

Burnout: A Review of the Literature

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Implications for Music Teaching and Learning

- It is important that teachers feel engaged in their work to mitigate burnout. This engagement can occur through investment in interpersonal relationships, connecting with others in the school, and through lifelong learning.
- Finding joy in activities outside of work, and separation between work life and personal life are important facets of work–life balance that can assist with preventing burnout.
- There are times when there is a mismatch in values and philosophies between the organization/school and the teacher, and this mismatch may lead to disengagement.
- Longer and harder working conditions in tandem with less job recognition may lead to burnout.

Abstract

In this review of literature related to burnout, I compiled definitions of the term, discussed factors contributing to burnout, effects of burnout, and prevention/possible remedies for burnout. Although there is no consensus on the term's definition, it is well understood that burnout has three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization/cynicism, and personal accomplishment. There are personal (internal) and organizational (external) factors that contribute to burnout. When teachers feel lack of control, overloaded, and underresourced, the potential for burnout is amplified. Burnout is manifested in physical (poor health) and psychological ways (detachment, boredom, and rigidity). Prevention strategies generally fall into the categories of (a) in-school interventions (including being more prepared and developing high quality interpersonal relationships), (b) out of school interventions (better work–life balance), and (c) mentoring. Given that engagement is the antithesis of burnout, keeping teachers engaged and feeling valued are mitigating factors for burnout.

Keywords

burnout, cynicism, depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, engagement, mentoring, preventing burnout

Burnout is an important issue that affects educators and the teaching profession at large. Though it may seem understood, it is actually only in the past 40 years that burnout has received attention in the research literature. The two early figures who examined the phenomenon were Herbert Freudenberger (1974), a psychiatrist, and Christina Maslach (1982a), a social psychologist.

As of 2019, burnout is not included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders–Fifth edition*, the standard classification of mental disorders used in the United States. However, the World Health Organization has classified burnout in its International Classification of Diseases, ICD-10 (1994). Thus, burnout is understood as a medical diagnosis in some countries (e.g., Sweden and the Netherlands), but has received only a psychological diagnosis in the United States. Accordingly, burnout is not exclusively a North American or Western phenomenon (Golembiewski et al., 1996).

Schaufeli et al. (2009) posited that the order in which the interest in burnout seems to have spread corresponds to the economic development of the countries involved. As new economies boomed, burnout has received more interest from scholars in these countries.

Maslach et al. (2001) highlighted that burnout as a social problem was defined by both practitioners and social commentators long before it became a focus of research study. Derided at first as “pop psychology,” it was not considered a topic worthy of scholarly inquiry. As more research emerged on the topic, it was more clearly understood. As of 2009, over 6,000 books and

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scholarly articles had been published on burnout, making it a well-established academic subject (Schaufeli et al., 2009).

Burnout was initially believed to be a syndrome that affected people in caregiving and service occupations. However, as more empirical research was conducted in the 1990s, the concept of burnout was extended beyond human services and education (Maslach et al., 2001). It was then understood to be a problem affecting people in any occupation, at any level, as more jobs became “high touch,” involving face-to-face contact with others (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Researchers and practitioners recognized that burnout occurred among managers, entrepreneurs, and white- and blue-collar workers, extending to other work requiring creativity, problem solving, or mentoring (Schaufeli et al., 2009). Thus, burnout was considered to be job stress, not just a particular subcategory of it (Maslach, 1982b). Certainly, music educators serve in both caregiving and service occupations, given the personal relationships that are developed with students as a function of aesthetic experiences.

