

# Burnout Is a Leadership Crisis

Why DEI Leader Well-Being Is  
the Next Business Imperative



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Talent Solutions for Better Workplaces

# Introduction

In the early days of the COVID-19 crisis, *burnout* became an inescapable term, as millions of employees struggled with blurred work-life boundaries, [increased caregiving responsibilities](#), and new health uncertainties. But here's the surprising truth: Workplace burnout has only worsened in the years since. According to *Forbes*, [burnout is at an all-time high](#), with workplace stressors escalating rather than subsiding.

Despite the ostensible return to "normal," many corporate leaders now face **greater emotional exhaustion, disillusionment, and disengagement** than they did at the pandemic's peak. Nowhere is this crisis more acute now than in **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) leadership**. With mounting [political pressures](#), [shrinking budgets](#), and [external scrutiny](#), DEI executives are being stretched to their limits.

This report explores how and why **burnout, and particularly DEI leader burnout, is no longer just a personal challenge but a critical leadership and business risk**. Taken together, the elements of this research constitute best practices for building more sustainable, people-centered workplaces, making the case for why **prioritizing well-being is a strategic imperative** for talent retention and organizational performance.

# Executive Summary

Burnout is no longer a post-pandemic buzzword—it's a systemic leadership crisis, with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) leaders at the epicenter. Despite a return to "normal," workplace stressors have only intensified. Today's DEI executives are navigating mounting political backlash, shrinking budgets, role ambiguity, and emotional labor—often without adequate support or resources.

Our latest research finds 69% of Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) report burnout, with 66% rating their well-being as "below average" or worse. Average CDO tenure sits at just 2.9 years—shortest among all C-suite roles. And the issue extends beyond DEI: 70% of executives say they're considering roles that better support their well-being.

This report reframes burnout as a leadership accountability issue—not a personal resilience gap. Structural factors such as unfair workloads, role ambiguity, lack of autonomy, and misaligned values are key drivers. For underrepresented leaders, especially Black women and Gen Z professionals, burnout is compounded by systemic inequities and emotional suppression.

Unchecked, this crisis has business-wide consequences: higher turnover, disengagement, strategic inconsistency, and loss of institutional knowledge. The financial toll is equally severe—estimated at \$120 to \$190 billion in health care costs alone.

## **This report outlines five leadership strategies to address the issue:**

- 1. Counter isolation** through peer support and cross-functional alignment.
- 2. Set clear expectations** and sustainable priorities.
- 3. Demonstrate visible executive support** and strategic integration.
- 4. Clarify DEI roles** and empower CDOs with authority and access.
- 5. Acknowledge the emotional toll**, and invest in real, structural support.

**The message is clear: Rhetoric isn't enough. DEI leaders—and by extension, the organizations they serve—need real investment. Addressing burnout is not just a moral responsibility. It's a business-critical priority.**

# 1

## Burnout Is Not About Workload— It's About Workplaces

The traditional view of burnout once centered on individual resilience—placing the onus on employees to develop better coping skills. But the science is clear: **Burnout is largely driven by imperfect organizational structures, not personal weaknesses.**

Existing research defines *burnout* as [more than just stress](#)—it's the result of [prolonged effort without visible results, leaving individuals feeling depleted, cynical, and disengaged](#).

According to *Harvard Business Review (HBR)*, [key drivers of burnout](#) include:

1. **Unclear expectations** and lack of support
2. **Insufficient autonomy** and decision-making power
3. **Emotionally draining roles** without adequate resources
4. **Misalignment** between organizational values and day-to-day operations

### 5 Factors That Drive Burnout

Gallup's long-standing research similarly identifies [five key contributors to burnout](#):

1. **Unfair treatment** at work
2. **Unmanageable workload**
3. **Lack of role clarity**
4. **Limited communication** and support from managers
5. **Unreasonable time** pressure

**For Chief Diversity Officers and other DEI leaders, these conditions are amplified.** Despite their mission to foster belonging, they often **work in silos, lack cross-functional support**, and carry the emotional weight of driving change in organizations slow to evolve.

