

2026/II.

GREENOVATIVE

**IT'S LONELY AT THE TOP – DO WE DARE
ADMIT IT?**



greensearch



INTRODUCTION



By 2026, the Hungarian economic environment reflects a transitional state. The major shocks of recent years—waves of inflation, supply chain disruptions, and financing uncertainties—have somewhat eased, and the most extreme fluctuations have subsided. Yet the sense of predictability has not fully returned. Trust is rebuilding, but at a slower pace.

This duality is clearly visible in corporate operations as well. Cost pressures and revenue uncertainty coexist, while labor market tightness and demographic trends continue to constrain room for maneuver in the longer term. Growth is no longer purely a question of demand; it has become equally a matter of capacity and organizational development.

The concept of VUCA—volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity—is frequently used in the literature to describe precisely this dynamic. What once appeared primarily at the strategic level has now become part of day-to-day leadership. Instead of linear planning, organizations must navigate multiple potential scenarios, with decisions often made on the basis of incomplete information.

In this environment, the emphasis of leadership is also shifting. Employees are not necessarily looking for ready-made answers, but for direction, structure, and consistency. They expect leaders who can interpret situations and provide stability—even when the external environment remains unpredictable.

The real question, then, is not whether the world is uncertain, but how to lead in a way that enables organizations not only to react, but to build consciously and move forward with intent.

I. LEADERSHIP BURNOUT IS NOT A PERSONAL WEAKNESS

One of the least visible, yet most impactful consequences of an uncertain environment is leadership burnout.

In recent years, burnout has become an increasingly common term. However, in public discourse it is often oversimplified and reduced to mere overload. In reality, it is a condition that develops over time, rooted in prolonged and insufficiently managed stress. It does not emerge overnight, and in its early stages it is often barely noticeable. For this very reason, burnout is not simply an individual well-being issue—it has a direct impact on decision quality, relational dynamics, and ultimately on the functioning of the organization as a whole.

At the leadership level, stress is not driven solely by workload. The weight of decisions, the consequences of responsibility, and the expectation of constant availability together create a level of pressure that, over time, exhausts even the most resilient operating capacity.

THE PHENOMENON CAN BE UNDERSTOOD ACROSS THREE KEY DIMENSIONS:

- ***Emotional exhaustion*** – mental load reaches a point where even relatively small decisions require disproportionately high levels of energy.
- ***Reduced sense of accomplishment*** – the experience of success becomes shorter-lived, as resolved situations are quickly replaced by new challenges.
- ***Relational distancing*** – patience declines, curiosity diminishes, and people are more easily perceived as “issues” rather than individuals.

WHAT DRIVES BURNOUT AT THE LEADERSHIP LEVEL?

Experience shows that burnout is rarely the result of a single factor. Rather, it emerges from the interaction of multiple, mutually reinforcing pressures.

Task-level pressure: Continuous performance demands, shifting targets, and delayed or prolonged outcomes gradually erode sustainable functioning over time.

A quarterly objective is often not even completed before a new expectation emerges: “this also needs to be added.” Leaders find themselves constantly chasing shifting targets, yet rarely experience the sense of completion—that something is truly done. By the end of the day, a significant amount of work may have been accomplished, yet the lingering feeling remains that something is still missing.

One of the most exhausting dynamics—for both leaders and employees—is the constant change of goals. And in a turbulent environment, this is not the exception, but increasingly the norm.

Operating environment: Information overload, constant interruptions, and the lack of sustained focus reduce decision quality and increase mental fatigue.

A leader may need to think through an important decision, yet is continuously interrupted by emails, Teams messages, and “just a quick question” requests. By the end of the day, many small issues are resolved, but there is little cognitive space left for the matters that truly require deep thinking.

Role tension: Leadership inherently carries conflicting expectations. Leaders are expected to be both decisive and supportive, while organizational and personal values do not always align.

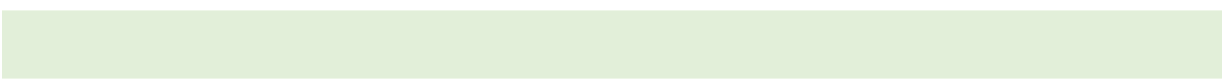
A high-performing, personally valued team member may need to be removed from a project because it serves the organization's broader interests. The leader fully understands the rationality of the decision, yet experiences internal tension—because, on a human level, they would choose differently. In times of crisis, leaders may even have to let people go, knowing that without such decisions the entire organization could be at risk within a year. Even when justified, these decisions take a significant emotional toll.



