

Leadership Without Burnout

What My Journey Taught Me About Sustainable Performance

Lenka Kmetova | HR TRENDY 2026

The Hidden Cost of High Performance

External Success, Internal Exhaustion

Everything looked successful outside, but inside, I felt an exhaustion sleep couldn't fix.

Early Leadership, High Pressure

At 25, I led ~70 people 3 departments in a fast-growing company.

The Annual Burnout Cycle

Almost yearly, my body would shut down, leaving me sick and exhausted.

The Wrong Question

Instead of questioning the system, I blamed myself: "What's wrong with me?"

3

Markets

Central Europe, Nordics, Japan

7

Years

Insights cultivated

COMPANY CONTEXT

Wolt: A Global Journey

Over the last seven years, I've worked across three very different markets—Czechia, Norway, and Japan—all within the same company. I joined Wolt in 2019, when it was still a young European startup, scaling fast and learning as it grew.

30+

Countries

Global operations

50M

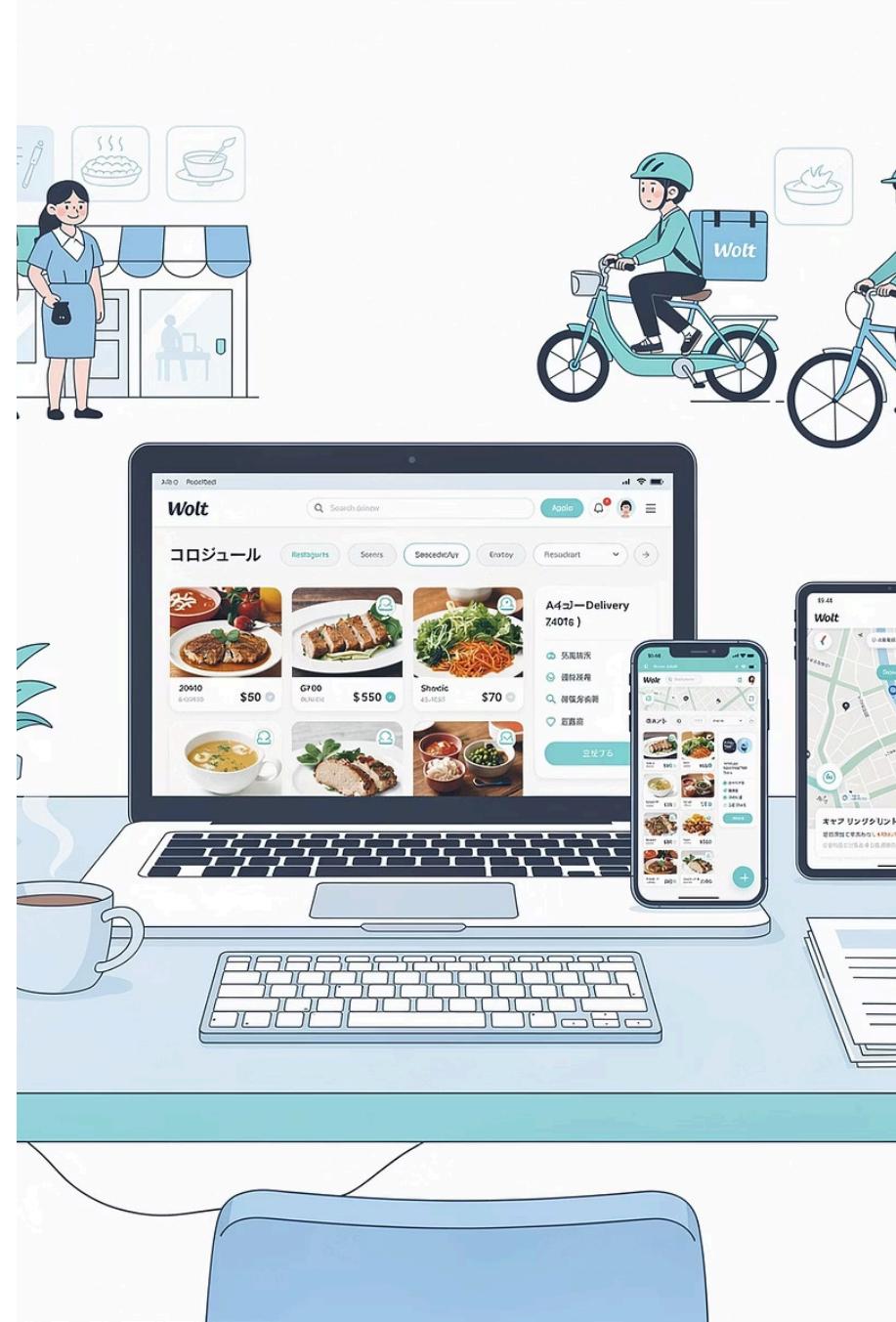
Consumers

Connected worldwide

15K+

Team Members

Powering the platform



Building, Expanding, Transforming

CHAPTER 1

Czechia: Building From Scratch

Joined Wolt Prague in 2019. Moved from support to sales. Built and scaled teams in fast-paced startup.

CHAPTER 2

Norway: Fast Expansion

Led sales team in 2023. Rapid expansion in competitive market. Started from zero.

CHAPTER 3

Japan: Complete Transformation

Arrived after major team and leadership reductions. Led sales transformation in 2025. Changed delivery from luxury to accessible.

Cultural Differences: Key Traits



Czechia

Speed · Direct · Pragmatic



Norway

Consensus · Flat · Balanced



Japan

Precision · Hierarchical · Long-term

The Universal Truth Across Cultures

Despite cultural differences, the underlying human needs were remarkably consistent across all three markets.

To Be Heard

Feeling genuinely listened to and understood.

To Be Seen

Receiving recognition and appreciation for contributions.

To Have Clarity

Understanding expectations, goals, and purpose.

To Trust

Building genuine relationships and psychological safety.



Rethinking Burnout

Widespread burnout, observed across cultures and experienced personally, highlights the critical connection between how companies design their systems, how managers translate strategies, and how individuals internalize these pressures. This interconnectedness shapes sustainable performance.



Companies

Design the system and environment

Managers

Translate strategy into daily reality

Individuals

Internalize and carry the pressure

I'll share the practical lessons learned to work, lead, and perform sustainably without burning out.