Now more than ever they also face resistance to DEI efforts, executive silence on critical issues, and relentless time pressure from ever-evolving crises, executive orders, legal changes, and media scrutiny.

**Lack of role clarity**—for some the consequence of positions created reactively in times of crisis—and **ever-expanding workloads and role redefinition** in the face of shifting levels of commitment pose further challenges.

# 2

## Executive Burnout

### A Hidden Crisis That Trickles Down

There's a common misconception that executives are immune to burnout. In reality, **they're uniquely vulnerable**—and when executives burn out, it has a cascading effect on the entire organization.

According to SHRM, [70% of C-suite leaders say they are considering quitting their jobs](#) for roles that better support their well-being.

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#### What makes executive burnout distinct? (adapted from SHRM)

- **Heightened isolation:** Unlike employees, executives often lack peers at their level to confide in, intensifying their sense of isolation.
- **Trickle-down burnout:** Executive burnout impacts employee morale, creating a domino effect throughout the organization.
- **Physical and mental health consequences:** Burnout takes a physical toll. A 2020 study published in the *European Journal of Preventive Cardiology* found that [burnout can lead to Atrial fibrillation \(AFib\)](#), increasing the risk of blood clots, stroke, and heart failure.
- **The financial toll is also staggering.** Burnout costs US companies an estimated \$120 to \$190 billion annually in health care spending alone, highlighting the enormous economic consequences of unchecked burnout ([HR Dive](#)).

# 3

## DEI Leader Burnout

### When Impactful Work Feels Impossible

The **leadership burnout crisis is hitting DEI executives particularly hard**—and the data confirms it.

Even before the results of the 2024 US election changed the landscape of DEI as we know it, **“preventing DEI leader burnout”** emerged as the **top concern** in our October 2024 poll, with reporting **69% of surveyed CDOs reporting experiencing burnout in the past year.**

#### **Key factors leading to DEI executive burnout: (October 2024 CDO poll)**

1. Insufficient resources to effectively execute DEI strategy
2. Overcoming DEI resistance
3. Engaging leadership
4. Communicating DEI’s value

Our most recent post-election survey of the **top three areas of concern for more than 100 Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs)** clearly reflects these pressures:

1. Navigating political and post-election challenges to DEI (82%)
2. Rebranding or redefining DEI (71%)
3. Uncertainty around corporate commitment to DEI (52%)

**The leadership burnout crisis is hitting DEI executives particularly hard—and the data confirms it.**

Other recent [Seramount research records](#) alarmingly low well-being scores among surveyed DEI leaders, **with 66% rating their personal well-being as “below average” or “very poor.”**

Equally concerning, **only 18% said they get at least seven hours of sleep per night.**

The current climate is worsening **already-shortened executive tenures in the space:** [average tenure for CDOs already sits at 2.9 years](#), the lowest among all C-suite positions.

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### The causes and effects are unmistakable, and the results are bad for business:

- ▶ **High turnover:** With DEI leaders cycling out every two to three years, organizations struggle with continuity and momentum loss.
- ▶ **Emotional suppression:** According to HBR, DEI leaders frequently engage in “[surface acting](#)”—suppressing authentic emotions while managing others’ apathy or resistance.
- ▶ **Role marginalization:** Many DEI leaders are reduced to symbolic figures, celebrated during heritage months but sidelined in strategic business decisions.
- ▶ **Isolation and lack of support:** Burnout in DEI roles is exacerbated by isolation. *Forbes* highlights that [leaders without peer support networks experience greater emotional depletion](#).

**Burnout at the leadership level disrupts progress**, drains institutional knowledge, disconnects DEI from broader business outcomes, and creates instability that erodes team and organizational confidence—**ultimately costing the business in both performance and culture.**



# 4

## The Heavy Toll of Burnout on Leaders from historically excluded communities

For leaders from historically excluded talent groups, burnout is further compounded by systemic inequities. As Amira Barger, Executive Vice President at Edelman, points out, [Black women frequently experience burnout that is indistinguishable from exploitation](#)—shouldering the emotional labor of advancing equity while simultaneously navigating workplace bias and being undervalued.