Relational load: Leaders are often in a constant mode of giving—making decisions, providing support, and offering direction—while having limited space where they themselves can receive feedback or support.

Throughout the day, they engage with people continuously: solving problems, making decisions, managing conflicts. Yet by the end of the day, there is often no one to process their own dilemmas with. Despite the high level of interaction, the sense of “I have to figure this out alone” can become increasingly pronounced. It is not a new phenomenon that leadership can be a lonely role—even when supported by a strong team, peer leaders, or external advisors.

II. COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT BURNOUT



- One of the most common misconceptions is that burnout is simply the result of “poorly managed workload” or even a form of laziness. Experience shows, however, that burnout is not a motivation issue, but a complex state of physiological and psychological overload. In many cases, it is those leaders who are affected who have delivered consistently high performance over a prolonged period and operate with a strong sense of responsibility.
- Another common assumption is that a longer vacation will resolve the issue. While rest can indeed help in the short term and reduce exhaustion, if the underlying patterns of how work is structured and managed remain unchanged, leaders tend to return to the same state very quickly. Burnout is not primarily a matter of rest—it is a systemic issue.
- Many leaders also hold the belief that “professionals don’t burn out.” In reality, the opposite is often true. High-performing, highly committed leaders are frequently at greater risk. A strong sense of responsibility, constant availability, and the tendency to deprioritize personal boundaries can, over time, place the greatest strain precisely on them.

- Finally, a common belief is that “things will get better once the workload decreases.” In practice, however, burnout is often driven not by the volume of work, but by a lack of control, constant interruptions, unclear priorities, and the absence of boundaries. As long as these factors remain unchanged, the sense of overload persists—regardless of the actual amount of work.

It is also important to recognize that after weeks or months of sustained high intensity, it is not easy to simply “switch off.” Many leaders find themselves unconsciously seeking the next challenge, making true recovery even more difficult.

III. PREVENTING LEADERSHIP BURNOUT – A MATTER OF HOW WE OPERATE

Preventing leadership burnout is not a matter of simply “paying more attention to oneself.” Experience shows that awareness alone is not enough. What truly works is a consciously designed operating system.

Most leaders we work with do not burn out because they cannot handle the workload, but because their way of operating lacks structure. There are no deliberate checkpoints where they pause, reprioritize, or simply reflect on whether what they are doing is truly necessary.

One of the simplest and most effective tools is weekly replanning. This is not about hours of strategic thinking, but a structured 30-minute review: what happened, what’s coming next, and what truly matters. It is also worth intentionally blocking time for focused work during this review. In most leaders’ calendars, such time does not exist—yet it is critical for decision quality.



Equally important is the conscious management of boundaries. Constant availability has become the default, which means boundaries do not establish themselves automatically. Turning this into a deliberate practice can make a tangible difference. For example, defining one clear boundary each week—a meeting-free morning or a protected, no-response time block—can lead to noticeable improvements in a relatively short time. This is not about redesigning the entire system, but about small, consistent steps.

Another critical area is energy management. Most leaders manage their tasks, not their energy levels. Yet over the long term, it is not the amount of time available that matters most, but the state in which that time is used. It is worth identifying the few activities that genuinely recharge energy—and not treating them as optional or “if there is time,” but intentionally integrating them into the week.

At the leadership level, the lack of feedback often increases uncertainty. Senior leaders rarely receive direct, honest feedback, which means they are often left to rely on their own interpretations. This is worth consciously counterbalancing. A short, focused monthly request for feedback—whether from a superior or a trusted colleague—can often be enough to ensure that leaders are not left alone with their questions.

When it comes to stress management, overly complex solutions are often proposed, while practice shows that simple, short techniques tend to be the most effective. Breathing exercises, brief mental pauses, and intentional shifts in focus may not seem sophisticated, but when applied consistently, they can have a significant impact.

Another important element is building a “support circle.” This does not necessarily mean formal coaching, but rather one or two people with whom dilemmas can be discussed regularly and briefly. Leadership loneliness is not reduced by being surrounded by more people, but by having access to genuine spaces for meaningful conversation.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge: when symptoms become persistent, seeking external professional support is not optional—it is necessary. Well-targeted coaching or psychological consultation often leads to faster and more effective change than individual efforts alone.



