Burnout: The Latest Major Health Crisis to Affect the Workplace

Burnout is considered a major health crisis in the U.S. workforce, leading to reduced job engagement, lower productivity, more frequent or extended sick leave, occupational changes and even permanent withdrawal from work. Studies show more than 1 in 5 workers experience feelings of burnout[1], figures that lead to an estimated cost of more than $125 billion in health care spending every year[2]. Moreover, burnout has been associated with increased health risks, including heart disease and type 2 diabetes[3].

What is burnout?

Burnout is an occupational phenomenon caused by chronic job stress that leads to feelings of emotional exhaustion, indifference towards one's work and an absence of value or achievement in the workplace.

Three main characteristics of burnout:

- Emotional exhaustion or feelings of fatigue caused by work
- Depersonalization, unsympathetic or impersonal response, and distant attitude toward one's job and recipients of one's service, care, treatment or instruction
- Professional efficacy, feelings of incompetence, and lack of successful achievement and value in one's work

> # One way to help combat work overload is to implement brief break periods (10-15 min) at regular intervals (every 90-120 min) throughout the day to renew mental resources for an overall higher and more sustained level of productivity.

What causes burnout?

Six main risk factors[4-5] contribute to burnout, including workload, control, reward, community, fairness and values. Interestingly, effective managers can positively navigate these factors[6] and increase employee value, level of engagement and productivity. Work overload stems from feelings that an individual does not have the capacity or resources to meet job demands.

Perceived control over job-related decisions is another factor that contributes to burnout. Managers that promote independent thinking and decision-making can facilitate employee engagement by conveying feelings of trust and value. People are more naturally engaged and productive when they feel their opinions matter.

Similarly, reward and recognition of hard work and achievement reduces vulnerability to burnout by building trust, emotional security and a sense of impact. Recognition attaches value to a person's actions and communicates appreciation of that person. It helps to confirm or validate an employee's competency, and conversely, the lack of recognition could imply inadequacy.

A supportive and inclusive community is also important to help prevent burnout. This occurs when a person feels secure, comfortable and 'fits in 'with their co-workers. When employees feel surrounded by unresolved conflict, a lack of job security or uncomfortable interacting with their coworkers, they gradually develop feelings

of anxiety, isolation and loneliness. This feeling can even permeate into their personal lives. As a result, these individuals are not as engaged or productive in their work.

Fairness is also a key part of effective work environments. Employees should feel that company and managerial decisions are based on logic and fairness. It also helps if managers explain their rationale behind big decisions. This transparency helps promote security, trust and inclusiveness.

Lastly, value alignment plays an important role in protecting against burnout. It is important that organizational values align with personal values to reinforce feelings of value and meaning to the role itself. When personal values align with work culture, employees feel more committed to the job and more engaged and productive in their work.

How can you help prevent employee burnout?

Managers can have a major impact in helping to reduce employee burnout.[7][8] Here are some key questions to ask when evaluating your organization, your management style, and your employees. This starts with an open dialogue with employees.

- Are their job expectations in line with management?
- Does the person feel that their workload is fair and balanced?
- Does the person feel valued as an individual?
- Does the person receive regular feedback, including rewards and recognition for hard work and achievements, and recommendations on how to improve and grow as a person and professional?
- Do performance work measures inspire them to improve?
- Does the person feel that the workplace culture is healthy?
- Are there policies in place to address unresolved conflicts?
- Does leadership promote inclusiveness, fairness and teamwork?
- Do employees feel listened to or are there opportunities to voice their opinions?
- Do employees feel involved in decision processes?
- Does the person feel their work is in line with their values and motivations?
- Do employees believe that their work has significance?

All these questions will help gauge an employee's risk for burnout. If they answer no, find out what support they need from their organization and what help you can provide.

For other information or resources on burnout in the workplace:

Recent Gallup articles[7][8] provide excellent information and recommendations for executives, managers, and human resource professionals on how to reduce burnout in employee populations. There are also several validated surveys that assess burnout, including the Maslach Burnout Inventory – General Survey (MBI-GS), Bergen Burnout Inventory and the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale.

Remember, that while burnout is becoming more prevalent, it can largely be prevented through small changes in management style and cultivating a strong workplace support system. Try some to implement some of these tips and create a happier, healthier and more productive workplace.

References
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