

WELL-BEING IN RELATIONSHIP

Rethinking What Leaders Need to Thrive

Dan Steenburgh | CSSEA *Leading for Change* Conference 2026

Leader well-being is a sector issue

71%

of Canadian nonprofit leaders reported burnout at least sometimes

1 in 3

reported burnout often or extremely often

31%

of Canadian people managers who had left or were planning to leave their role said mental-health issues influenced their decision

YMCA WorkWell, 2024; Benefits Canada, 2025.

When your organization talks about well-being...

Whose well-being do you picture?

Frontline employees • Leaders • Both • It varies

SHOW OF HANDS

When leader well-being became personal

- We recognized that many of our leaders were experiencing burnout
- We also recognized that this was something we needed to address together, not something that senior leaders could do for others
- This shifted the focus, not away from service quality, but towards the foundational importance of leader well-being

An influential leader

- Set high standards
- Worked at a pace that was difficult for others to sustain
- Did not always recognize when others were struggling
- Tended to be highly task-focused

…



A personal journey

- Experience with burnout and well-being challenges
- Major life changes
- Trying to hold it together as a parent and a leader
- Finding my footing in a new and challenging leadership context



Today’s conversation

1. What leaders carry
2. What the research tells us
3. Three assumptions to reconsider
4. Well-being in relationship

01

What leaders carry

Responsibility does not create invulnerability.



The “romance of leadership”

Why is leader well-being often overlooked?

- Leaders are perceived to experience greater well-being and have greater access to resources.
- Distress can appear inconsistent with the image of an effective leader.
- Those assumptions can make struggle easier to hide and harder to discuss.

Barling & Cloutier, 2017; Cloutier & Barling, 2023

What leaders carry

Relational

- Responsibility for others
- Difficult relationships and conflict
- Carrying others' emotions while managing your own

Organizational

- Heavy workloads and time pressure
- Resource and staffing constraints
- Competing priorities and task conflict

Cognitive

- Ambiguity and uncertainty
- Continuous decisions
- Pressure to remain composed

Leaders are expected to support others and sustain the organization while managing their own demands.

Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Steenburgh, 2024.

Why leader well-being matters

- Leader depletion can affect employees and teams (crossover effect).
- Diminished psychological resources can affect leadership behaviour.
- Fatigue is associated with lower commitment and greater turnover intention.
- High costs to the organization (turnover, productivity, etc.)

Byrne et al., 2014; Barling & Cloutier, 2017; Li, Y., Wang, Z., Yang, L.-Q., & Liu, S. (2016); Steenburgh, 2024.

02

What the research tells us

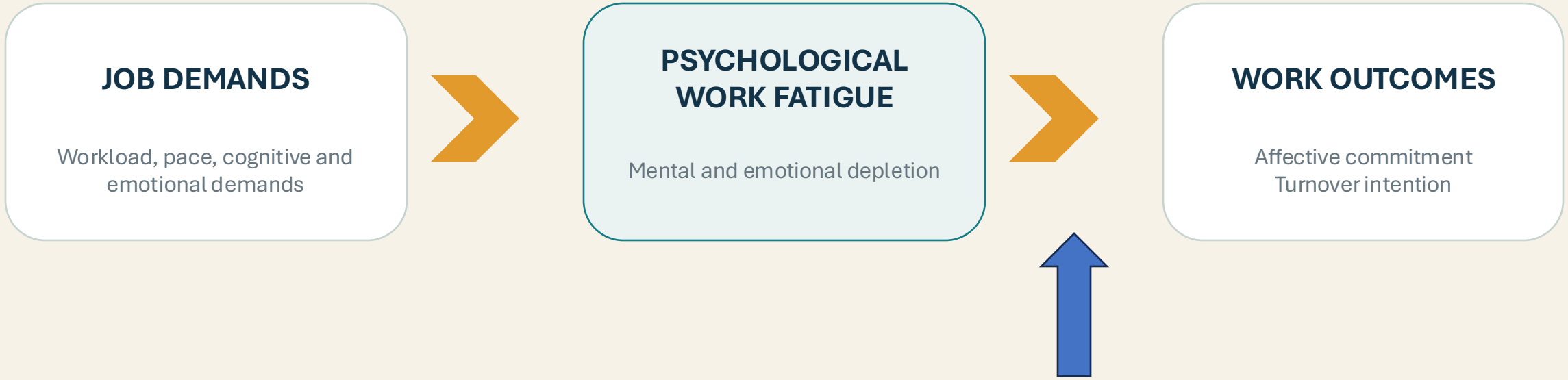
Demands matter. Fatigue explains part of why.
Support can change the outcome.

