



Building a Network That Sustains High Performance with Nick Petrie

Organizations keep asking people to perform harder and faster — and a growing number of their best people are quietly burning out. We asked **Nick Petrie**, author of [*Burn Bright: 10 Habits to Sustain High Performance in an Always-on World*](#), to share five years of research into how a rare few sustain high performance under pressure while most grind themselves down. What surprised us was how much of the answer lived not in their habits, but in their relationships. This ebook captures his insights on building a professional network that protects your energy, sharpens your thinking, and keeps you growing.

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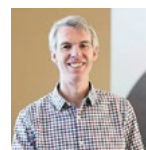
The Achiever's Dilemma

Performing, but burning

Petrie has been tracking a problem that intensified after the pandemic. Modern professionals, he argues, face three demands at once. They have to perform — deliver results and create value right now. They have to grow — keep learning and changing. And they have to sustain — do both for years without grinding themselves down.

The trouble is that most people optimize only the first. *"Most people are way over balanced on perform and way under focused on growth,"* Petrie observes. *"They are not doing new things they've never done before. They're just repeating the same stuff they were doing a year ago."* The result is a generation of high performers running hot.

And it is rarely the people you'd expect. *"It's always the good people,"* he says. *"It's the people who care, the people who really want to help, the people who don't want to let their colleagues down... People who don't care are fine. Selfish people are usually fine."*



Nick Petrie

AUTHOR, BURN BRIGHT

Nick is the author of [Burn Bright: 10 Habits to Sustain High Performance in an Always-On World](#) (Thorsons, 2026).

Over five years, he and his research team studied people who operate under sustained pressure — Navy SEALs, surgeons, athletes, founders and executives — to learn why a few sustain high performance with low stress while many burn out. His work spans leadership development and adult (vertical) development, and he partners with organizations and professional sports teams to design healthier, higher-performing ways of working.

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The Three Demands Of Modern Work



Perform

Deliver value right now



Grow

Keep learning & changing



Sustain

Do both, for years, without burning out

Burnout, his team found, almost never has a single cause. It is *"multifactorial"* - usually three pressures stacking up at the same time. Which is why the usual fix falls short. A day off or a yoga class helps a first-degree burn, but for the deeper degrees, rest alone backfires. *"If you just rest and go back to work, you'll burn out again,"* Petrie warns. *"The solution was growth."*

So we asked a deliberately narrow question: if you wanted to perform more sustainably and you could change nothing except your relationships at work where would you start? His answer reframed the whole problem.

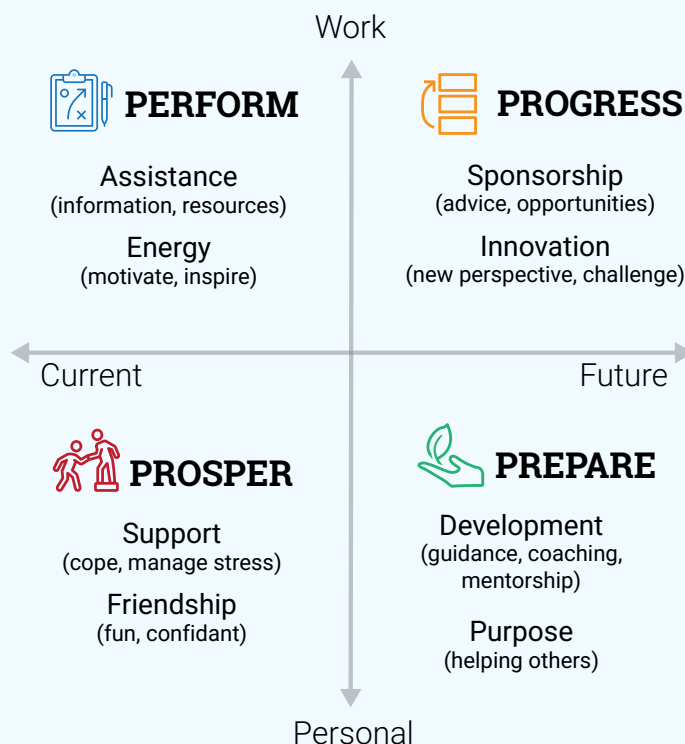
From “who drains me?” to “what am I missing?”