THE BURNOUT RESPONSIBILITY MODEL

Three Layers

01

System - Companies

The environment either reduces stress or multiplies it

02

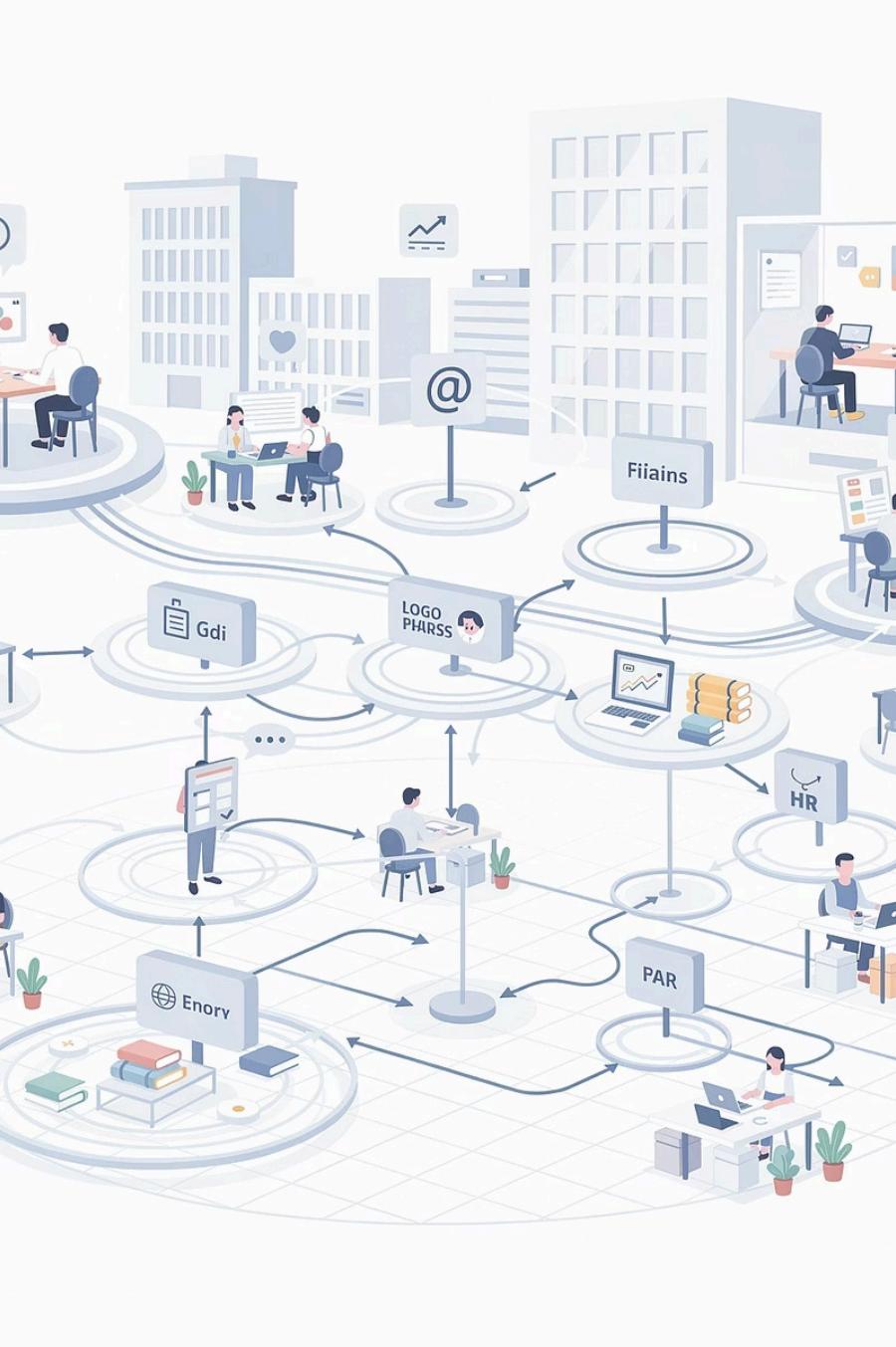
Leadership - Managers

What helped me earn trust and what I learned the hard way

03

Individual Responsibility

The pressure we also generate internally



LAYER 1: SYSTEM

Companies: The Environment Matters Most

People work hard everywhere. The crucial difference isn't individual resilience, but effective system design.

How success is defined, priorities set, decisions communicated, and leaders chosen directly impacts pressure. Clarity and alignment ease pressure; misalignment erodes trust and motivation.

Burnout isn't just about workload; it's about trust in the system. Clarity, consistency, and aligned incentives transform pressure into purpose, not drain.

What Consistently Reduced Pressure

1

Aligned Incentives & Success Metrics

Designing goals, KPIs, and rewards that reinforce the company's long-term vision and values, while allowing for focused periods of intensity when needed.

2

Strong Connection: Strategy to Customer

When people understand why the work matters and the value being created, pressure feels purposeful rather than chaotic.

3

Stable Direction & Priorities

Not "never change"—agility is essential—but direction and priorities can't shift constantly without clarity on what remains consistent.

4

Transparent Communication

Communication that reduces uncertainty and enables action, rather than adding noise.

