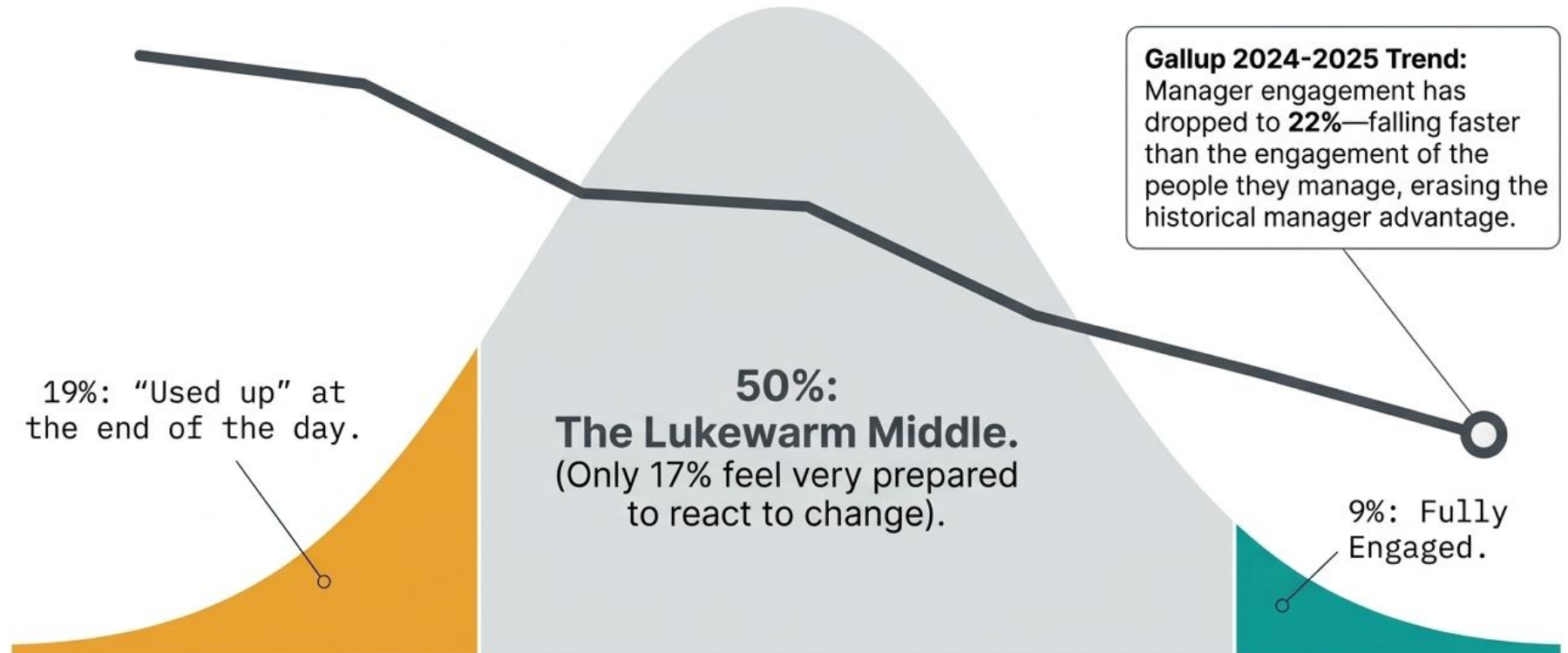
Standard Enterprise Risk Radars

- ✓ Cybersecurity STATUS: MONITORED
- ✓ Supply Chain Resilience STATUS: MONITORED
- ✓ AI Payoffs STATUS: MONITORED
- ✓ Regulatory Exposure STATUS: MONITORED

Leader
Capacity

The Hidden Vulnerability: The energy level of the people expected to lead through perpetual restructuring and disruption is unmeasured and unprotected.

