

COMMUNITY BUILDING PROMPTS

I Didn't Know I Was Burned Out Until Everything Started Breaking

Episode 10: Reflection & Discussion Guide

How to Use These Prompts

These prompts invite honest conversation about burnout as signal loss — when leaders override their internal warning signs until something breaks. Use them in leadership circles, peer supervision, organizer support spaces, or anywhere people can speak truthfully about the gap between functioning and thriving.

Ways to engage:

- Team check-ins
- Leadership development cohorts
- Supervision sessions
- Facilitator debriefs
- Coalition sustainability planning
- Written reflection after periods of high strain

The Core Framework

The central claim of this episode:

Burnout isn't a cliff — it's a slope.

By the time the breakdown becomes visible, something bad has happened.

Burnout doesn't start when things break. It starts when signals go unheard. Leaders often don't realize they are burned out until something breaks — their patience, their health, a key relationship, or their credibility.

The problem: The problem with the red zone is that we can operate there. But if you are there all the time, the engine's going to blow. High-capacity leaders don't miss signals — they ignore them. It's not about not noticing. It's about seeing it, feeling it, and deciding to do nothing with it.

Discussion Prompts

What's your earliest sign that you're drifting toward burnout?

Think about your personal dashboard. What's your yellow light — the first signal that tells you you're drifting below the line? Is it shorter patience? Sleep disruption? Irritability? Avoiding people? Physical tension? Decision fatigue? Be specific. When did you last notice this signal — and what did you do with it? Did you act on it, or did you explain it away?

What does your work culture reward — pushing through or noticing strain?

Be honest. What gets celebrated in your organization or team? Who gets praised — the person who works late, never says no, always delivers despite impossible timelines? Or the person who names when they're at capacity, sets boundaries, protects their recovery? What happens when someone says "I need to pause"? Are they seen as weak, or as practicing good leadership? Is burnout a badge of honor or a warning sign?

Who notices when you're not okay — before things break?

Name the person or people, if anyone. Who sees you clearly enough to notice when you're slipping into yellow or red? Who has permission to name it to you? If no one comes to mind, why not? Is it because you're isolated? Because you hide it well? Because you've trained people not to ask? What would it take to invite someone into that kind of witnessing?

What story do you tell yourself to keep going when the warning signs appear?

This is where signal loss happens. What's your narrative? "I can handle it." "This is just temporary." "Everyone else is struggling too." "If I don't do it, it won't get done." "I'll rest after this project." "I'm fine, really." Which story are you telling yourself right now? And what's it protecting — your status? Your identity? Your sense of control? What would happen if you stopped telling yourself that story?

Guidelines for Dialogue

Normalize naming without shame "I'm at capacity" is leadership, not weakness. Create space for people to name strain early.	Focus on early detection, not collapse Talk about yellow, not just red. Burnout prevention is not recovery after collapse — it's early intervention.
Name systemic patterns, not individual failure If your whole team is in red, that's not a personal problem — it's a design problem.	Center health as strategy We have an unsaid obligation to the health and well-being of the groups we lead. If I'm driving my team into the red zone, I'm impacting their health.

DEEPER REFLECTION

The Racialized Health Context

The episode names how chronic stress — especially stress tied to structural inequality — accumulates in the body. Consider:

"What invisible health impacts are BIPOC leaders carrying?"

Drawing on Dr. David R. Williams' research: Black and brown folks are experiencing high incidence of diabetes, hypertension, heart disease. You can't feel hypertension right away. By the time you feel it — just like burnout — it's too late. Chronic stress tied to structural inequality accumulates physiologically. What health costs are BIPOC leaders in your organization absorbing? What would it mean to take that seriously as an organizational responsibility?

"What does 'pushing through' cost differently for BIPOC leaders?"

BIPOC leaders face compounded strain: navigating power dynamics, managing visibility pressure, meeting racialized expectations of competence. The "pushing through" that gets rewarded for everyone produces chronic anxiety and physiological stress that shows up differently in bodies already carrying the weight of structural racism. Who's being asked to override their signals most often? Who's being praised for it? What's the long-term cost?

"Who do you see before you get sick?"

This is the patient prevention question. We deal in the art and practice of patient prevention — we don't want you to be a patient. What structures would need to exist in your organization for BIPOC leaders to access care, rest, and early intervention before health breakdown? What would it mean to center BIPOC leaders' sustainability as strategy — not sacrifice?

BONUS

For Teams Building Burnout Prevention

If your team is committed to early detection, try these practices:

"What would a weekly dashboard scan look like for us?"

Build a regular check-in: "What color are you this week?" Make it normal to name yellow. Create space for people to say "I'm at capacity" without penalty. Track patterns — if the whole team is in red, that's data about your work design, not individual weakness.

"How do we model pausing publicly?"

Leadership sets the tone. If leaders never pause, never name strain, never set boundaries — the team learns that overriding signals is expected. What would it look like for leadership to say out loud: "I'm protecting my recovery today" or "I'm in yellow, so I'm canceling this meeting"? Make pausing visible, not shameful.

"What do we need to interrupt the 'handling it' = 'fine' belief?"

Functioning doesn't mean thriving. Handling it doesn't mean being fine. How do you distinguish between coping and capacity in your team culture? What would it take to make that distinction normal?

PRACTICE TOOL

Creating Shared Language for Burnout Prevention

The episode recommends building shared language so groups can name strain early. Try these phrases:

"I'm in yellow right now"

"I'm at capacity"

"I need to pause"

"I'm protecting my recovery"

"My dashboard is lit up"

"I'm noticing signals I usually ignore"

"I'm spending energy on recovery, not forward movement"

Group reflection:

Which of these phrases would help your team? What other phrases do you need? How would you normalize using them?

COMMITMENT TO ACTION

Commitment to Action

After engaging with these prompts, what will you actually do?

One signal I will stop ignoring:

One action I will take in yellow:

One person I will invite to notice when I'm not okay:

Burnout doesn't start when things break — it starts when signals go unheard.

Early detection is leadership.