5

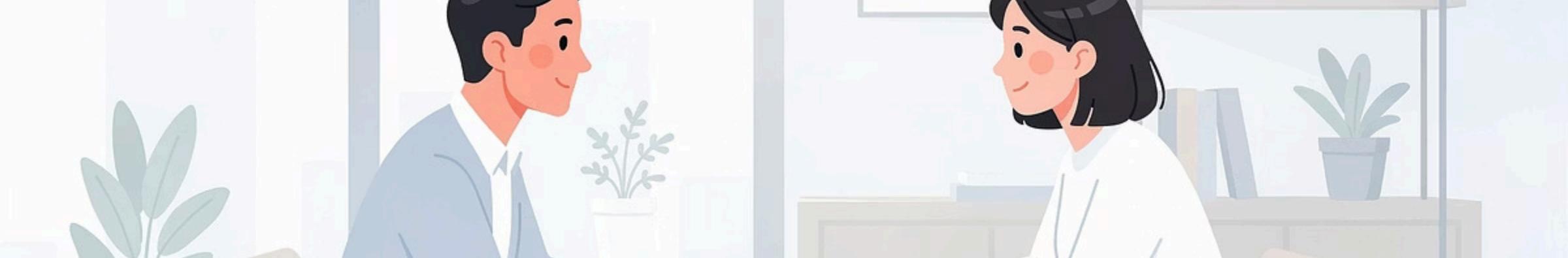
Burnout Prevention Awareness

Learning to spot early warning signs and being mindful not to unintentionally reward unsustainable ways of working.

6

Thoughtful Leadership Selection

Placing people in leadership roles who deliver results and create healthy, effective environments—viewing leadership as responsibility and impact, not status.



LAYER 2: LEADERSHIP

Direct Managers: The Translation Layer

Companies design the system, but managers determine how it's actually experienced. Direct managers serve as the translation layer between strategy and daily reality, shaping trust, clarity, and stress every day.

Trust isn't earned with a title, but through consistent action especially under pressure, over time.

"Managers are the nervous system of the company. Their ability to listen, translate strategy, set standards, and manage pressure dictates the daily experience."

What Consistently Builds Trust



Understand Before Changing

Taking time to learn the team before introducing change: listening, observing, and understanding what works, what exhausts people, and what "good" means in that context.



Translate Strategy Into Clear Expectations

Turning high-level direction into concrete steps. People don't burn out from ambitious goals—they burn out from unclear ones.



Create Psychological Safety

Building trust by actively listening to feedback and visibly acting on it—adjusting processes, removing what doesn't work, and closing the loop.



Maintain Clear Standards

Setting and holding clear and high standards early. Clarity and accountability creates fairness and protects the team.



Stay Close to the Work

Leading with real context by spending time with the team in their day-to-day work, understanding the challenges they face.



Invest in Developing People

Supporting continuous learning and development through coaching and growth opportunities, not just delivery targets.



Manage Pressure Upwards

Communicating to leadership honestly when expectations or pressure are unrealistic. Protecting the team sometimes means having difficult conversations above you.



LAYER 3: INDIVIDUAL

Individual Responsibility: The Internal Pressure

Even with strong systems and leadership, a component of burnout remains that can't be delegated: internal pressure. This pressure, often self-generated, leads to burnout even in healthy cultures.

Recognizing this self-generated pressure is uncomfortable yet empowering. It highlights individual responsibility, especially when leaders foster environments for personal growth and response.

Where Personal Agency Matters

Identity & Meaning Beyond Work



When self-worth and meaning come solely from work, pressure never switches off. Multiple sources of identity and validation create buffers that allow sustainable performance.

Nervous System Regulation & Recovery



Burnout is prolonged physiological activation without sufficient regulation. What matters is the ability to down-regulate stress during everyday life, not only during time off.

Listening to Early Body Signals



The body provides early signals long before burnout becomes visible. Chronic exhaustion, illness, tension, or sleep disruption are feedback, not weakness.

Emotional, Mental & Inner Wellbeing



Pressure needs regular release, not continuous suppression. Unprocessed emotional and mental load accumulates over time and eventually shows up as exhaustion.