Burnout has been defined in many ways, and no consensus exists. Freudenberger (1974) borrowed the term from the illicit drug scene where it colloquially referred to the devastating effect of chronic drug abuse. He used it to describe the gradual emotional depletion, loss of motivation, and reduced commitment among employees. Maslach et al. (2001) defined it as a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job. Hamann (1990) defined burnout as a syndrome that occurred at an individual level, was an intense psychological experience involving feelings, attitudes, motives, and expectations, and included distress, discomfort, dysfunction, and negative consequences. He further described it as “stress that had gotten out of control” (p. 31). Moreover, he believed it was a leading cause of teacher ineffectiveness and a primary reason for ending a teaching career. Maslach (1982a) collected a number of definitions for the term, including (a) “a state of exhaustion, irritability, and fatigue that markedly decreased workers’ effectiveness and capability”; (b) “to wear oneself out doing what one has to do”; (c) “a malaise of the spirit, a loss of will, an inability to mobilize interests and capabilities”; (d) “a condition produced by working too hard for too long in a high-pressure environment”; and (e) “a debilitating psychological condition resulting from work-related frustrations, which results in lower employee productivity and morale” (pp. 30–31). Despite the lack of consensus, it is clear that burnout is a negative response to stress on the job.

Three key dimensions of burnout emerged from Maslach’s systematic inquiry: (a) emotional exhaustion, (b) depersonalization/cynicism, and (c) personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion was defined as feelings of being overextended and depleted of one’s emotional

resources. Depersonalization/cynicism referred to the negative, callous, or excessively detached response to various aspects of the job. It occurred when an individual put distance between oneself and others by actively ignoring the qualities that made them unique and engaging people. Personal accomplishment was reduced when there were feelings of incompetence and a lack of achievement and productivity at work (Maslach et al., 2001). Maslach and Jackson (1981) noted that as employees’ emotional resources were depleted, they felt they were no longer able to give of themselves at a psychological level. The development of negative, cynical attitudes, and feelings about one’s clients was pervasive, as was the tendency to evaluate oneself negatively. Workers felt unhappy about themselves and dissatisfied with their accomplishments on the job when they were burned out.

These three dimensions then became subscales for the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981), a measurement tool that was developed to stimulate new ideas about patterns or phases of burnout. This assessment measure was found to be valid and reliable using various psychometric analyses. It includes nine items on the emotional exhaustion subscale, five items on the depersonalization subscale, and eight items in the personal accomplishment subscale, each rated on two dimensions: frequency (how often it is experienced) and intensity (how strongly it is experienced).

Factors Contributing to Burnout

Researchers have considered both personal and organizational factors contributing to burnout. On one side of the spectrum, there are elements of individuals that make them susceptible to burnout (Friedman & Rosenman, 1980; Maslach, 1982a; Maslach et al., 2001). Others argue that burnout’s cause is external, with systems of the organization and management playing the larger role in why a worker feels burned out (Freudenberger, 1977; Maslach, 1982b; Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Maslach (1982a) listed personal characteristics such as (a) motivations, (b) needs, (c) values, (d) self-esteem, and (e) emotional expressiveness and control, suggesting that these internal qualities determined how someone handled external sources of emotional stress and helped to explain why Person A experienced burnout in a particular work setting but not Person B. Also pointing to personal factors, Friedman and Rosenman (1980) believed burnout was more likely associated with individuals who displayed personality and behavioral traits known as Type A behaviors. Perhaps because of their constant need for social approval, these individuals were more greatly influenced by criticisms due to their orientation toward achievement. In contrast, persons with Type B personalities were more easygoing and handled stress better. Similarly, Maslach et al. (2001) observed that people who

displayed low levels of hardiness (i.e., involvement in daily activities, a sense of control over events, and openness to change) had higher burnout scores. Burnout was higher among people who had an external locus of control rather than an internal locus of control.

The more widely accepted understanding is that elements of the job and organization contribute to burnout for the employee. Freudenberger (1977) pointed to longer and harder working conditions in tandem with less job recognition. Poor management and organization also contributed to job burnout. Maslach (1982b) observed that (a) if the goals of the agency were not clear, (b) if the roles for the staff were ill defined, (c) if bureaucratic hassles predominated, or (d) if communication between management and employees was unclear and unsupportive, then the employee found it especially difficult to provide good service, treatment, instruction, or care to recipients. Excessive loads, restrictive regulations, and poor management were also considered problematic. Music educators have experienced each of these issues regularly in their teaching positions.