The enterprise is running on an exhausted center of gravity

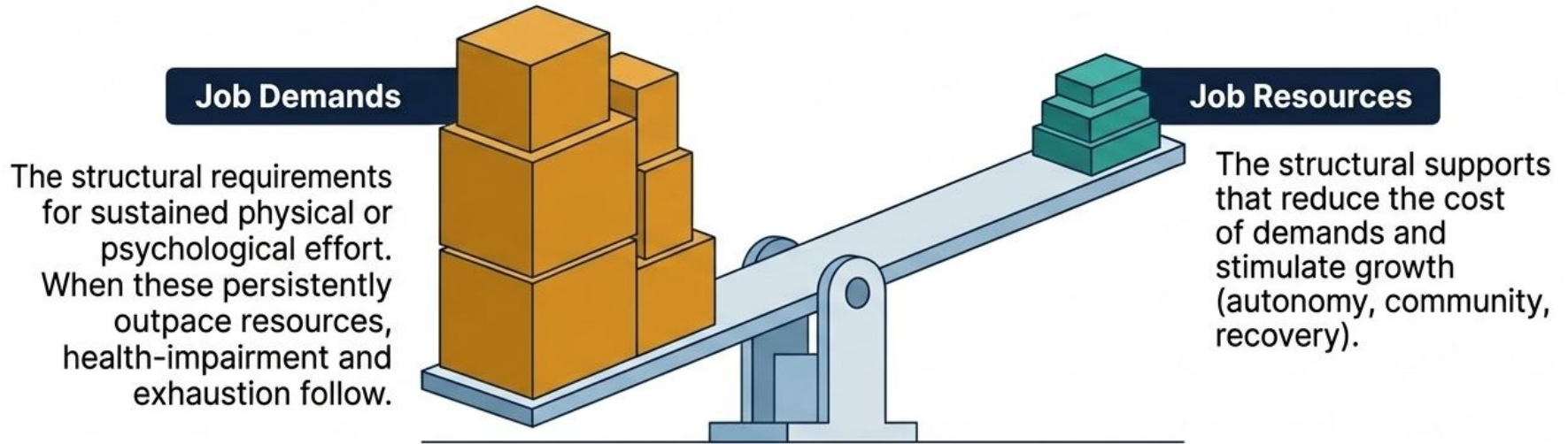


DATA: DDI GLOBAL LEADERSHIP FORECAST 2027

The lukewarm middle is dangerous precisely because it looks like compliance

	Burnout	The Lukewarm Middle	Fully Engaged
Visible Symptoms	Resignation, visible failure, misconduct.	Keeping deadlines, answering emails, showing up.	Proactive innovation, mentoring.
Behavioral Posture	Total withdrawal.	Conserving resources. Avoiding discretionary investment. Protecting against further loss.	Investing surplus energy.
Enterprise Risk	A visible vacancy.	An invisible deficit. Slow erosion of judgment, patience, and curiosity.	High adaptability.

Depletion is not a lack of effort; it is a structural resource imbalance



MYTH DISMISSED:
EGO DEPLETION /
LIMITED SELF-CONTROL

COR Theory (Conservation of Resources): Loss compounds. Leaders with fewer resources are more vulnerable to future loss, creating a **downward spiral** if the system does not intervene.

Four structural vectors are actively compressing leadership capacity

1. Accumulated Change Load

66% of organizations restructured in the past two years.

Perpetual change without recovery drains the reserves needed to lead through it.

3. Attention Fragmentation

Inboxes and endless meetings shift focus away from relational leadership toward transactional tasks.