The research question

When leaders experience high job demands, what role does psychological work fatigue play in their commitment and intention to leave, and can workplace support make a difference?

Steenburgh, 2024.

Research model



Potential buffers:

- **organizational support**
- **supervisor support**
- **colleague support**

Steenburgh, 2024; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Eisenberger et al., 1986.

Do not edit
How to change the design



Which source(s) of support do you think buffered the effect of psychological work fatigue on affective commitment?

ⓘ The Slido app must be installed on every computer you're presenting from

slido

The result

AFFECTIVE COMMITMENT

Supervisor support was the only tested support that significantly buffered the relationship between fatigue and commitment.

TURNOVER INTENTION

None of the three supports significantly buffered the relationship between fatigue and turnover intention.

Care and support can change the outcome, even when demands stay the same

Staying is not the same as thriving.

Steenburgh, 2024.

What leaders said helped — and what they needed

Organization

- Benefits and counselling
- Flexible work and time off
- Wellness culture

Supervisor

- Availability and debriefing
- Regular check-ins
- Empathy and recognition

Colleagues

- Strong peer relationships
- Collaboration
- External networks

Work design & funding

- Administrative capacity
- Workload and coverage
- Funding and compensation

Steenburgh, 2024, qualitative findings.

What the research suggests

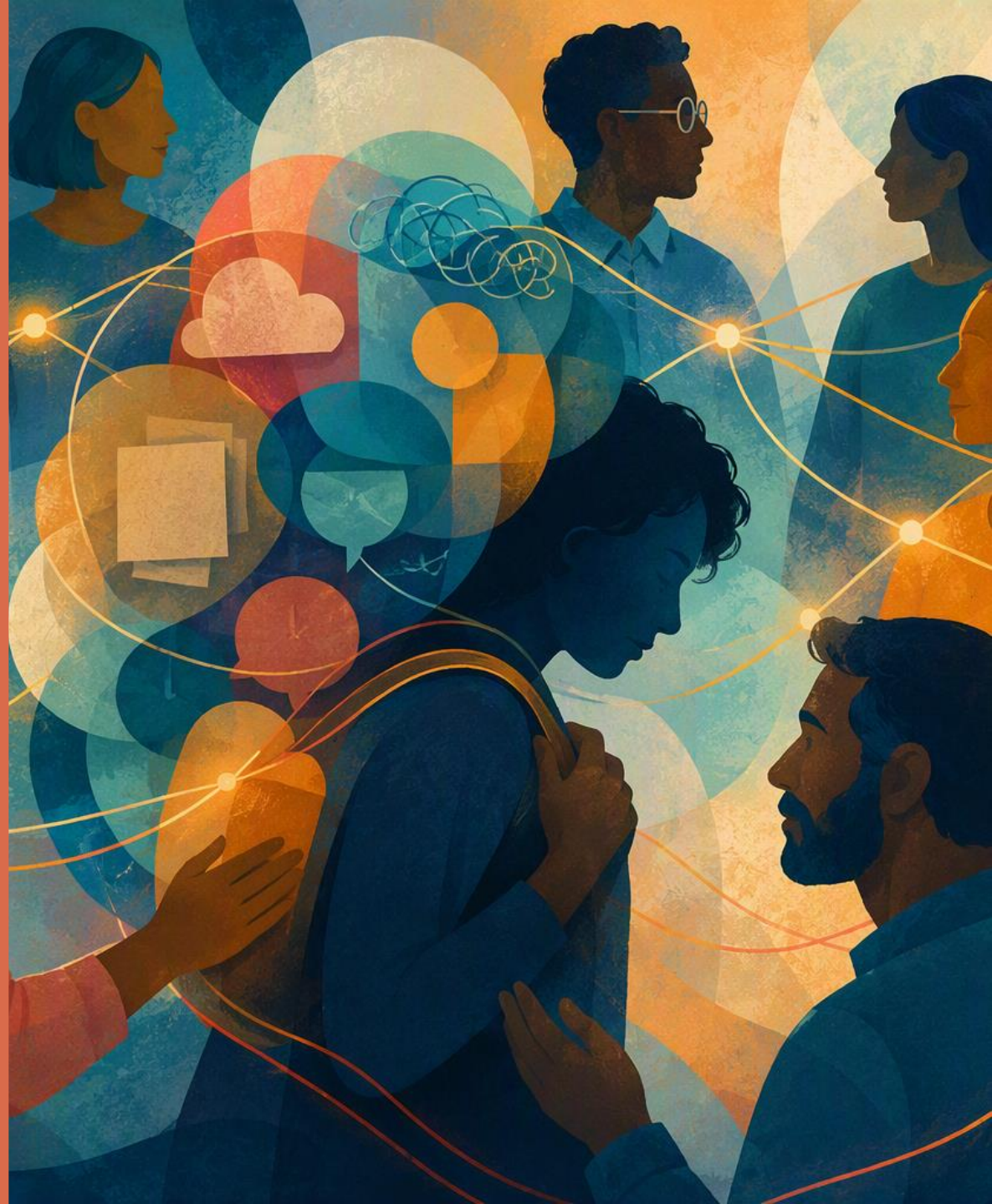
1. High demands are especially consequential when they leave leaders depleted.
2. A leader may stay while becoming less connected to the organization.
3. Care and support from above can protect that connection, even when demands remain.
4. Some demands require organizational or sector-level responses.

Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Steenburgh, 2024.

03

Three assumptions to reconsider

A contextual approach to strengths, boundaries, and demands.



Assumption 1

“The best people are well-rounded”

Are we developing people to contribute at their best, or trying to make them more well-rounded?

Effective people make distinctive contributions through particular strengths.

Adapted from Buckingham & Goodall (2019).

Buckingham & Goodall, 2019.

Strengths have sharp edges

The goal isn't well-roundedness. It's impact.

Organizations are often built to see how we measure up to a standardized model, rather than how we can contribute our unique strengths

- Focus on where people can contribute most
- Build on strengths for more effective, sustainable performance
- Recognize when strengths become overused
- Manage limitations that get in the way
- Build complementary relationships and teams



Buckingham & Goodall, 2019;

Strengths, overuse, and complementarity

7 minutes

What leadership practices help people contribute from their strengths?

Consider:

- What is one strength you rely on, and when can it become overused?
- What complementary strengths do you need from others?
- How well do you recognize and support the distinctive strengths of those you lead?

From well-roundedness to contribution

- Understand where each leader creates their best impact.
- Distinguish limitations that must be managed from differences that do not need to be fixed.
- Build complementary teams and relationships.
- Pay attention to the effect of strengths when they are overused.

Buckingham & Goodall, 2019; Steenburgh, 2024.

10-MINUTE BREAK

Think of a time when the relationship above you made a demanding period either more sustainable or more difficult.

What did that person do, or fail to do, that made the difference?

Assumption 2

“Work-life balance is the goal”

What values do you or your organization place around work-life balance?
Is work-life balance a realistic goal? Does it fit everyone’s needs?

Inspired by Buckingham & Goodall, 2019; informed by Clark, 2000 and Kossek et al., 2012.

