

9 When Excellence Becomes Heavy

There is a pattern that appears in high-performing organisations with enough regularity to deserve a name: the hidden cost of sustained excellence. The people who perform most consistently over time frequently carry a weight that is invisible to the organisation benefiting from their performance. It accumulates quietly and tends to become visible only when it becomes a crisis.

Most performance cultures are not designed to see this. They are designed to maximise output, and the human cost of that output is treated as a private matter for the individual concerned, something to be managed outside of work, unrelated to the organisation's responsibility or interest. This is a significant error, and it is one with a measurable performance consequence. The cultures that cannot name what their best people are carrying tend, eventually, to lose those people or to watch them perform at a fraction of their actual capability while the organisation continues to draw on the reputation of what they once produced.

Simone Biles's withdrawal at the Tokyo Olympics and her return in Paris four years later offer the clearest recent example of what this pattern looks like and what a genuine resolution to it requires from both the individual and the environment around them.

Tokyo, July 2021

Simone Biles is the most decorated gymnast in the history of the sport. At the point she arrived at the Tokyo Olympics in the summer of 2021, she had won four Olympic gold medals, nineteen World Championship titles, and had four skills in the sport's Code of Points bearing her name, meaning that the governing body had formally recognised that she was performing things no one else had done before. The world had come to the Games expecting to watch her extend all of these records. The expectation was not modest. It was the expectation that she would once again do something that redefines what is possible.