The obvious place to start, Petrie acknowledges, is to sort people into who gives you energy and who takes it. “You could think about that,” he says, “but I don’t think that’s the most interesting part.” The more revealing move is to audit what your network actually gives you - the resources it provides, the kind of view he points to in tools like the Leader Network Diagnostic.

Here is the pattern he sees again and again. Most people have built a network in which everyone exists to help them get something done. “Everyone is an operational tie,” Petrie explains. “You start to see everyone around you as: can you help me? – and there’s no relationship there.”

Network Resources

Networks don’t just connect you to people; they connect you to the resources that drive success. Some help you get work done and stay energized, others open doors and challenge your thinking, and still others provide the support, friendship, and growth that carry you through change. When a network delivers across all four areas, it becomes one of the most powerful accelerators of your career.



What is missing, almost universally, is the connective tissue that actually sustains people. “What most people have a real deficit in is **support, friendship and strategic ties**,” he says. “They don’t cultivate those. They underestimate them.” In an always-on workplace those are precisely the relationships that refill the tank - people who give you energy, but also strategic perspective and connection to opportunity.

“The question is a lot less around energy and a little more around: what resources does my current network give me — and what am I missing?”

It is a subtle but powerful shift in the question you ask. Not who drains me? but what is my network failing to provide? *“That,”* Petrie says, *“seems to be where people have the biggest leaps.”* A network weighted entirely toward getting things done is, paradoxically, a network that wears you out.

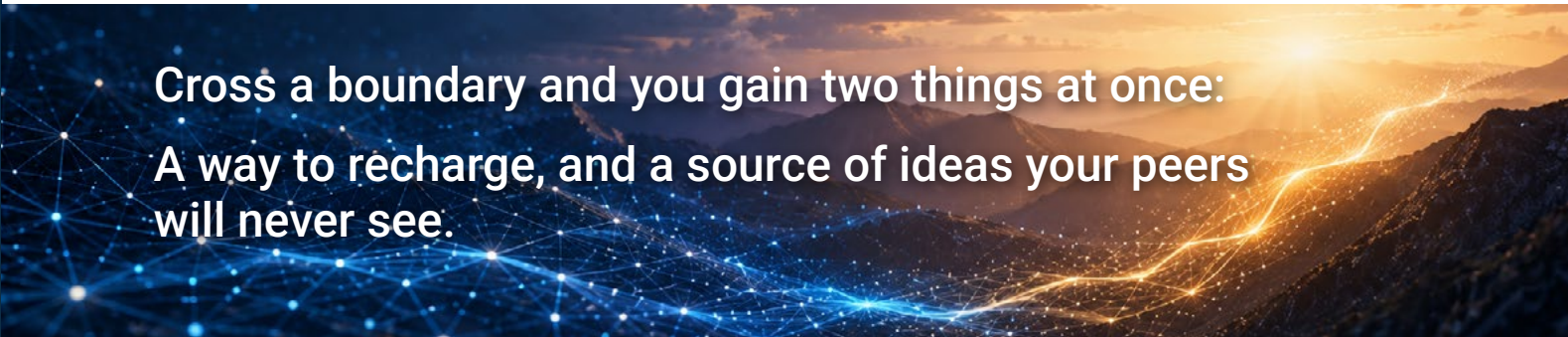
Why your best ties have nothing to do with your job

One of Petrie’s signature ideas is the opposite world — an activity that is the direct opposite of your work mode. A burned-out tech executive discovered Argentine tango: two hours a night where, as he put it, no one cares about your title or salary and the only currency is whether you can dance. *“It’s the only time in my world where my work disappears and my work brain is off recharging,”* he told Petrie. This is not indulgence. *“It’s not just for fun, not just a hobby... for the sustainable high performers, it’s a core part of their performance.”*

During the session, the idea came up about whether the same logic applies to people. Should an effective network deliberately include those who have nothing to do with your professional identity? Petrie’s answer was emphatic. The thrivers he studied had quietly built relationships with, in his words, “deliberately nothing to do with their work.”

