

Vitality

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Recognizing and preventing burnout

Managers see it everyday: enthusiastic high achievers slowly losing their motivation, productivity and creativity and becoming cynical, indifferent, and even angry. Years of long hours, heavy workloads and high expectations have taken their toll. They're burned out. And that can also take a toll on your team.¹

More than 3,400,000 Canadian workers are burned out.² They're disillusioned, cynical, indifferent, exhausted, and fed up with everything. They're working but just "going through the motions."

And this is costing companies. A 2013 survey³ by Kronos Incorporated found that 54 percent of employed Canadians admitted that they have called in sick to avoid going to work. And the majority of those – 65 percent – said it was because they felt stressed or burned out. It's no wonder absenteeism rates are on the rise.⁴

Literally millions of Canadians workers are burning out and their employers are footing the bill for lost time and reduced productivity. It is important that managers recognize the warning signs of impending burnout in their team members – and themselves – in order to maintain an engaged, productive and positive team.



Burnout costs companies in other ways, including:

- Lowered productivity
- Increased errors
- Poor customer service
- More interpersonal conflicts
- Higher rates of short- and long-term disability leaves
- Lowered morale as other workers pick up the slack
- Increased turnover

What Is Burnout?

The late German-American psychologist Herbert Freudenberger first coined the term “burnout” in his 1974 book, *Burnout: The High Cost of High Achievement*. He defined it as “the extinction of motivation or incentive, especially where one’s devotion to a cause or relationship fails to produce the desired results.”

Freudenberger saw this happening to successful, ambitious men and women who had worked incredibly hard for years and were suddenly unable to perform well or do more than the bare minimum. These formerly driven perfectionists were barely functioning.

While high achievers are especially vulnerable, everyone is susceptible to burnout. However, people don’t always recognize the early warning signs because burnout creeps up on them slowly.⁵ But the unhappiness and disengagement it causes not only threatens their jobs, relationships, and health, but the productivity and morale of co-workers forced to assume extra work and tolerate negative behavior and attitudes.

Managers play an important role in keeping their

employees engaged and motivated by recognizing the early warning signs of burnout and encouraging employees make needed changes – before irreparable damage is done to their professional and personal lives.

What causes job burnout?

There are many causes of job burnout. While 40 percent of people attribute their burnout to individual factors, 60 percent cite organizational factors.⁶

The two most frequently cited organizational factors are feeling overworked and under appreciated over an extended period of time. Other factors include:

- **Having little or no control** or input into the decisions that affect your job, such as workload, assignments or schedule.⁷
- **An unhealthy work workplace.** Bullying, micromanaging, conflicts, a lack of managerial support and a negative work environment play a big role in any employee’s long-term engagement and performance.⁸
- **Being in the wrong job.** It becomes increasingly stressful doing a job that you find boring or that doesn’t fully take advantage of your skills and/or experience.⁹
- **Unpredictable workloads.** A job that bounces between monotonous and frenetic and back again can become exhausting and increasingly stressful, especially when there is no predictability.¹⁰
- **Conflicting values.** When your personal values are different from those of the organization, it’s only a matter of time before you emotionally disengage.¹¹
- **Lack of work-life balance.** If people have no time to recharge their energy levels and creativity with family, friends, and pastimes, they will soon become exhausted, resentful and angry.¹²
- **Not meeting individual needs.** Working long hours and neglecting healthy eating, regular exercise and sleep tax both body and mind. In addition, people with demanding jobs and home lives also tend to forget to take breaks. Taking regular vacations doesn’t detract from productivity, quite the opposite. You are more likely to return home refreshed and revitalized.¹³



Preventing burnout on your team

As a manager, you play a huge role in creating a work environment in which employees have the resources and support they need to be productive and effective and where they feel valued. This can include:

- **Being aware of workload** and assigning tasks accordingly. Work should challenge, not overwhelm.¹⁴
- **Not setting expectations too high.** Yes, you want your team to excel, but at what cost? Remember that not everyone has the same energy levels, attitudes, style of working or ambitions.¹⁵
- **Stay connected to your team.** When someone expresses frustration or concern, address it immediately. Make sure the individual knows you are taking appropriate action.¹⁶
- **Respecting work-life balance.** Not everyone lives to work. Most people will work extra hours when called for, but will resent having to do so as part of a normal work week. Respect the fact that people have personal obligations and are not slacking off if they leave on time.¹⁷
- **Encouraging regular breaks.** Unless absolutely necessary, discourage employees from working through lunch and make sure they take regular breaks. Also encourage people to use their vacation time. Dedication to the job is admirable, but not if it causes an employee to become less productive.¹⁸
- **Supporting aspirations.** Is each member of your team doing work they enjoy or that challenges them? Are newly acquired skills being utilized? Are they bored? Try to understand and support each person's career goals.¹⁹
- **Supporting training and development.** Employees who feel they are going nowhere or that their employer doesn't care about their future will either burn out or leave. Recommend team members for interdepartmental projects or committees and support any reasonable training requests. Also make sure your employees have the training they need to perform changing job functions.²⁰
- **Promoting a healthy workplace.** Have a no-tolerance approach to bullying or any other disrespectful, malicious or non-cooperative behaviour.²¹

Are you at risk of job burnout?

No one is immune to burn out – including managers and senior leaders. The same reasons they scaled the corporate ladder – their drive, willingness to put in long hours and assume crushing workloads, and meeting the constant pressure to excel – are the same reasons they burn out. A Harvard Medical School Study found that some 96 percent of senior leaders feel somewhat burned out, and a third described it as extreme.²⁵

If you experience any of the following symptoms²⁶, you may be burning out.

- A negative and/or critical attitude at work
 - Losing interest in your work
 - Having trouble sleeping
 - Reluctance going to work
 - Lowered productivity and effectiveness
 - Feeling your work has little or no meaning or doesn't make a difference
 - Feeling unrecognized
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- **Giving feedback.** Take time with each employee to provide constructive feedback. We all like encouragement and support and want to know when we're doing well. When employees know a manager has their best interests at heart, they will listen to constructive criticism and advice.²²
 - **Rewarding and recognizing.** This doesn't mean just bonuses, awards and/or promotions. A simple "Great job" or an email praising excellent performances can help employees feel valued and appreciated.²³
 - **Laughing.** Having a team of positive people who can see the humour in situations will contribute to a happy, productive work environment for everyone. Taking life too seriously is a sure way to burn out.²⁴

- **Educating.** Provide information about burnout and how employees can prevent it. Consider having your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provider conduct workshops where people can ask questions and discuss the issue.

Recovering from burnout

If you feel you're starting to burn out, or think you're already burned out, there are ways to restore your enthusiasm, energy and effectiveness.

- **Take a vacation.** Don't take your work with you. Unplug your Smartphone, tablet or laptop and focus on relaxing and re-energizing.²⁷
- **Reevaluate your career.** Burnout can occur when your work doesn't meet your professional and/or personal needs and goals. Have you hit a ceiling? Are you bored? Have you stopped learning and developing? Is it time to consider other opportunities or positions?²⁸
- **Develop a work-life balance.** Your personal life should be as rich and satisfying as your professional life. If it's not, find something that you enjoy and spend time doing it – volunteer activities, spending time with children or grandchildren, social engagements, sports or fitness pursuits, a hobby. Set boundaries with your personal life. Turn off your work phone and don't check your e-mail.²⁹
- **Take care of yourself.** It's probable that your own health and wellbeing has taken a back seat to the demands of work. Focus on a healthy lifestyle – a nutritious diet, regular exercise and at least eight hours of sleep a night. If smoking, prescription medication, too much alcohol or other unhealthy behaviors have been part of how you've coped with stress, contact your Employee Assistance Program for help.³⁰

However, just as it took time to become burned out, it can take time to recover. So be patient with yourself.

A final word

Burnout is not only the slow killer of productivity, but of careers. The problem for managers is that some employees may not even realize they're burning out before it's too late. Others may be reluctant to share their feelings with their direct report. But if the productivity and efficiency of a top performer starts to slip, be sure to have a conversation with him or her to determine if stress levels and workload have become unmanageable and how you can help reignite your employee's engagement, commitment and drive.

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