2. Role Expansion

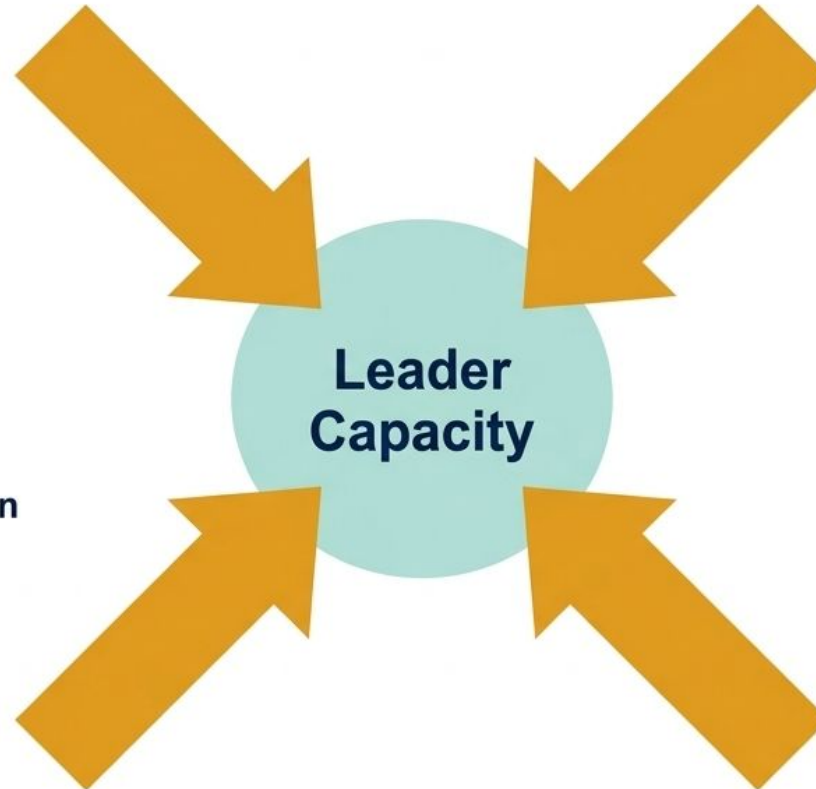
Average of 51% more responsibilities than effectively manageable (Gartner).

Wider spans of control without corresponding resources or administrative support.