Meanwhile, [burnout is becoming the norm for much of Gen Z](#), with exhaustion and mental fog setting in earlier and more frequently. [Cigna research](#) reveals that 91% of Gen Z employees report feeling stressed, with 98% exhibiting signs of burnout.

The result of the collective force of these combined factors? **A growing exodus of underrepresented leaders, just when their expertise is needed most.**

**91% of Gen Z employees report feeling stressed, with 98% exhibiting signs of burnout**

# 5

## Burnout Is a Leadership Problem Not an Employee Issue

The key takeaway: **Burnout is not just a DEI or HR issue**—it's a **leadership accountability challenge**. The research is clear: **Employee well-being is directly linked to organizational performance.**

While organizations often talk about their commitment to inclusion, **DEI leaders do not feel that leadership statements translate into action**. Seramount's 2024–2025 listening sessions with over 150 DEI leaders found that **CDOs overwhelmingly desire more resources**—additional staff, increased budgets, and sabbaticals—to combat the emotional toll of their work.

- **One DEI leader put it simply:** “More FTEs and budget committed to share the load.”
- When asked if their organizations provide adequate resources to address the emotional toll of DEI work, **only 23% of respondents reported sufficient resources were provided.**

As Daisy Auger-Domínguez, Chief People Officer at Fractional, puts it, [burnout prevention requires systemic solutions, not just individual wellness initiatives](#). According to Auger-Domínguez, **key strategies for mitigating burnout include:**

- **Emotional check-ins:** Regularly creating safe spaces for team members to discuss stress and challenges
- **Celebrating small wins:** Recognizing incremental progress to sustain morale
- **Fostering collective responsibility:** DEI is not a solo effort—empowering teams to share the workload prevents burnout

*Surveyed DEI leaders report taking proactive steps to safeguard their well-being. Some are unplugging from toxic online spaces (“Deactivating my X account”), while others are leaning into their communities (“Leading a local political action group and engaging with others”).*

# 6

## Leadership Strategies to Prevent CDO Burnout

While there's no silver bullet to **drive the systemic, leadership-driven change** that researchers and thought leaders identify as truly preventing burnout, it's business-critical to make a start.

Our latest research outlines **Five key strategies for executives to better support DEI leaders** and reduce burnout.

### 1 **Countering Isolation: Foster Peer Support and Community**

Burnout thrives in isolation. According to *Forbes*, [DEI leaders with strong peer networks experience significantly lower burnout rates](#). Yet, many CDOs operate as teams of one, lacking the resources and cross-functional support needed to drive sustainable impact.

#### **WHAT LEADERS CAN DO:**

- Establish internal and external peer groups where DEI leaders can share challenges, seek advice, and exchange best practices.
- Proactively facilitate community-building and knowledge-sharing both within and beyond the organization.
- Encourage cross-functional collaboration so CDOs aren't working in a vacuum, and remain highly visible and plugged in to broader business outcomes.

### 2 **Combating Trickle-Down Burnout: Set Realistic Boundaries and Expectations**

Executives often unintentionally fuel burnout by over-relying on DEI leaders without setting clear, achievable expectations. According to SHRM, [leaders who fail to set boundaries experience greater physical and emotional depletion](#).

#### **WHAT LEADERS CAN DO:**

- Set measurable, realistic goals for DEI work, ensuring priorities align with broader business objectives.
- Remove roadblocks preventing DEI leaders from executing their strategies effectively.
- Model the importance of balance by protecting time for restorative breaks and promoting sustainable workloads.

### 3 Preventing Role Marginalization: Demonstrate Support and Integration

When executives fail to engage meaningfully with DEI leaders, the work is often perceived as compliance-driven or an afterthought rather than a strategic business imperative. Research consistently demonstrates that [lack of trust](#), [autonomy](#), and visible executive support can accelerate burnout and attrition.