Do not edit
How to change the design

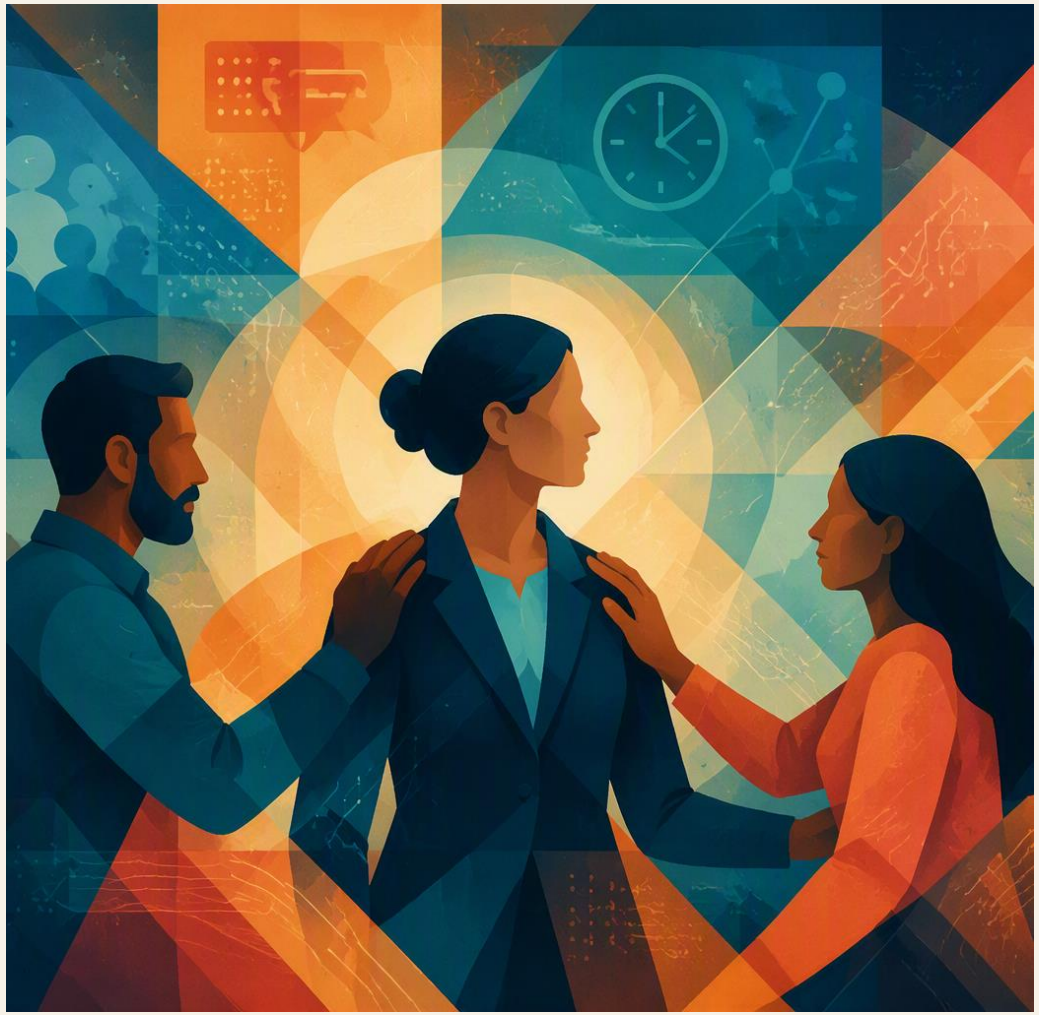


How do you prefer to manage work and the rest of your life?

ⓘ The Slido app must be installed on every computer you're presenting from

slido

Fit, agency, boundaries, and recovery



- Some people prefer clear separation and some prefer intentional integration
- Boundary preferences and workable arrangements differ by person and context
- Leaders can support their organizations by supporting what works for those they lead and adapting policies and work design to accommodate flexibility

Clark, 2000; Kossek et al., 2012; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Reid, 2015.

Work-life fit

7 minutes

1. Where do you need firm boundaries, and where does flexibility or overlap help make your preferred arrangement sustainable?

2. How can you support those you lead to find the boundaries that work best for them?

3. How can organizations support different arrangements while maintaining fairness and operational clarity?

What this means for leaders and organizations

- Avoid prescribing one ideal arrangement
- Create enough trust for people to discuss what works
- Support boundaries without equating commitment with constant availability
- Address work design, not only individual coping

Clark, 2000; Kossek et al., 2012; Reid, 2015; Perlow & Kelly, 2014.

Assumption 3

“Effective leaders can manage it all”

What assumptions do people have about what leaders should be able to accomplish? What pressures do you and those you lead face to “manage it all”?

The mission-driven leadership trap

Protect employees	**Carry more**
Preserve services	**Take on what isn’t resourced**
Stay committed	**Keep going while depleted**
Make it work	**Hide the true capacity problem**

Steenburgh, 2024; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; McFadden et al., 2015; Reid, 2015.