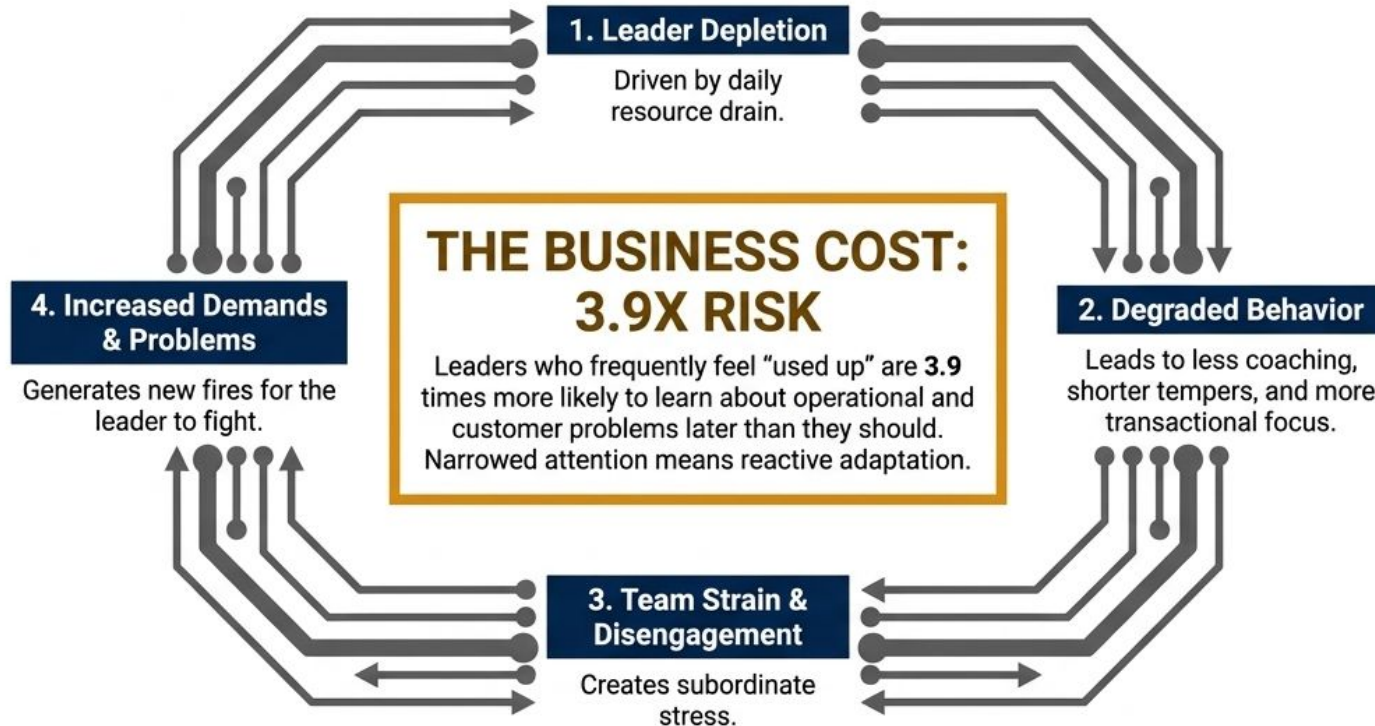
4. Skills Anxiety

87% of leaders fear their skills are becoming obsolete (AI/tech). This anxiety consumes energy invisibly.

Risk is highest among Gen Z leaders (26% frequently 'used up').



Unchecked depletion creates a contagion loop that guarantees systemic blind spots



Rebuilding capacity requires an organizational paradigm shift

Old Paradigm (Personal Problem)

Diagnosis: The leader lacks resilience or coping skills.

Solution: More training, wellness perks, tell them to “sleep better”.

Ownership: The individual leader and HR.

New Paradigm (Systemic Resource)

Diagnosis: The organizational system demands more than it provisions.

Solution: Redesign the role, enforce collective recovery, measure capacity.

Ownership: The C-Suite and Systems Architecture.

Intervention 1: Redesign the role for manageable demands

Stop adding to the load without subtracting. Audit and remove low-value administrative tasks, cap recurring meetings, and reset expectations around the highest-impact work.



SYSTEM WARNING: Deliberate Span Decisions

Aggressive delaying (e.g., Amazon, Bayer) without corresponding workload reduction simply causes massive role expansion, guaranteeing depletion.

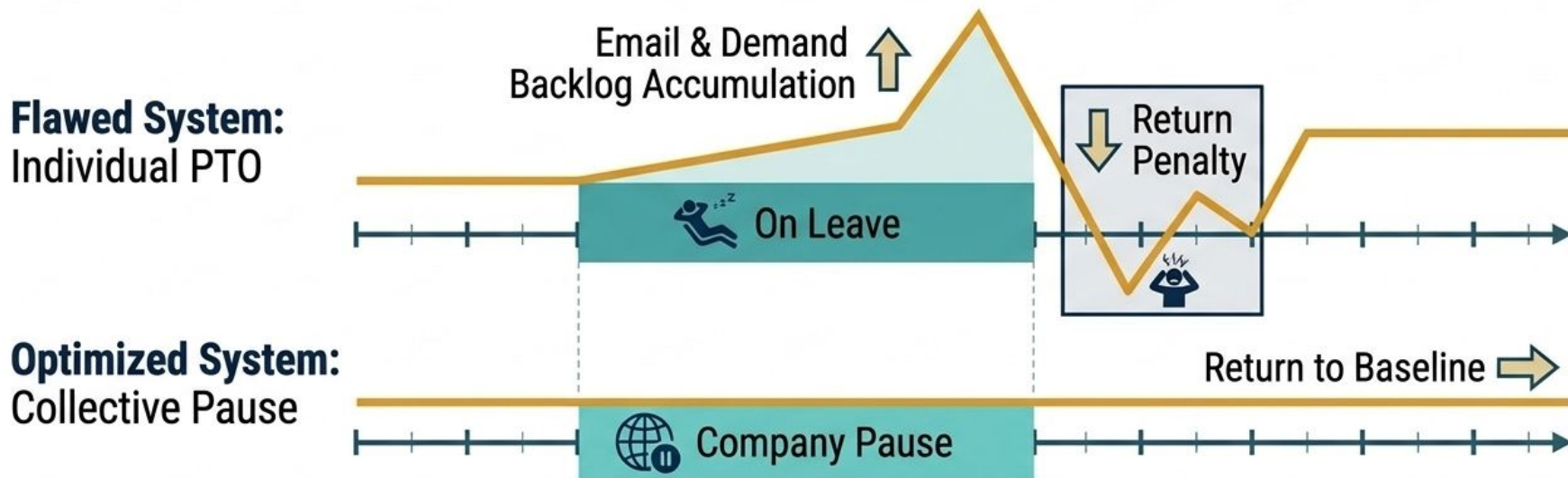
BLUEPRINT IN ACTION

Shopify: Automated cancellation of recurring meetings >3 people; deleted ~322,000 meeting hours.