#### WHAT LEADERS CAN DO:

- Show up. Participate in DEI discussions, strategy sessions, and initiatives.
- Position DEI as an integrated business solution, not a checkbox exercise.
- Avoid micromanaging or sidelining DEI leaders; instead, provide resources and strategic alignment to ensure success.
- [Integrate DEI into global business strategy](#) while ensuring adequate regional support.

### 4 Clarifying the Role: Define Purpose, Scope, and Outcomes

In the wake of George Floyd's murder, many organizations created DEI roles without clearly defining responsibilities, leading to role ambiguity and frustration. McKinsey, for example, has studied the [widespread confusion about the authority and expectations of CDOs](#).

Despite their commitment to creating inclusive workplaces, our data shows that **DEI leaders feel isolated and unsupported in their roles:**

- Seramount surveys of over 150 DEI executives (conducted November 2024 to March 2025) find that **fewer than one in three CDOs feel "very supported" by their organization's leadership.**
- **Only 3% of surveyed DEI leaders always felt supported by executive leadership.**
- Fifty-seven percent of surveyed executives felt their efforts were appreciated only *sometimes* or *rarely*.
- Surveyed CDOs consistently reported that **simple recognition and acknowledgment from leadership would go a long way in reducing burnout.**

#### WHAT LEADERS CAN DO:

- Clearly define the DEI leader's scope, authority, and objectives.
- Ensure direct access to executive leadership—and avoid burying the role in organizational hierarchy.
- Align the DEI strategy with business priorities, ensuring leaders have a mandate to drive meaningful impact.

*One surveyed DEI leader noted: "I feel supported by my direct leader and peers, but not beyond this group. I am very disappointed." Another added, "Acknowledgment of the issues that people are facing is always good, even if we can't change the situation."*

## 5 Addressing the Emotional Toll: Demonstrate Support and Integration

DEI leaders often navigate emotionally charged, high-stakes conversations and pushback from within the organization. The psychological weight of this work can be overwhelming, yet it is rarely acknowledged as a significant contributor to burnout.

### WHAT LEADERS CAN DO:

- Acknowledge the emotional labor involved in DEI work and offer resources tailored to these unique challenges.
- Provide executive sponsorship and advocacy to safeguard DEI leaders from unnecessary friction and politicization.
- Celebrate wins and progress, reinforcing the long-term value of DEI efforts.

By implementing these five strategies, executives can create an environment where DEI leaders thrive, reducing turnover and ensuring long-term success. [When leadership provides clarity, resources, and visible support, CDOs can focus on building enduring programs that drive business success](#), engaging historically excluded talent and expanding to new markets.

*The message from DEI leaders is clear: They need more than rhetoric—they need real investment. Whether it's budget, additional team members, or leadership support, organizations must step up to prevent burnout before they lose their most passionate advocates.*

# 7

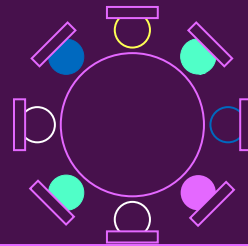
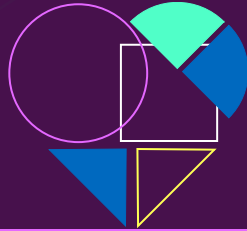
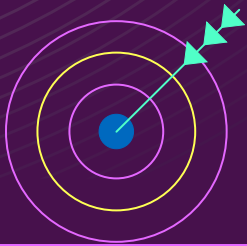
## Key Takeaway: Addressing Burnout Is a Critical Business Priority

According to [Gallup](#), burned out leaders are **63% more likely to take sick days and 2.6 times more likely leave their current employer**. They also feel less confident, psychologically safe, and engaged with management.

The stakes have never been higher. Today, burnout is a DEI and broader business imperative. Together we can introduce practical solutions for creating sustainable, **people-centered workplaces that prioritize both impact and well-being**.



To learn more about our work to prevent burnout and advance DEI leadership community, including best practices to support your organization's success during trying times, [please contact us](#).



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