Arguing that burnout is not a problem of the individual but a problem of the social environment in which people work, Maslach and Leiter (1997) devised a model for understanding the ways in which organizations contributed to employee burnout. Burnout was more likely when there was a mismatch between the nature of the job and the nature of the person who did the job. This mismatch was experienced in six ways:

- work overload (work is more intense, work demands more time, work is more complex, work creates the exhaustion of overload),
- lack of control (when employees don't feel that they can make any decisions or influence the processes that affect their work),
- insufficient reward (when employees do not receive recognition or do not feel intrinsic satisfaction),
- breakdown in community (when people lose a positive connection with others in the workplace),
- absence of fairness (when there is an inequity in workload, pay, or lack of respect), and
- conflicting values (when the value requirements of the job do not match the personal values of the employee).

They argued further that when the workplace did not recognize the human side of work, then the burnout grew, carrying a high price with it. Maslach (1982b) recognized another institutional contributor to burnout. Institutional rules that structured the nature of the contact between employees and recipients sometimes trapped employees when the institution required them to meet with unwilling

recipients. She provided an example of a therapist being forced to visit with a prisoner who was not interested in therapy. A natural extension in music contexts is teaching students who did not choose to enroll in a music class.

Pointing to the larger social, economic, and cultural developments in the United States, Schaufeli et al. (2009) speculated that the roots of the burnout concept were linked to idealism of young people in the human services professions. Former U.S. President John F. Kennedy ignited a vision of public service through his call to "ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." Former U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson then launched the war on poverty that caused a huge influx of young people to work on eradicating poverty, who found themselves increasingly disillusioned. Frustrated idealism was a defining quality of the burnout experience. Service providers were appalled at their diminished capacity to perform or to show compassion toward their recipient. Burnout was not merely an inconvenience or occupational hazard, but a devastating attack on their professional identity.

Specific to music teachers, Hamann and colleagues (Hamann & Daugherty, 1984; Hamann et al., 1987) linked burnout to professional demands. These included (a) inadequate support; (b) noninstructional responsibilities; (c) feelings of isolation; (d) lack of recognition by administrators, other teachers, peers, parents, and students; (e) unclear goals from principals, music administration, and fellow music teachers; (f) too much work; (g) not enough salary; and (h) not enough equipment, room, or budget. Jorgensen (2010) cautioned that we should not be surprised when music teachers experience burnout within a few years of beginning to teach, especially given the number of ways in which they are marginalized. There has been an overriding sense of powerlessness in the face of pervasive expectations by governments, businesses, religions, music professionals, and the public at large. Moreover, music teachers have not usually been consulted about relevant issues that affect them, including curriculum, disciplinary actions, and administrative policies.

Effects of Burnout

Burnout manifests for individuals at the physical and psychological levels. Researchers have observed the following physical symptoms of burnout: (a) exhaustion, (b) insomnia, (c) use of alcohol/drugs, (d) weight loss or gain, (e) high blood pressure, (f) migraine headaches, and (g) rise in cholesterol (Hamann, 1990; Koutsimani et al., 2019; Maslach, 1982b; Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Mercer & Mercer, 1986). Psychological symptoms have included (a) detachment, (b) boredom, (c) cynicism, (d) irritability, (e) mental dysfunction, (f) sense of impotence, (g) paranoia, (h) disorientation, (i) impatience, (j) crankiness, (k) rigidity, (l) mistrust of others, and (m) worry (Freudenberger &

Richelson, 1980; Hamann, 1990; Hamann et al., 1987; Koutsimani et al., 2019; Maslach, 1982b; Maslach et al., 2001; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Freudenberger and Richelson (1980) aptly summarized that humans who were burned out anesthetized their feelings and went about their daily routines in a more mechanical and cut-off way, no longer functioning as whole human beings.

Specific psychological effects of burnout align with the three dimensions of burnout referenced previously (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization/cynicism, and personal accomplishment). For example, individuals who experience wearing out, loss of energy, depletion, debilitation, and fatigue are emotionally exhausted. They feel drained and easily irritated. Depersonalization causes a negative shift in responses to others, with negative or inappropriate attitudes, retreating into a detached stance in an attempt at emotional self-preservation. A negative response toward oneself and one's personal accomplishments yields low morale, withdrawal, reduced productivity, and inability to cope (Maslach, 1982a, 1982b).