Citigroup: Implemented 'Zoom-free Fridays' led directly by CEO Jane Fraser.

Intervention 2: Build recovery into the collective operating rhythm

Individual vacation penalizes leaders with an avalanche of catch-up work. Organizations must engineer collective recovery time, strict availability norms, and senior-level modeling.



BLUEPRINT IN ACTION

- **LinkedIn:** “RestUp” week—a paid, company-wide week off to prevent returning to an unanswered inbox.
- **Bumble:** Closed global offices simultaneously for a week to recognize collective burnout.

Intervention 3: Provide development as a resource, not a demand

Traditional training on top of an unchanged workload is experienced as a drain. Development must be confidential, practice-based, spaced over time, and delivered with protected learning time.

Training as a Demand



Development as a Resource

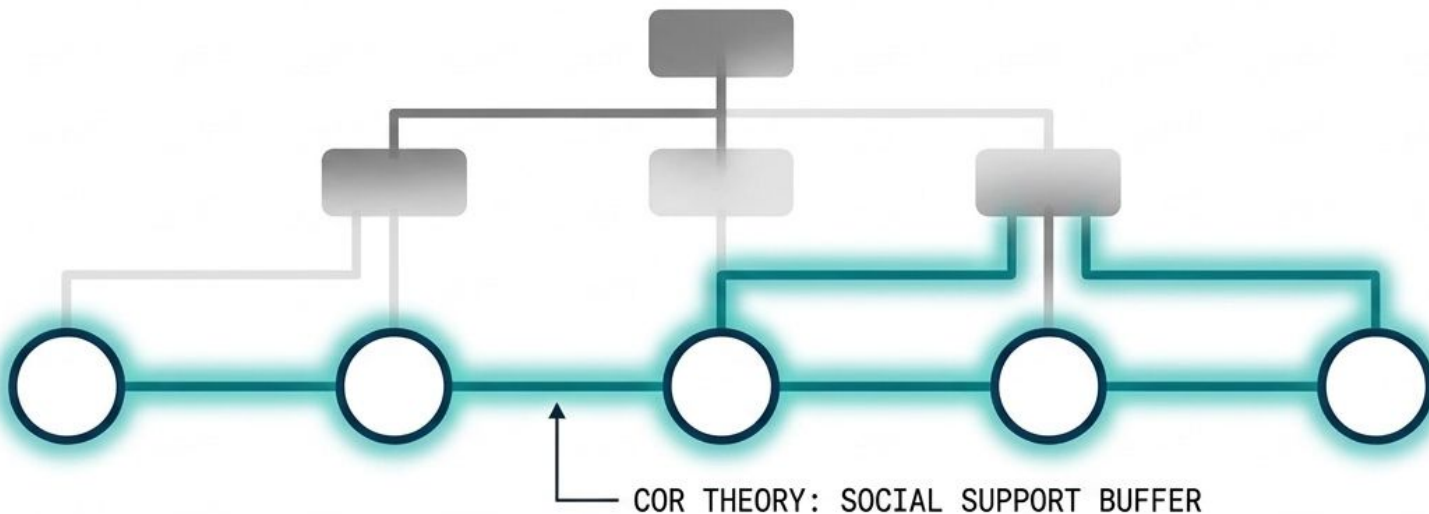


BLUEPRINT IN ACTION

- **Microsoft MCAPS:** Built a centrally funded coaching ecosystem accessible at all levels, generating a massive uplift in internal mobility and manager capability.
- **NHS #LookingAfterYouToo:** Free, confidential one-to-one coaching adapted to workforce pressures; over 10,000 sessions in 13 months.

Intervention 4: Cultivate peer community and visible impact

Create small, stable, facilitated peer groups where leaders can acknowledge emotional labor without fear of career penalty. Connect leaders back to the prosocial impact of their help.

