

Philanthropy on the Brink of Burnout

La philanthropie au bord de l'épuisement

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This is an AI-generated English translation of Daniel H. Lanteigne's original French-language column, provided for reference. Read the original in French on Les Affaires → <https://www.lesaffaires.com/mon-entreprise/management-et-rh/la-philanthropie-au-bord-de-lepuisement/>

Philanthropy undeniably changes the world, not least because it helps reduce inequality as an indispensable social safety net. But at what cost? Behind a growing number of causes are unsung heroes who are burning out, facing harassment and, too often, falling in the line of duty.

As irony would have it, I'm one of those statistics. I'm currently on medical leave for major depression. The cobbler's children go barefoot, you might say.

A Dashboard Flashing Red

Just before I left to "recharge my batteries," I conducted a study of 385 people working in Quebec's philanthropic sector. It painted a picture of well-being—or rather, ill-being. A bleak, troubling and alarming portrait in which not a single indicator is in the green.

And no one can ignore this finding: everyone sees it, everyone knows it. But for lack of resources, and because philanthropy doesn't transform overnight, the steps taken so far have been insufficient. And meanwhile, the numbers keep getting worse and people keep burning out.

Energy and Workload

40% say their energy level has dropped. When nearly half a sector is running out of steam, its entire capacity for impact erodes with it.

71% see their workload increasing, with no additional resources. The vicious cycle is clear: more to do, and less to do it with.

The result: 21% are seriously considering leaving not just their organization, but philanthropy altogether.

Fragile Mental Health

More than 52% have experienced an episode of depression, burnout or depressed mood. The exception has become the norm.

Barely 48% consider themselves to be in good mental health. In other words, the majority are not doing well.

Harassment: Still Too Common

29% have been victims of harassment at some point in their career in the sector, a sharp increase from 2023. That figure should send a chill through any board of directors.

And it isn't just an individual "experience": 37% have witnessed harassment directed at colleagues. In other words, the problem is visible, and too often tolerated in silence.

Snuffing Out Those Who Want to Light Up the World

These numbers speak for themselves: philanthropy is exhausted.

Exceptional people who agree to earn less than they would in the private sector, who sacrifice evenings and weekends for fundraising events, and who pour their energy into a cause bigger than themselves. They are the ones holding up an entire ecosystem—and we end up burning them out by endlessly raising expectations.

Relying solely on people's desire to change the world isn't sustainable. When you keep squeezing the lemon, eventually there's nothing left, and the sector ends up with a human deficit.

And this pressure comes from everywhere: project-based funding, targets that only ever go up year after year, and accountability requirements. All of this in a fragile economy, where even donors are reassessing their own priorities.

So expectations keep climbing while resources stay flat. The imbalance keeps widening. And when everything becomes an emergency... nothing really is anymore.

So one question is unavoidable: what are we willing to give up to protect our people? Because helping remains the primary mission. But to keep helping, the people carrying that mission need to be able to stay standing.

The Business Community at the Heart of the Solution

At first glance, this picture might seem like an internal nonprofit issue. It isn't. Philanthropy isn't a parallel sector—it runs on the rhythm of boards of directors, campaign cabinets, funding committees and donors. Business leaders aren't on the periphery; they're at the heart of this ecosystem, and they shape its culture.

And that culture is faltering today. Mental health is an economic issue. Turnover is expensive. Absenteeism undermines performance. When philanthropy weakens, essential services erode, and businesses feel the effects too—in their communities, their customer base and their own employees.

That's why the business community has to play a key role. Board members, major donors and senior-level volunteers hold a uniquely powerful lever of influence over this culture. It's time to use it.

Nonprofits have already put well-being practices in place. But the business community can do more than simply occupy a seat at the table. Not to impose—to act. And to transform, with concrete means, a sector that badly needs it.

What Can Be Done?

The finding is clear: mental health has become a pressing need in the philanthropic sector. The numbers show it, and the testimonials confirm it. This is not the time to minimize it, nor to dramatize it—it's time to act. Behind every cause are human beings holding up our social safety net with their bare hands. And if we don't take care of them, the entire ecosystem becomes more fragile.

Daring a Real Culture Change

This is where it all starts. Boards, executive directors and donors need to acknowledge that success can no longer be measured solely in dollars raised or projects launched. As long as performance is built on infinite growth, mental health will keep being pushed to the back burner.

Putting People Back at the Center

Working for a cause is a job that deserves dignified, safe working conditions. Nonprofits need to revisit their priorities, set limits and protect their teams.

Sharing and Adapting Best Practices

The philanthropic sector doesn't need to reinvent the wheel. Many good practices already exist in the private sector. The challenge is adapting them and translating them into the reality of nonprofits. When we pool what works, we build lasting solutions instead of everyone working in silos.

Philanthropy saves lives. It changes life trajectories. It transforms our societies. But to prevent burnout among the people holding it all together, it's time to shift into a higher gear. To move beyond one-off collaborations and build real bridges between the business world and the philanthropic world. Those connections already exist, but they need to be amplified to transform the culture that is weakening the sector.

Because a better society isn't built on the backs of burnt-out people. It's built with them, when they are recognized, supported and healthy.

If you work at a nonprofit or a co-op and are currently feeling fragile when it comes to your mental health, know that a resource exists just for you. LÉO is a free, confidential psychological support line, available quickly, offered by professionals from Relief. To access their support, visit <https://www.leoquebec.org>.

Please note: LÉO is funded by philanthropy. The sustainability of this funding will be essential to ensure the continuity of this valuable resource and to keep help available to those who need it.