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I'm not recovering the old me

Instead, I'm leaning into my new operating system and it's making me a better leader.



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**BY NATANYA WACHTEL**

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Some accidents interrupt your life—and then some events dismantle it.

The kind that doesn't just injure your body but forces a reckoning with your core identity. The kind that makes you confront what happens when you are the center of a system—your judgment, authority, visibility, coherence, and reliability—and suddenly you can't perform the way everyone expects.

Here are the facts: I fell off a stage, on camera, and in front of thousands, while presenting at a Wellness Conference (insert ironic emoji here) hosted by a strategic partner. I suffered a concussion and traumatic brain injury. The fall was nearly fatal.

This was not my first encounter with significant adversity. I would be a contender in the series of unfortunate events Olympics.



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This time, I was running companies and serving as the face of a brand—the visible center of systems other people relied on. It wasn't just a brush with death; it was a confrontation with what happens when leadership, identity, and capacity fracture in full public view.

As my recovery has progressed, I've noticed two types of questions. The personal ones: How close did you come to dying? What was that experience like? And the professional ones: Are you functional again? Are you reliable? Has the system people depend on—my mind, judgment, and presence—been restored? Am I back to being myself?

What they're really asking is this: Are you operating the same way? Are you and your teams producing at the same speed? Are you thinking with the same clarity? Will you be carrying the same weight after this?

In leadership culture, recovery usually means restoration. The expectation is to return to baseline—to reclaim the version of yourself people already understand and trust.

LEADERS ARE NOT MACHINES

I am not a tabulator of ones and zeros coming back online.

What's happening to me is more uncomfortable—and ultimately more useful. I'm learning how to recalibrate without restoring the old system. I'm running a new one. What follows are lessons—revelations—emerging from lived experience, not theory. They surface in real time, sometimes painfully, and always instructively.

1. RECOVERY ISN'T A REWIND

To the casual observer, I may seem fully operational—brimming with ideas, fluent in strategy and detail. But the game has changed.

My memory isn't always reliable. Numbers don't behave the way they used to. My body—once conditioned for hours of strength training, yoga, and Pilates—now imposes limits. My brain chemistry hasn't returned to pre-event transparency. Migraines happen. These realities affect how I work every day.

Certain capabilities have returned online—including the capacity to synthesize complexity in real time, often more clearly than before. I can hold competing inputs, incomplete information, emotional nuance, and long-term consequences without forcing premature resolution. I can sustain the decision matrix longer.

Perhaps most notably, I experience a new internal clarity when making decisions. Ideas once arrived sequentially. Now they appear multidimensionally—and when they land, they lock.

It took time to recognize this as capacity, not chaos. At first, I resisted. I tried to recover the old version of myself. That effort was exhausting—and ineffective.

The question that changed everything was this: What if leadership effectiveness after trauma doesn't depend on restoring your old operating system? What if you return different—and different works?

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2. WHEN YOU ARE THE SYSTEM

This distinction matters most when crisis and recovery are not private.

Healing applies not only to your body but also to the companies you lead. Clients, partners, and investors relied on my judgment, presence, and coherence. That reality surfaced questions leaders rarely say out loud:

- If I'm the system, what happens when I go down?
- What does reliability look like when I'm not fully intact?
- How much of a company should live inside one person's body and brain?

These aren't just philosophical questions. They sit at the intersection of operations and emotion—an area most leadership frameworks ignore. They shouldn't. Some might call this disaster preparedness. Lately, I call it a Tuesday.

3. THE IMPACT NO ONE PREPARES YOU FOR

Publicly, the accident and brain injury were the headline. Privately, the betrayal that followed cut deeper.

The incident affected millions in current and projected revenue and led to the collapse of a partnership central to my organization. The fact that the partner was a wellness company—and that the accident occurred at a wellness event—is an irony with teeth.

Despite early assurances of accountability and support, I was met with silence, legal insulation, and a willingness to let carefully built

infrastructure collapse. I was angry. It forced a reckoning beyond physical recovery.

I had to confront how often leadership partnerships rely on unspoken assumptions about ethics and accountability. And it raised a fundamental question: If loyalty evaporates when a leader becomes medically compromised—when they become inconvenient—what is holding the enterprise together?

What I learned, the hard way: Goodwill is not enough. Alignment must exist before contracts are signed, and ethical boundaries should be explicit—especially around what we would never do if someone is injured while working with us. I emerged more compassionate—and more exacting.

4. LEADING WITHOUT THE OLD CRUTCHES

Before the accident, I led with velocity: fast recall, rapid synthesis, constant responsiveness. But leadership isn't speed alone.

As my cognitive profile has shifted, so has my leadership style. I'm more deliberate with attention, less invested in performative **productivity**, and more disciplined about what truly matters. Coherence now outweighs visibility. Quality outranks quantity.

I wondered how this would be perceived. Would clients read evolution as instability? Would investors mistake recalibration for retreat?

But this is me now. And this model—with clearer structures, tighter delegation, and honest boundaries—works. When I stopped forcing myself into a mold that no longer fit, my output didn't vanish. It was reorganized.

The process isn't neat. Certain leadership assumptions only reveal themselves under sustained load. I'm still inside that experiment—observing which habits survive constraint and which quietly fail when they're no longer propped up by stamina.

Those results aren't in yet.

Natanya Wachtel is the founder and chief strategy officer of New Solutions Network.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Natanya Wachtel builds human-scale systems inside world-scale industries. She operates at the intersection of behavioral science, media, emerging technology, and public-benefit innovation—where storytelling becomes infrastructure and disruption becomes a tool for restoration, not chaos **More**

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