

## Connection and Support

### Month 1 Leadership Challenge

#### Purpose

Consider your own experience—by exploring whether the people you lead feel connected and supported, and by examining your own sources of connection and support. Burnout isn't just about workload. It's also about culture. It turns out that one of the most protective factors against burnout is social support, and that when we are lonely, we are at higher risk of developing burnout. This challenge looks in both directions: outward toward your team and inward toward yourself.

#### Why This Matters

The consequences of burnout are serious. It leads to higher turnover, more errors, and lower performance. But the research also points to a solution: *social connection at work*. People who feel valued, supported, and respected are more engaged, more professionally fulfilled, and more productive.

This means leadership isn't just about managing tasks—it's about fostering the conditions where people feel connected. And it means your own connections matter too. Leaders who are isolated burn out faster and lead less effectively.

#### Your Challenge

This month, have two genuine conversations:

1. **Check in with a direct report about connection and support.** Ask whether they feel connected to the team, supported in their work, and valued for their contributions. Listen for signs of isolation—and for what helps them feel like they belong.
2. **Reflect on your own sources of connection and support.** Have a conversation with a peer, mentor, or trusted colleague about who you turn to when work is hard. Do you have people you can go to for honest advice? For emotional support? Or are you leading in isolation?

#### Guidelines

- Choose a direct report you trust enough to have an honest conversation. This isn't a performance review—it's an inquiry about how they're doing.
- For your own reflection, choose someone who knows your work but isn't a direct report—a peer leader, mentor, or colleague outside your chain of command.
- Keep both conversations brief. 15–20 minutes is enough.
- Listen more than you talk. Resist the urge to fix, reassure, or minimize what you hear.
- Be honest with yourself about your own isolation. Many leaders are surrounded by people but have no one they can really talk to.

## CU Thrive Leadership Circles

### Conversation Prompts

#### For your direct report:

- "Do you feel like you belong on this team? What makes you feel that way—or not?"
- "When work gets hard, do you have people here you can turn to for support?"
- "Do you feel valued and respected for your contributions—not just your output?"
- "What would help you feel more connected or supported here?"

#### For your own reflection:

- "Who do I turn to when I need honest advice about a difficult situation?"
- "Who can I talk to about how I'm really doing—not just how the work is going?"
- "Am I leading in isolation? When did I last have a real conversation with a peer about the hard parts of this job?"
- "What would it take to feel more supported in my leadership role?"

### Key Concepts

**Burnout and Loneliness Are Linked:** The more exhausted people are, the lonelier they feel. This isn't about being introverted or socially isolated—it's about the emotional depletion that comes with burnout. Addressing connection is part of addressing burnout.

**Connection Drives Performance:** Research shows that an important factor in work happiness is positive relationships with colleagues. People who feel valued, supported, and respected are more engaged, more trusting, and more cooperative. Social connection isn't soft—it's strategic.

**Leaders Need Connection Too:** Leadership can be isolating. Many leaders are surrounded by people but have no one they can be honest with. Your own support network—peers, mentors, colleagues you trust—is essential for sustaining your leadership over time.

**You Shape the Culture of Connection:** Workplaces characterized by caring, supportive, and respectful relationships have higher performance overall. As a leader, you set the tone. How you treat people—and whether you foster community—directly affects whether your team thrives or burns out.

### Reflection Questions

After completing the challenge, reflect on the following:

1. What did you learn about whether your direct report feels connected and supported?
2. Were there signs of isolation or exhaustion you hadn't noticed before?
3. What did you discover about your own sources of support—or lack of them?
4. Are you leading in isolation? What would it take to build stronger connections with peers?
5. How might strengthening connection on your team help address burnout—for them and for you?

## CU Thrive Leadership Circles

6. What's one thing you want to carry forward into the specific leadership challenges ahead?