



Work and Wellbeing

Burnout Contagion: Managing and Reducing Socially-Transmitted Burnout

CQ Dossier | Evidence-based Management

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Executive summary

Burnout is, largely, a social phenomenon. Many of the causes of burnout are social: when an organization is run in an unjust fashion, conflict is high, and employer demands are difficult to meet, employees are at a greater risk of burning out (Oberle et al, 2016). Burnout is also exhibited in social terms: burned out employees are more disagreeable, apathetic, and jaded. The diminished performance of a burned out employee can create more conflict and disappointment within their workplace, negatively impacting those around them (Kim et al, 2017).

Because burnout is such a social phenomenon, it can be spread through social channels (Dunford et al, 2014). The “burnout contagion effect” is evident when several employees within a team or department exhibit symptoms of burnout, or when burnout is spread from one employee to several others. Sometimes, burnout contagion occurs slowly, hopping from one dissatisfied employee to another; in some cases, though, burnout explodes into a wildfire of dejection, bitterness, and negative outcomes (Salyers et al, 2017).

Social psychological research has documented the origins and risk factors for burnout contagion effects, and has described in detail the patterns through which burnout spreads. In addition, research has identified several steps that managers may take to snuff out the fire of discontent, and repair employee relationships. This dossier will review the current state of scientific knowledge on these subjects, with an eye toward making recommendations that managers can put into action.

How does burnout spread?

Individual transmission. At times, burnout spreads from one employee to another, the way a cold or flu may be passed around a workplace. A burned out employee’s negativity, diminished productivity, and psychological unwellness may set a negative example for their peers and subordinates (Chullen, 2014). Their negativity may serve as a social model, and influence how others feel and think directly (Oberle et al, 2016). The individual impact of a burned out employee can also be indirect; since burned out employees tend to be low-performing, their poor quality of work may inconvenience

people around them, or may require co-workers to increase their efforts, to “pick up the slack” (Salayers et al, 2017). These co-workers may, in turn, develop burnout of their own, and pass it to their nearby colleagues.

Group transmission. Burnout can also spread rapidly, across an entire department, office, or company (Dunford et al, 2014). This type of burnout contagion effect typically occurs following some precipitating event, such as mass layoffs, budget cuts, policy changes or the introduction of a new manager (Gill et al, 2017). In the wake of threatening changes, employees may experience fear and confusion, or frustration and anger. When these difficult feelings are not addressed by an unresponsive organization, burnout may develop and engulf numerous people who are in close contact with one another (Kim et al, 2017). Conversations in which employees repeatedly complain, exchange gossip, or exaggerate wrongdoing may cause burnout to increase in intensity or in scope.

Catching fire: events that spread burnout

Restructuring. When organizations restructure, there is often some redundancy in positions. Employees may perceive, or genuinely experience, a risk to their jobs. This risk can feel overwhelming, and outside of an employee’s control (Greenglass & Burke, 2016). Changes in how work is done may also follow this restructuring, causing more confusion. When a transition is not managed in a gradual, clearly communicated fashion, employees are particularly likely to feel undervalued, out of the loop, and demotivated. This can cause group transmission of burnout, and diminished productivity is a frequent result.

New management. Most employees view new management with some degree of suspicion. When a new individual ascends to a position of power within an organization, workers may experience increased scrutiny, new work standards, new rules, and more negative consequences (Boamah et al, 2017). At times, individuals who are moved into new leadership positions do not receive adequate support or briefing on the organizations current projects; this can lead to employees’ time being wasted with redundant communications. New leadership policies can be hard to keep track of, and may not be preferable to the policies that employees had grown accustomed to. Due

to all these factors, newly hired (or newly promoted) managers must be very proactive about the avoidance of burnout.

Layoffs, firings, and negative consequences. Most humans are loss averse – they experience a loss more intensely than they appreciate a gain. Thus, when employees have to worry about losing their jobs or losing desired benefits, they tend to be deeply demotivated and demoralized (Vifladt et al, 2016). At times, cutting back is a necessity within an organization; however, managers must be aware that eliminating positions or cutting back on payment and benefits will be negatively received by workers. Effective managers will be up-front about the extent of cuts, and the rationale for them; they should allow for open communication about negative feelings. Frank, respectful discussions that honor employees' fears can go a long way in preventing burnout contagion.

Cooling tensions: reducing the impact of burnout

Consult with employees. As much as is possible within your organization, let employees in on the decision-making process. If your organization is about to restructure, ask your team about their reactions and concerns. They may be able to identify problems that you are unaware of, and which can be addressed prior to the restructure, preventing a crisis. When new management is instituted, consider allowing employees to meet with the prospective hires and to familiarize themselves with their work. When individuals have a sense of control over difficult circumstances, they are less likely to burn out in response to them (Chullen, 2014; Greenglass & Burke, 2016).

Honor negative feelings. As a manager, you may feel tempted to brush employees' feelings under the rug, to maintain morale and reduce conflict. However, suppression of emotions can have a rebound effect: hurt feelings, frustrations, and anger can come rushing back stronger than ever. Employees can also feel disrespected when their emotions are downplayed (Petitta et al, 2017). To avoid this, listen to employees when they are angry, sad, or frightened by developments. Do not take offense if they express critical reactions. Listen actively, and indicate that you understand why they are concerned. Your goal should not be to eliminate bad feelings; by legitimizing them, you can help employees process them and move forward.

Key take-aways

- Burnout can spread from one employee to another; negative, unmotivated employees tend to be a negative influence on others around them
- Burnout can also spread across an organization rapidly, particularly when a major disappointment strikes the workplace
- Employees are particularly susceptible to burnout in times of change; new management, layoffs, and restructurings are especially prominent risk factors
- To prevent burnout, communicate with employees about key decisions, and let them in on the process
- Do not attempt to stifle all criticism and negative feelings – allow your employees to express their concerns, and you can work to prevent burnout

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