Demands, capacity, and support

8 minutes

1. What are we asking leaders to carry that they were never meant to carry alone?
2. What would we do differently if we treated capacity as something we create together, rather than something individuals are expected to have?
3. What is one unwritten expectation of leadership that we should challenge?

What supportive supervisors can do

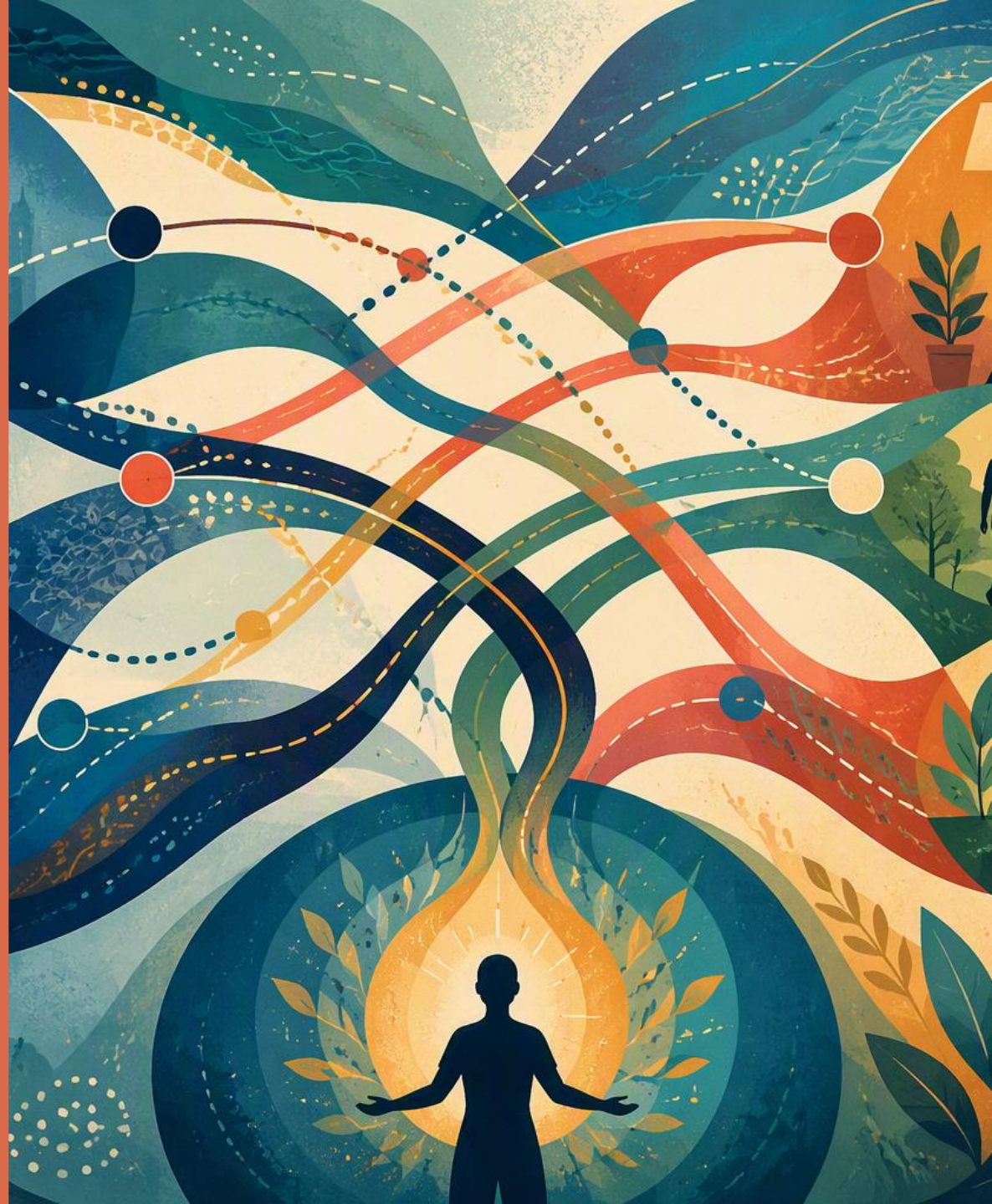
- ❖ Clarify priorities and reduce ambiguity
- ❖ Authorize work to stop or change
- ❖ Help obtain or redistribute resources
- ❖ Advocate upward
- ❖ Create space to debrief
- ❖ Recognize fatigue early
- ❖ Show care and solidarity
- ❖ Maintain accountability

Care and support can matter even when the demand cannot be removed

04

Well-being in relationship

Support is a dialogue, not a checklist.