In addition to these physical and psychological symptoms, burnout also negatively affects job performance. Workers who feel burned out (a) tend to be absent or tardy more frequently; (b) invest less time and energy in their work, doing only what is absolutely necessary; and (c) express little or no motivation or enthusiasm for the subject matter or for teaching (Maslach, 1982b; Pines et al., 1981). They are also likely to feel low morale for their work and, in short, do work less well (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Veninga and Spradley (1981) noticed a five-step pattern for burnout: (a) the honeymoon stage, (b) fuel shortage, (c) chronic symptoms, (d) crisis, and (e) hitting the wall. At the honeymoon stage, there was a loss of high energy, enthusiasm, and job satisfaction, but it could be treated easily. Fuel shortage came with (a) inefficiency at work, (b) dissatisfaction with the job, (c) fatigue, (d) sleepless nights, and (e) increased smoking, drinking, or other means of escape. Chronic symptoms included exhaustion, physical illness, anger, and depression. At this point, teachers began to withdraw or were prone to illnesses and missing work. In addition, their attitudes toward students, parents, friends, and family began to shift. Problems became more pronounced at the crisis point, and hitting the wall was the final stage where professional incompetence, impairment, and physical and psychological dysfunction increased to a detrimental level.

Perhaps the most detrimental effect of diminished teacher performance is the negative impact on students. Stern and Cox (1993) compared the differences between students and teachers who are burned out. Students could always skip a class, not practice, or not prepare an assignment. These behaviors only affected themselves. For teachers, however, the lack of motivation and enthusiasm also affects students. A burned-out teacher may not be

receptive to answering questions or responding to student needs, not encouraging them to learn. They may also become unapproachable, unimaginative, and dull. Eager learners may experience frustration and boredom at the lack of challenge in the learning environment.

Prevention of Burnout/Possible Remedies

Given the detrimental effects of burnout, it is important to identify potential remedies and to review preventative strategies. Researchers have provided recommendations to prevent burnout and overall stress, in three general categories: (a) in-school contexts, (b) out of school contexts, and (c) through mentoring/induction programs. Stress can be reduced by changing the work environment or one's internal responses to it. Alternatively, there may be stressors that can be ameliorated through a better work-life balance. When considering best practices for prevention of burnout, mentoring and induction programs have received the greatest attention in the research literature.

Recommendations for in-school solutions have generally centered on the elements of being more prepared and being more engaged with the work environment. Hylton (1989) offered a few strategies for better time management, which he considered a coping strategy for stress. These included (a) reviewing objectives, (b) planning ahead, and (c) setting priorities by delegating nonmusic tasks where possible. Inasmuch as lack of classroom control promoted teacher burnout, Stern and Cox (1993) advised teacher development of an effective discipline and positive reinforcement strategy that was organized, clearly articulated, and consistently implemented. They also suggested that being prepared and well-organized when entering a classroom reduced stress.

Engagement is considered the positive antithesis of burnout (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980; Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Schaufeli et al., 2009). Accordingly, the burnout process starts with the wearing out of engagement. Engagement is characterized by energy, involvement, and efficacy—the direct opposites of the three burnout dimensions. One possible way to increase engagement is through job crafting. Timms et al. (2012) defined job crafting as “the self-initiated changes that employees make in their own job demands and job resources to attain and/or optimize their personal (work) goals” (p. 173). Lee and McNaughtan (2017) surveyed collegiate music professors in the United States to see how they applied job crafting in their work to enhance revitalization. They found that 22% of faculty viewed changing their job roles as a precursor to rejuvenation. Some faculty changed their role from faculty to administrator; others spent more time on research, whereas others collaborated with colleagues. The authors concluded that

simply providing autonomy for faculty to craft their work was a great tool to increase job satisfaction.

Another way to increase job satisfaction is to develop and nurture positive high-quality interpersonal relationships. These may occur between teachers and students, parents, administrators, and other faculty. In fact, Heston et al. (1996) went as far as to recommend that positive relationships between teachers and students may initially need to take precedence over instructional and performance goals. They also advocated for closer liaisons between music teachers and administration and other professionals, so that music educators were accepted as core faculty within the overall context of the school program. Other suggestions have included (a) teaching new literature, (b) creative rehearsal techniques (Stern & Cox, 1993), and (c) periodic self-assessment (M. V. Smith & Haack, 2000).