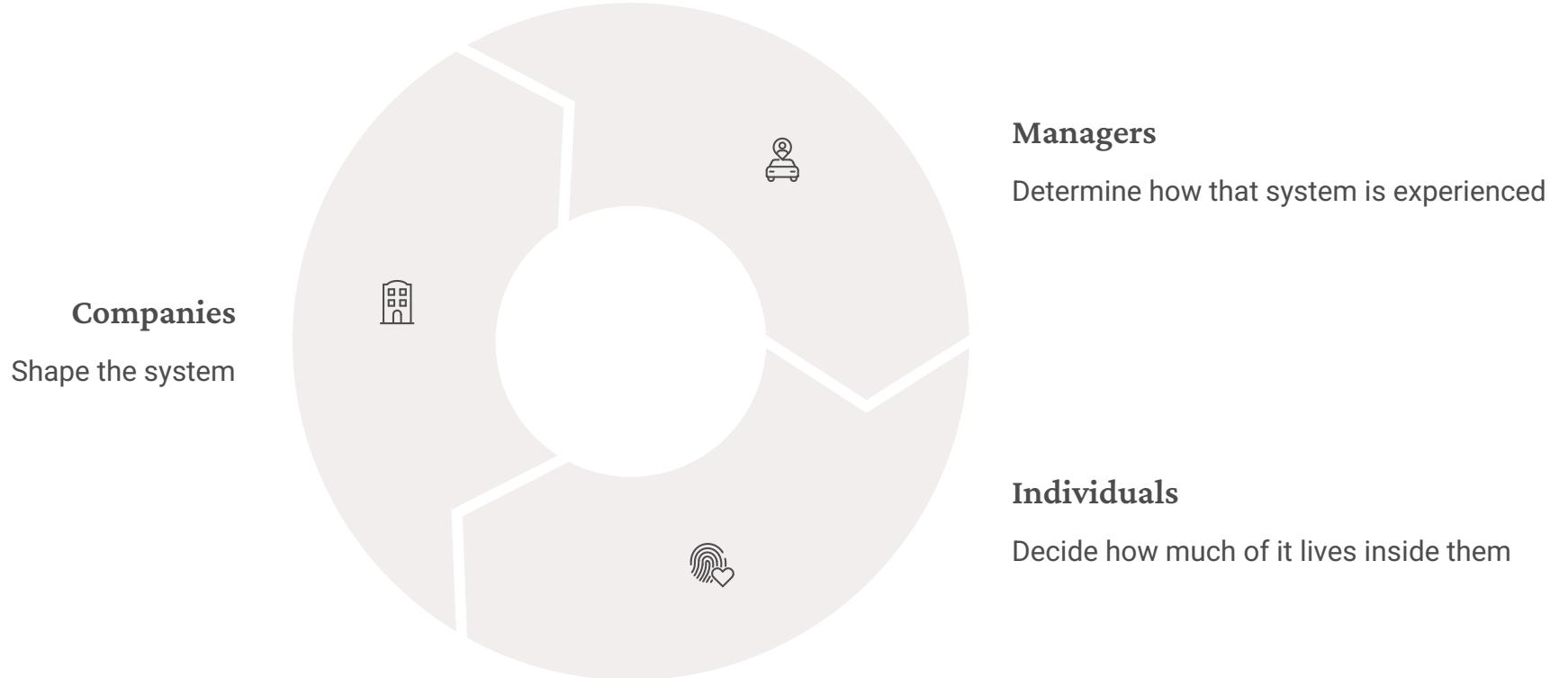
Agency, Boundaries & Capacity Ownership



Burnout often results from carrying more than personal capacity for too long. Actively managing limits, load, and pace is a strategy for longevity, not reduced ambition.

This is the layer where personal agency matters. Everyone has responsibility for finding meaning beyond work, regulating their nervous system, and communicating their limits. When people take care of these basics, work stops running the system from the inside.

The Path Forward



Burnout emerges from how pressure is designed, translated, and carried. These layers don't work in isolation sustainable performance requires alignment across all three.

One Question to Take With You

Which layer is falling behind in your company and what will you change tomorrow?

Thank you.

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