Three relational resources

Teams

- Complementary strengths
- Shared ownership and problem-solving
- Candid challenge and perspective
- Mutual support and load-sharing

Supervisor (or Board)

- Clarity and prioritization
- Honest dialogue
- Authority, challenge, and support

Organization & Sector

- Work design and resources
- Funding and system conditions
- Advocacy and collective action

Support as a dialogue, not a checklist

A CHECKLIST ASKS

What wellness program do we offer?

A DIALOGUE ASKS

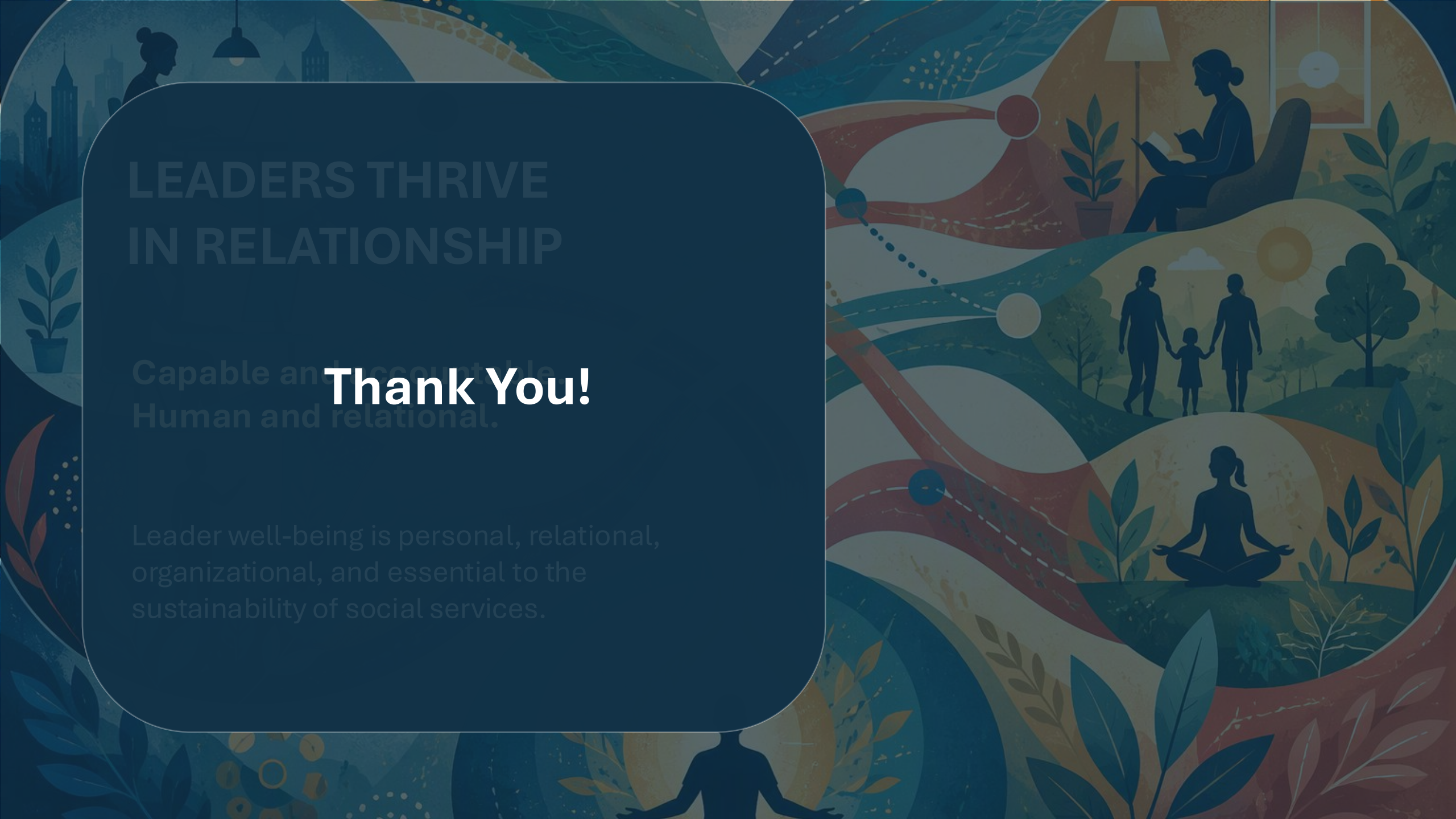
What are you carrying?