REST IS NOT A LUXURY

Rest and intentional disengagement are not luxuries—they are fundamental prerequisites for sustainable leadership. Continuous decision-making, responsibility, and constant availability can easily lead to mental overload, which over time undermines performance and sound judgment. Regular recovery helps restore focus, enhances creativity, and supports emotional stability.

When a leader allows themselves time to slow down, they are in fact creating value for their organization—by showing up in a more balanced and clear-headed way. Rest is not lost time; it is an investment in long-term effectiveness. It requires conscious effort, as today's environment rarely "allows" us to pause on its own.

PRACTICAL WAYS TO REST AND RECHARGE

- *Take a full day fully offline: no emails, no phone—just being present*
- *Spend time in nature: hiking, forest walks, or recharging by the water*
- *Build in short but regular micro-breaks during the day (e.g., a 10–15 minute walk or breathing exercise)*
- *Engage in physical activity that helps you switch off (sports, yoga, swimming, or a longer walk)*
- *Explore new environments: even a different city or country with a culture unlike your own can help break habitual thinking patterns*
- *Creative activities: music, drawing, cooking—anything not driven by performance*
- *Quality time with family and friends—with full attention, without multitasking*
- *Revisit hobbies you used to enjoy and that you know genuinely recharge you*
- *Allow yourself moments of "just being"—without tasks or structure, simply letting your mind wander. This is often the most difficult for leaders.*

CONCLUSION

There is no single “right” way to rest—what restores energy is different for everyone. What is universal, however, is that without rest, sustainable leadership is not possible. The real question is not whether you can afford to disconnect, but whether you can afford not to.

Leadership burnout is not an individual weakness, but a natural consequence of today’s operating environment—and therefore requires conscious management. Those who aim to lead effectively over the long term must pay attention not only to their organizations, but also to their own energy and boundaries. Sustainable leadership is not a matter of choice—it is the only viable path forward.

CLOSING THOUGHTS: THE COURAGE TO RECALIBRATE

To conclude, a few powerful examples remind us of the importance of pausing, recalibrating, and stepping away when necessary.

Example 1 – Business Leadership (burnout → new operating model):

Arianna Huffington, founder of The Huffington Post, once collapsed from exhaustion—suffering a broken cheekbone in the fall. This became a turning point, leading her to recognize that constant overload is not sustainable. She consciously redesigned her life, placing sleep, recovery, and mental well-being at the center. She later founded Thrive Global and has since become one of the most prominent advocates of sustainable performance. Her story illustrates a powerful truth: the wall we hit is often the beginning of a new direction.



Example 2 – Sports (burnout → intentional return):

Simone Biles, one of the most successful gymnasts in history, withdrew from multiple events during the 2020 Summer Olympics due to mental overload. At the time, many did not understand her decision, but she chose to prioritize her safety and mental health. She later returned gradually and once again delivered world-class performance. Her story sends a clear message: stepping back is not failure—it is a conscious, responsible decision, even at the highest level.

9

Example 3 – Business & Creative Performance (exhaustion → renewed focus):

Steve Jobs faced extreme pressure at several points in his career, including his departure from Apple Inc., which forced a period of pause. Yet this phase became an opportunity for reflection, creative renewal, and new ventures such as NeXT and Pixar. When he returned to Apple, he did so with sharper focus and greater clarity—ushering in one of the most successful eras in the company's history. Sometimes, distance is what creates the perspective needed for the next level.



Example 4 – Hungarian Athlete (intentional pause → sustained peak performance):

Áron Szilágyi has faced not only physical but also significant mental demands throughout his career, particularly during consecutive Olympic preparations. Despite his success, he consciously integrated recovery, mental preparation, and periodic stepping back into his routine to avoid burnout. Rather than choosing constant intensity, he chose balance—allowing him to remain at the top of his field over the long term. Winning gold medals at three consecutive Olympics is not only a matter of talent, but also the result of sustaining oneself in a deliberate and sustainable way. His example highlights a key insight: intentional rest does not weaken performance—it creates a competitive advantage.

These stories come from different worlds, yet point to the same conclusion: pausing, reflecting, and regenerating are not the opposite of performance—they are its foundation.