

Preventing Coach Burnout In Indoor Gyms

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in [CWA Blog](#)



Turnover rates in any service industry are relatively high. One saving grace for indoor climbing gyms is that your employees are likely passionate individuals who truly care about climbing and want to make a positive impact. However, this also means staff may tolerate working conditions that are less than ideal for the sake of passion and eventually hit a wall and burn out. Full burnout can be challenging to recover from and can affect the morale of an entire team or program.

Article At A Glance

- **Writer:** Tuesday 'Kirby' Kahl, an accomplished coach and future presenter at the 2025 CWA Summit. She currently focuses on coaching, training, and programming and served on the 2024 CWA Summit Content Committee.
- **Who Should Read:** This article is for our coaches and our senior management and gym owners.
- **What Will You Learn:** The myriad ways management can help keep coaches at their facilities. This is also a helpful read for anyone who is a coach looking for inspiration.
- **Tie-Ins, Resources, or Further Reading:** A similar but different read [on the emotional side of being a coach for an indoor climbing gym](#).

Thankfully, installing programs to support the coaching staff and the associated labor can mitigate these issues, reduce turnover, and build a better program. Happy, engaged coaches

build successful and engaged programs that, in turn, benefit your business.

The Mental and Emotional Labor of Coaching

Let's first dive into how and why coaching has additional tasks unique to the profession.

In coaching, there is no autopilot. When in a coaching role, there is a constant need for vigilance. This need entails watching for safety concerns and behavior issues, monitoring group dynamics, movement analysis, and pattern recognition.

Coaches must be present and engaged to be effective instructors. They also take on a lot of emotional labor for their athletes. Fear, climbing, and social situations can bring up so many emotions. Coaches must remain ready to step in and support athletes through big wins, hard losses, frustrations, and even simply the challenges of daily life.

The labor of ever-shifting social dynamics, pressure from gym management to have successful and profitable programs, challenging parent, athlete, or client interactions, managing safety concerns, unconventional hours, and the physicality of the role becomes a heavy burden to bear without support. Coaches rarely sit during practice or competitions; when they do, it's a treat, not a standard.

When looking at coaches who deal in competitions, events like youth national championships involve up to eight long and exhausting days. Athletes often get breaks between rounds, but coaches don't. They have to rely on snacks and food deliveries in isolation zones and can even be in isolation for as long as 13 to 16 hours at a time.

Competition days, even youth qualifying events, are rarely shorter than eight hours. They are more likely to be about 12 hours long in addition to team meals, travel, and more. Coaches often work weekends and evenings when others rest and are the logistical support in the chaos of every climbing competition.

Resources for Growth and Development

Depending on the size of your indoor climbing gym, you may possess different resources for professional development and growth. If your gym is resourced, purchasing access to video libraries from online coaches and coaching systems, sending coaches to certification programs, or supplying funds for classes related to their profession is a great way to keep coaches engaged and demonstrate your support as an organization.

When attending conferences like the CWA Summit, consider using this opportunity to allow coaches and instructors to take classes and coursework and bring back their learnings to their teams.

Many smaller indoor climbing gyms lack financial resources. There are also lower-cost resources and programs you can implement to make your team feel supported. An easy one is to have a leader meet with coaches on a semi-regular basis to tackle some of their professional goals.

Other options could involve utilizing the skill sets of your more experienced coaches and setting up mentorship programs, or asking them to create training materials to deliver to other coaches. This allows senior coaches to solidify their understanding of the material by teaching it and arms the rest of the coaching team with information on a specific topic. The only expense on these programs is the payroll/labor costs.

Another resource some climbing gyms utilize is a database filled with drills, concepts, cues, and ideas to support lesson planning and program planning. This database could be leadership supplied but is often best when all coaches send in ideas, drills, and topics and leadership organizes this material.

Starting a project like this only requires payroll costs and splits the mental workload among staff, which also means you simply have more diversity in your resource database. Diversity in creation will always make for a better product.

Creating a Cohesive Team

An under-utilized method to manage coaching burnout is to ensure the cohesiveness of the coaching team. I've been on teams that worked flawlessly, and we all pushed each other. I've also worked on teams that drained me beyond belief and made me want to leave.

We all know work environment can keep an employee around longer. Creating an effective coaching team creates an environment for growth where coaches challenge, push, and grow alongside each other much like they do their athletes.

If you want to read more about building an effective coaching team,
[check out this article.](#)

Scheduling Considerations

Coaches often work evenings and weekends when folks are off school or work and can attend classes or programs. Rotating schedules or freeing their evenings or weekends can help them stay rested and engaged.

Another plague of coaching is that practices or classes often only fill a few hours, meaning that even working 5-7 days per week, coaches don't always receive full-time hours. **Adding other responsibilities or creating pathways for hours that still ensure off days for coaches is critical.**

Coaches are often only budgeted 10-15 minutes before or after a class or practice to debrief, clean up, talk to parents, and complete a myriad of potential tasks. This means that if there are multiple practices or classes back-to-back, coaches have minimal if any, time to feed themselves, use the bathroom, snack, or simply take some space to transition from one task or class to another mentally. This leads to feelings of internal chaos, stress, and further exhaustion. Creating more transition time in coaches' schedules leads to happier, more relaxed and prepared coaches.

When considering the schedule of competition coaches, canceling practice or having other instructors sub-in after a long weekend of coaching large competitions like regionals or divisionals, gives coaches a much-needed break after long competition days and weekends.

Coaching competitions are a lot of fun, but it is truly exhausting and often requires travel, budgeting breaks before and/or after competitions is a must to ensure coaches are rested and prepared for practices.

Understanding the Finances of a Program

Ensuring programs are financially viable often weighs heavily on coaches. Taking a more holistic view when reviewing program finances is a must. Program financials aren't as straightforward as they seem.

You can read more about the [nuanced impact and financials of programming here](#)

All in all, preventing coach burnout is a problem with many potential multi-tiered solutions that can be implemented based on your team, current resources, and gym leadership.

As the demand for climbing grows across the country, coaches will become more in demand. We need to commit to professionalizing climbing coaching and supporting staff who pursue this career. Coaches and classes are a key piece of orchestrating the community and keeping climbers engaged in your facility.

About the Author



Tuesday "Kirby" Kahl is a movement specialist, passionate instructor, and athlete. She is the Programs Director of Skyhook Bouldering in Portland, Oregon. Kirby has worked every job in a climbing gym, from manager, retail buyer, routesetter, and everything in between, but her true passion is instruction. Kirby's primary populations are youth and adaptive competitive athletes, but she loves assisting climbers of all ages and abilities and helping them reach their goals. She is a student at Portland State University

studying Applied Health and Fitness and minoring in Neuroscience. She has been coaching for the last 15 years across several sports, enjoying a bubbling career as a swim coach before falling in love with climbing. You can find her bouldering, multi-pitching, competing, or backcountry skiing when she's not in school or coaching. Off the wall, she's a dedicated plant mom and painter.

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