What is depleting you?

What can we change together?

Closing Reflection: Think of one leader you support

- What is this person especially good at?
- What might this person be carrying that you do not see?
- What demand could you help clarify, reduce, or renegotiate?
- What conversation have you not yet had?
- What support do you need to support this person well?


LEADERS THRIVE
IN RELATIONSHIP
Capable and accountable.
Human and relational.
Leader well-being is personal, relational, organizational, and essential to the sustainability of social services.
Thank You!

References

Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2017). Job demands–resources theory: Taking stock and looking forward. Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 22(3), 273–285. https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000056

Barling, J., & Cloutier, A. (2017). Leaders' mental health at work: Empirical, methodological, and policy directions. Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 22(3), 394–406. https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000055

Benefits Canada. (2025, July 18). People managers leaving role due to lack of fulfilment, mental-health issues: Survey. https://www.benefitscanada.com/news/bencan/people-managers-leaving-role-due-to-lack-of-fulfilment-mental-health-issues-survey/

Buckingham, M., & Goodall, A. (2019). Nine lies about work: A freethinking leader's guide to the real world. Harvard Business Review Press.

Byrne, A., Dionisi, A. M., Barling, J., Akers, A., Robertson, J., Lys, R., Wylie, J., & Dupré, K. (2014). The depleted leader: The influence of leaders' diminished psychological resources on leadership behaviors. The Leadership Quarterly, 25(2), 344–357. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2013.09.003

Clark, S. C. (2000). Work/family border theory: A new theory of work/family balance. Human Relations, 53(6), 747–770. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726700536001

Cloutier, A. E., & Barling, J. (2023). Expectations of leaders' mental health. Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies, 30(3), 276–296. https://doi.org/10.1177/15480518231178637

Eisenberger, R., Huntington, R., Hutchison, S., & Sowa, D. (1986). Perceived organizational support. Journal of Applied Psychology, 71(3), 500–507. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.71.3.500

Greenhaus, J. H., & Powell, G. N. (2006). When work and family are allies: A theory of work-family enrichment. Academy of Management Review, 31(1), 72–92. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2006.19379625

Kossek, E. E., Ruderman, M. N., Braddy, P. W., & Hannum, K. M. (2012). Work–nonwork boundary management profiles: A person-centered approach. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 81(1), 112–128. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2012.04.003

Kottke, J. L., & Sharafinski, C. E. (1988). Measuring perceived supervisory and organizational support. Educational and Psychological Measurement, 48(4), 1075–1079. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013164488484024

Li, Y., Wang, Z., Yang, L.-Q., & Liu, S. (2016). The crossover of psychological distress from leaders to subordinates in teams: The role of abusive supervision, psychological capital, and team performance. Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 21(2), 142–153. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0039960

McFadden, P., Campbell, A., & Taylor, B. (2015). Resilience and burnout in child protection social work: Individual and organisational themes from a systematic literature review. British Journal of Social Work, 45(5), 1546–1563. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bct210

Perlow, L. A., & Kelly, E. L. (2014). Toward a model of work redesign for better work and better life. Work and Occupations, 41(1), 111–134. https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888413516473

Reid, E. (2015). Embracing, passing, revealing: How men and women negotiate an ideal-worker identity during career transitions. Organization Science, 26(4), 997–1017. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2015.0975

Steenburgh, D. (2024). Job demands and leader well-being in the community social services sector: The influence of perceived organizational, supervisor, and colleague support [Master's project, University of Regina].

YMCA WorkWell. (2024). Insights to impact: 2024 workplace well-being report—The state of employee well-being in Canadian nonprofit organizations. https://www.ymcaworkwell.com/insights-to-impact-2024