



Work and Wellbeing

Lighting the Match: Causes of Burnout in an Organization

CQ Dossier | Evidence-based Management

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Executive summary

Burnout is the enemy of productivity, collaboration, and morale (Auh et al, 2016). When an employee is experiencing burnout, they report low motivation, low investment in their organization's goals, and an outlook that is pessimistic and grim. Burned out employees are more likely to be absent, waste time at the workplace, make avoidable errors in their work duties, and generate conflict among their co-workers (Avanzi et al, 2015). On the employee's side of things, burnout is miserable to experience, and is often associated with depression, physical exhaustion, anxiety, and numbness.

Managers should always be on the lookout for organizational factors that could create burnout. It may be tempting, at times, to see burnout as a sign of personal failure – but in nearly every observed instance, burnout has external, situational causes and contributing factors that can be addressed (Angelo & Chambel, 2015). No employee wants to exhibit low motivation, diminished performance, and a negative attitude – and usually, these large, impactful signs of burnout only follow after weeks or months of institutional “warning signs”.

So, what can you do as a manager to nip burnout in the bud, before it negatively affects productivity and work quality? Look for these three surefire signs that burnout is on your horizon: employee stress, employee work, and structural dysfunction (Mo & Shi, 2017). These can be thought of sufficient, but not necessary conditions: all three are not required for burnout to develop. Burnout can become evident when even one of these three factors is at work in your organization.

Stress

The role stress plays in human productivity is paradoxical. On one hand, some degree of anxiety and stress is necessary for people to experience motivation. Stress helped keep our early ancestors alive, by alerting them to predators and driving them to amass resources and defend themselves. Today, stress can help individuals identify priorities, sense threat, and stay on-task. Positive stress, sometimes called eustress, can also add stimulation and excitement to life (Angelo & Chambel, 2015). Many employees can recall times when working to meet a pressing deadline or respond to a crisis was

exhilarating, for example. A manager's goal, therefore, should never be to eradicate all stress entirely.

Stress becomes a problem (and a risk factor for burnout) when it impedes individual performance. Where the line between "positive stress" and "negative stress" should be drawn is highly subjective; some employees thrive when held to a rigorous, high-stakes standard, while others buckle and fail. As a manager, it is your responsibility to be attuned to your employees' stress levels and their motivational needs (Avanzi et al, 2015). When an employee is given a goal to meet, does he complain, show dread, or seem physically agitated? When you make a team leader responsible for a new task, does she seem motivated and energized? Look, also, to physical symptoms of anxiety: overly stressed employees may sweat, get stomach aches, spend a lot of time in the bathroom, have a dry mouth, or miss work due to illness (Söderlund, 2017). If you see these signs of toxic stress in your employees, you need to withdraw some of the pressure.

Overwork

Long hours and a lack of breaks can lead to burnout very quickly. When employees lose sleep due to long work hours, overnights, or just stress, their emotional and physical resolve begins to wear down. This can even be the case when employees are allowed to go home, but expected to remain "plugged in" to their employer digitally, for extended periods (Ter Hoeven et al, 2016). Even the immune system becomes dysfunctional when stress and exhaustion are high. Burnout is also a likely outcome if your demands prevent employees from taking full lunch hours or utilizing their breaks, or if days off are withheld repeatedly (Grossi et al, 2015).

Research suggests that the average person can only operate at their highest level of productivity for between four and eight hours a day; most people cannot place full attention and energy into every task, at all times. Thus, it is your duty as a manager to set appropriate expectations, and assign tasks in such a way that no one is drained. You can also address burnout by correcting for periods of overwork by becoming briefly more lenient and slow-paced. Deadlines and late nights might occasionally be inevitable, but they should never be your workplace's primary tool. Show respect for

your employees' time, and realism about the needs of the human body and mind, and you will be rewarded with a much lower burnout rate, and much higher employee retention (Mo & Shi, 2017).

Structural Problems

Organizational dysfunction, disorganization, and injustice are all leading predictors of burnout. Managers who are seeking to avoid burnout must remain vigilant in looking out for, and addressing, these factors. Each one can contribute to employees' sense that their work does not matter, their presence in the organization is not valued, and that their position is under threat.

Common symptoms of organizational dysfunction include: employee apathy, jaded attitudes, [communications](#) problems, missed deadlines, and sloppy mistakes. If two departments do not effectively communicate with one another due to poor organization, broken communication tools, or political infighting, the risk of burnout is heightened (Ter Hoeven et al, 2016). Organizational dysfunction can also occur when there is an emphasis placed on the hierarchy: abuses of power and signs of disrespect are especially dispiriting and demotivating to employees.

Furthermore, when employees perceive that they are being judged or evaluated using unfair methods, they are apt to see their work as meaningless, their employers as inept, and their position within the organization as insecure (Herr et al, 2016). To avoid this, make sure you are utterly transparent about how performance is monitored, what tools are used to score productivity, and how each of those scores is calculated. Be open to reasonable critiques of evaluation processes. If employees are not receiving credit for the work they do, or are not receiving fair compensation, they will tend to self-sabotage, diminish productivity, or generate conflict as a result.

Broadly speaking, a manager can reduce the organization-wide burnout risk by attending actively to employees' concerns (Mo & Shi, 2017). Make yourself available to your employees, and be receptive to suggestions and airings of frustrations, no matter how they are worded. Lower-level employees may have first-hand knowledge of the flaws in work procedures, or areas that require new investment. By listening to your

team and incorporating their suggestions, you will increase their sense of organizational fairness, which has been found consistently to lower burnout risk (Herr et al, 2016).

Key take-aways

- Burnout is defined by diminished productivity, apathy, and resentment
- High levels of negative stress can lead to burnout in individual employees
- Overwork, and lack of appropriate breaks, can exhaust employees and predispose them to burnout
- When an organization is dysfunctional, conflict-ridden, and disorganized, the risk of burnout is high
- Managers can reduce the risk of burnout by having meaningful, responsive relationships with lower-level employees

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