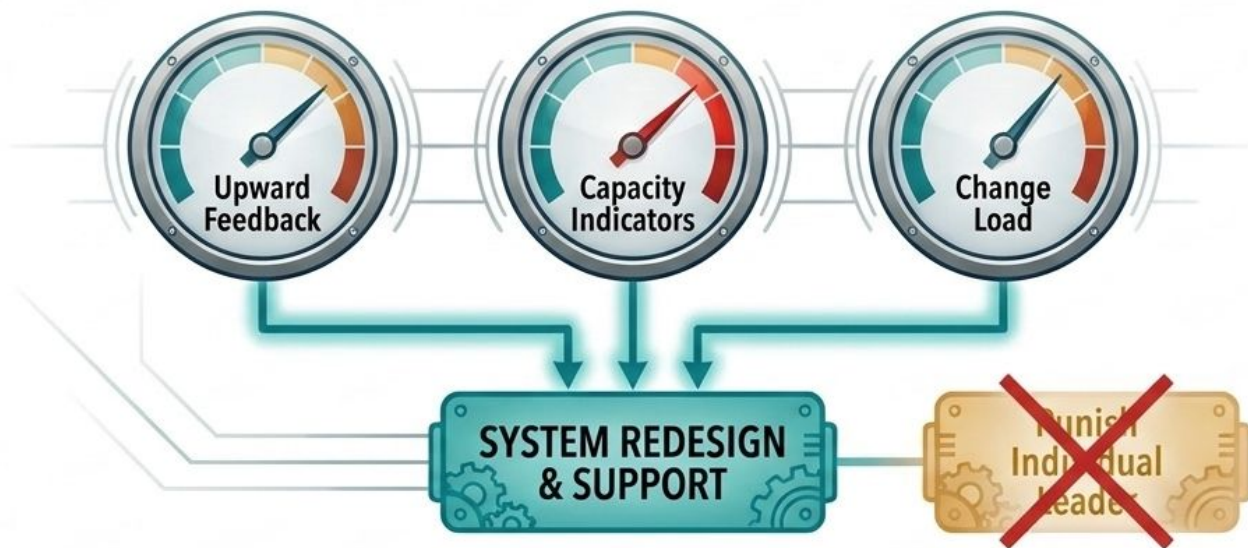


BLUEPRINT IN ACTION

- **Mayo Clinic COMPASS:** Provided groups of 6-7 physicians with organizational-funded meals every two weeks to discuss the rewards and challenges of the job. Over 1,100 joined within 10 months, drastically lowering burnout through simple, structured collegial connection.

Intervention 5: Measure capacity and make it a shared accountability

Track leader energy and workload separate from employee engagement. Act on the data as a signal about system design, not just individual failure.



BLUEPRINT IN ACTION

- **Mayo Clinic:** A 1-point increase in a supervisor's leadership score correlated with a 3.3% lower likelihood of burnout for their team. Annual upward ratings embedded in reviews.
- **Google Project Oxygen:** Used upward feedback purely developmentally, raising median manager scores from 83% to 88% by pairing data with support.

Long-term foresight: Treating leader energy as enterprise capital

LONG-TERM LEADER CAPACITY

1. Strategic Sequencing

Every new initiative draws from a finite pool of attention. Actively sequence change, retire legacy initiatives, and accept slower progress in some areas to protect capacity for critical priorities.

2. Sustainable Pipelines

Allow high-performers to test management fit and opt-out without losing pay or status. Do not force people into emotionally demanding roles merely for advancement.

3. The End of Heroic Leadership

Redefine strong leadership from “the hero who absorbs everything and never rests” to the sustainable leader who actively manages boundaries, energy, and collective recovery.

The Leadership Redesign Blueprint

- ✓ **1: Name the risk:** Treat leader energy as a board-level operational metric.
- ✓ **2: Subtract before adding:** Delete low-value meetings and processes; span decisions are capacity decisions.
- ✓ **3: Protect collective recovery:** Engineer shared downtime and enforce availability norms.
- ✓ **4: Make development a resource:** Shift from mandatory training to accessible, protected coaching.
- ✓ **5: Lead the culture from the top:** Senior executives must openly model recovery and boundary-setting.

You cannot slow the pace of change. But you can decide whether the people leading it are running on reserves or running on empty.