Researchers have amassed data related to teaching in virtual environments. Online teaching has been associated with isolation and loneliness (Dolan, 2011). Makarenko and Andrews (2017) found that online instructors were more susceptible to experiences of isolation and emotional distress than face-to-face instructors. Hogan and McKnight (2007) found similar results, stating that the well-being and mental health of online instructors was a significant cause for concern, with increased rates of burnout. They recommended that institutions should consult with online instructors about matters that affect their learning environments. Additionally, providing instructional support and reducing the teaching loads and number of students per online course were considered helpful.

The majority of suggestions for mitigating burnout related to finding a better balance between work activities and personal activities outside of work. Relaxation, exercise, cutting back on overtime or excessive hours, limiting job spillover, and emphasizing other aspects of life are common strategies suggested by researchers (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980; Hamann, 1990; Hamann & Gordon, 2000; Maslach, 1982b; Stern & Cox, 1993). Another important solution is to engage in appropriate boundary setting (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980). Referencing marching band directors specifically, Shaw (2014) found that pressure from parents, students, and staff, as well as pressure to uphold the reputation of their band programs were inhibitive aspects to work–life balance. Setting personal rules and making time for self and others was helpful for participants, especially through help from supportive people. Although work–life balance was frequently referenced, practicing it was a more difficult task. Fitzpatrick (2013) discussed the many inhibitive factors to achieving this desired balance, especially a general lack of time, feeling of guilt, and perceived disparities in parental expectations between men and women. Papastylianou et al. (2009) suggested that,

compared with Greek teachers, American teachers experienced difficulties with work–life balance that related to cultural and societal pressures:

A Greek compensates for professional difficulties by the satisfaction he/she achieves in his/her personal life. On the contrary, in other countries such as the United States, work is an end in itself and a strong focus is placed on competition, high personal achievement and personal value. Employees start their careers with ambitious goals and high expectations, and when these are not realized, they experience burnout. (p. 307)

Although one might predict that married individuals experience burnout in increased levels, given the additional responsibilities, Maslach (1982b) found the opposite to be true. People who were single experienced the most burnout. She speculated that the family was an emotional resource rather than an emotional drain, and that spouses and children made individuals more experienced with dealing with personal problems and emotional conflicts. She also pointed to the value of social approaches to coping; getting together with others (even outside of family settings) helped with companionship, insights, emotional support, feedback, and advice.

It is possible that burnout signals a problem of fit between the person and the job (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). In these cases, it may be necessary for the individual to find another path. Ideally, organizational inventions can occur to improve culture and establish processes for communication and conflict resolution. Many suggestions offered by researchers ignore that even though there are steps a teacher/professional can take to assist with burnout, there are systematic issues that can be problematic, and external to the individual (Stern & Cox, 1993). Furthermore, treatment is not as effective as prevention (Maslach & Leiter, 1997), and “preventing burnout is not enough; it is necessary to go further to foster work engagement” (Schaufeli et al., 2009, p. 216). Seeking professional help is also advisable (Hamann, 1990).

With respect to mentoring and teacher induction programs, the common theme in the literature appears to be “it’s different in music.” In nonmusic settings, novice teacher mentoring has been shown to support teacher retention (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; T. M. Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Strong, 2009; Wenglinsky, 2002). However, some of the challenges unique to music confounded the positive elements. For example, Gallo (2018) reported that first-year music teachers received lower quality mentorship and induction supports compared with nonmusic educators, and that new music teachers found their mentorship experiences to be less helpful than all other disciplines. Possible barriers to effective mentorship of music educators included location and accessibility of mentors (Montague, 2000) and lack of time (Conway, 2015a, 2015b). Moreover, Conway

(2001, 2012) recommended context-specific experiences via music conferences and workshops rather than a “one size fits all” beginning teacher induction program, which may or may not be applicable to the work of music teachers. Mentors assisted with logistical challenges, such as classroom management and budgeting (Conway, 2003; Conway & Zerman, 2004), helped focus developmental activities on the unique needs of the teacher (Haack, 2006), and provided greater knowledge of the school system (Haack, 2006). It also provided benefits to the mentor (Berg & Conway, 2020; Haack, 2006). However, the link between mentorship and beginning teacher support and teacher turnover is not strong (Baker, 2007; Hancock, 2008, 2009; Killian & Baker, 2006); therefore, its utility as a mitigation for burnout is questionable.