A doctor told him he refuses to socialize or network with healthcare people. *“They’re all great people,”* the doctor said, *“but when I see their faces, I’m back in doctor mode.”* A surgeon named Thomas joined a mountain bike club — *“full of builders, entrepreneurs, physiotherapists, plumbers,”* people he’d never otherwise spend time with. *“It just gets him out of his own world,”* Petrie says, *“and he sees the world is much bigger than his little bubble.”*





**Cross a boundary and you gain two things at once:
A way to recharge, and a source of ideas your peers
will never see.**

The payoff is double, and Petrie roots both in network science. There is **sustainability** — stepping outside the professional bubble is how these people recharge. And there is **insight**:
“When you cross boundaries into different industries and different ways of thinking and different people with different backgrounds, you learn a lot more than if you hang out with people who are in your bubble.”

“Both for sustainability and learning, diversifying your networks is way more powerful.”

His wider research reinforces the point. The thrivers refused to fuse their identity with their job - they kept multiple hats, seeing themselves as a parent, a coach, a singer or a club member as much as a professional. As a mentor of one colleague advised, you should be *“dating the company, but not married to it.”* A diversified network is the relational version of that hedge: when one part of life goes sideways, another holds you steady.

From *Doer* to *Grower*

Why do networks curdle into operational overload in the first place? Because the formula that builds a career early on quietly stops paying off. In the first half of a career, Petrie says, what works is *“a real yes attitude, massive work - just do everything,”* because what you have to offer is your energy, enthusiasm and time. But *“in the second half of your career, just doing more of that has diminishing returns. What you’ve actually got of value is your wisdom, pattern recognition, great judgment, years of experience.”* The trap is that *“they get stuck on a winning formula from their 20s and they keep doing it.”*

That shift — from doer to grower — has a network signature. A doer's network is a running to-do list of operational ties. A grower's network is designed: fewer purely transactional relationships, more strategic ones, and a deliberate move from mentors who advise you to sponsors who vouch for you. It is the same rebalancing Petrie described for burnout — trading some operational load for the support, friendship and strategic ties most people under-invest in.

Networks compound when you tend them

Petrie is wary of grand fixes, and of leaving the work to individuals alone. The most durable gains come when teams redesign the conditions, not when people white-knuckle their own calendars. Across 15 companies, in just three 90-minute sessions, teams that rebalanced how they worked and connected improved both productivity and stress, and saw an unplanned bonus: *"the levels of trust improved within the team, and we weren't working on trust at all,"* Petrie says. *"The collaboration improved and we weren't really working on collaboration."* For leaders, the lesson isn't another wellbeing course; it's treating the network as part of the operating system - noticing, as a team, where everyone has become an operational tie and where the support, friendship and strategic connections that sustain performance have gone missing.



The Leader Network Diagnostic connection

This is where the Leader Network Diagnostic (LND) earns its place. It makes the invisible structure of a network visible — and surfaces the resources view Petrie points to: the balance between operational ties and the support, friendship and strategic connections people under-invest in. Across a team, it turns an abstract idea into a shared picture of who is carrying overload and where the energizing ties are too thin. And it works fast: leaders can sit with it and, as Petrie notes, *"within 90 minutes or two hours"* walk out with a redesigned network - making the LND less a survey than an intervention.

About this Conversation

This ebook draws on a live session with Nick Petrie and on his book [Burn Bright: 10 Habits to Sustain High Performance in an Always-On World](#). Quotations are taken from that conversation; supporting ideas and examples are drawn from his research and writing. It is part of an ongoing Network Leader series exploring how relationships and networks shape performance, growth and wellbeing at work.

References & Further Reading

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