Implications for Music Education

Understanding the elements contributing to burnout can help educators notice their own responses to stressful contexts. For example, feeling emotionally exhausted and depleted can be a strong signal that disengagement from work is beginning to take place. Although it is common to wonder if one’s feelings are “normal,” it is helpful to have labels to understand what burned out teachers experience. A reduced sense of personal accomplishment, and a desire to detach from and depersonalize others are additional signs of burnout. With both physical and psychological symptoms, teachers may begin to engage in interventions when they notice they are beginning to anesthetize their feelings or turn to dysfunctional coping mechanisms through alcohol, overeating, or drugs.

When considering potential remedies within the teacher’s control, one obvious implication from the research literature is to be well prepared and organized by coming to class each day with a plan. Delegating simple tasks is also a strategy that can benefit both the teacher and the student, developing leadership opportunities and increased investment in the class. Additionally, investing in students, parents, administrators, and colleagues can lead to increased high-quality interpersonal relationships, another mitigation for burnout. There are myriad admonishments through media for individuals to engage in self-care, finding a balance between work and life. This balance is not easy, but music educators must find avenues for separating from work activities and taking necessary time off to rejuvenate themselves. Because teachers are hardworking and generous, it may be easy to believe that making time for outside activities is selfish or unnecessary. However, given the data reflecting the negative impact on students, it is clear that a burned-out teacher is not as effective as one who has chosen to establish healthy boundaries around work. Students are more attentive and learn more

when a teacher is excited, eager, and passionate, compared with one who is detached and disengaged.

It is also important to note that sometimes the stressors contributing to burnout occur externally. Teachers cannot assume all the responsibility or work harder and harder to solve problems that they have no agency to solve. Administrators/school systems that marginalize their teachers by not including them in decisions relevant to their discipline or overloading them without providing commensurate financial compensation can send the strong message that teachers are not valued. Counselors who assign unwilling students into music classes contribute to this marginalization. There will be times when the mismatch between teachers and administration creates irreparable lack of fit, and teachers may need to seek alternative employment. Given Hancock’s (2008) finding that school conditions and lack of support contribute to teacher migration and attrition, and that 16% of teachers migrate to another school or leave the profession altogether (Hancock, 2009), it is clear that not enough is being done within the schools to retain teachers.

When possible, teachers should consider job crafting, or changing something about the job itself to make it more rewarding. Music teachers have the privilege of choosing repertoire, selecting performance opportunities, and, in some cases, number of performances throughout the year. It is possible that learning new music, perhaps written by a living composer willing to speak to the students, will fuel new excitement into the job. Additionally, music teachers may consider performances in the community and other forms of service that broaden their goals outside of the immediate environment. Partnerships with area schools, adult community groups, or local universities may also provide fresh perspectives.

With the prevalence of online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is no surprise that feelings of isolation and loneliness were magnified. Webinars and virtual conferences became accessible forms of professional development while also keeping teachers connected. Participation in professional development, toward the goal of lifelong learning, can also mitigate burnout and feelings of isolation.

Because there is a national teacher shortage (Hancock, 2008) and because teachers’ well-being is important, continued study in the field of burnout is warranted. Solutions cannot come from teachers alone, nor can the “just work harder” mantra be perpetuated. The public perception of the heroic teacher, always willing to work under any condition for the benefit of the children, is unhelpful to teachers who wish to be valued and respected as professionals. It is incumbent on administrators at every level to recognize the human side of work, to acknowledge music teachers as core faculty, and to continue seeking ways to increase teacher engagement and recognition. As Freudenberger

and Richelson (1980) observed over 40 years ago, burnout is robbing our society of what it can least afford to lose: high achievers, the men and women of action and purpose to whom the rest of us look for leadership and inspiration.

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