

5 Steps You Must Take Right Now to Help Your Burnt Out Employee



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Introduction To Burnout and Stress

- The Scope of Burnout And Stress
 - Over half the global workforce report they are closer to burnout today than five years ago.ⁱ
 - The American Psychological Association says 75% of the population experiences frequent stress.ⁱⁱ
 - According to a 2013 Wall Street Journal report, Harvard Medical school found 96% of chief executive officers feel somewhat burnt out, with one third feeling extreme burnout.ⁱⁱⁱ
- The Cost of Burnout and Stress In The Workplace and Elsewhere
 - Stress costs “U.S. businesses an estimated \$300 billion per year through absenteeism, diminished productivity, employee turnover and direct medical, legal and insurance fees.”^{iv}
 - Insurance company data shows stress related claims cost nearly twice as much as non-stress related claims, driving up insurance costs for everyone.^v
 - Research estimates that 60 to 90% of all doctor’s visits are the result of stress, thus being a chief driver of rising health care costs.^{vi}
 - Stress has also been shown to be far more dangerous to our health than cigarette smoking or high cholesterol foods according to a 20-year study by the University of London.^{vii}

How To Identify Employee Burnout

- What Is Burnout And What Is Not Burnout?
 - American psychologist Herbert Freudenberger, in describing what was happening amongst doctors and nurses in 1974, defined ‘burnout’ as “the extinction of motivation or incentive, especially where one's devotion to a cause or relationship fails to produce the desired results.”^{viii}
 - Almost 40 years later burnout has expanded into every workplace and there is no accepted definition or diagnosis.
 - The only research-based, workplace related definition of burnout comes from the work of Jesús Montero-Marín and his colleagues. In 2010, they identified three types of burnout, all of which have a different effect on our work and depend on the dedication of the

employee to their work.^{ix} The types are frenetic, under-challenged, and worn-out.

- *What is NOT Burnout*
 - Burnout is not a medical condition.^x
 - Burnout is not depression.
 - Burnout is not limited to high-stress or high-level jobs. Burnout can occur in any job or no job at all.
 - Burnout is not limited to Type-A personalities.
 - Burnout does not present in the same way for everyone.
 - Burnout is not only the result of overwork.
- *What is Burnout*
 - Burnout is a “person’s response to **chronic** work-related stress and is an attempt to adapt to or protect oneself from it”.^{xi}
 - Burnout occurs when the employee uses “ineffective coping strategies to try to protect themselves from work-related stress.”
 - Burnout for the “frenetic” type occurs when the employee works to the point of exhaustion.
 - Burnout for the “under-challenged” type occurs when the employee is coping with monotonous and unstimulating conditions.
 - Burnout for the “worn-out” type occurs when the employee gives up in the face of stress.
- Burnout’s Impact On Morale and Productivity
 - Burnout can lead to multi-tasking which has been shown to reduce productivity and efficiency.^{xii}
 - Burnout reduces focus and inhibits creative thinking.^{xiii}
 - A worn-out team member can drag a team’s morale down as they refuse to pull their weight and become inefficient.
 - A frenetic team member can alienate team members.
 - An under-challenged team member might pull the team down with their cynicism.

- Common Signs Of Burnout^{xiv}
 - Frenetic burnout can be seen when an employee is:
 - Working long hours, especially with the belief that they will be rewarded for their hard work. This may or may not be true.
 - Looking for the next success, not just in projects but in their career.
 - Overloaded yet unable to say no to new tasks or projects.
 - Ambitious.
 - Often exhausted.
 - “Self-medicating” to boost energy, e.g., unusually high caffeine consumption or interest in the latest “energy-boosting” supplements.
 - Employee is feeling they are sacrificing health and/or personal life in exchange for work success.
 - Under-challenged burnout can be seen when an employee is:
 - Working on monotonous tasks or in an unstimulating environment.
 - Not satisfied with work even when they have done a good job.
 - In different to circumstances.
 - Bored because they are experiencing work as routine.
 - Lacking in personal development because they aren’t satisfied with their talents going unacknowledged.
 - Giving up or unmotivated.
 - Indifferent in that they work superficially and without interest.
 - Employee expresses a desire for or complains about a lack of personal growth experiences or opportunities.
 - Employee desires to take on other jobs where they can better develop their skills, but are frequently denied those opportunities.
 - Employee is highly cynical.
 - Worn-out burnout can be seen when an employee is:
 - Complaining about lack of acknowledgement or in contrast about others being acknowledge.
 - Easily frustrated by stressful situations.

- Demonstrating or complaining about lack of control in their work.
- Disruptive with negativity and complaining.
- Disengaged or has lost interest in work.
- Disregarding the responsibilities of their position.
- Giving up when the job gets hard.

How To Go Beyond EAPs and Really Help Employees Overcome Burnout

- How To Approach An Employee About Burnout
 - Traditional manners and employee relations principles have taught us not to pry into our employee's personal matters. The idea of talking to an employee about a potential burnout issue might feel like stepping over a forbidden boundary.
 - Transparency is a buzzword that has been catching on. With employees demanding more transparency in the workplace, it also means they are more open to being transparent themselves.
 - Despite trends toward transparency, gauge your relationship with each individual before having a "burnout conversation."
 - *A Word of Caution – Opening The Can Of Worms:*
 - Having a burnout conversation can be a tale of "careful what you ask for." When opening the door to discuss what might be burning your employee out, recognize that you will have to address what you discover. Be prepared to act upon the conversation.
 - **Health issue.** If your employee reveals a previously undisclosed health issue that has been stressing them out, be prepared to involve your human resources department and explore the employee's need for an accommodation or medical leave.
 - **Family issue.** If the source of your employee's burnout is a pressing family issue, it may or may not qualify for family leave. Again, be prepared to involve your human resources department to discuss options.

- Do the pros outweigh the cons? Despite the legal challenges a burnout conversation might create, burying your head in the sand about an employee's burnout is a short-term solution. If the employee is a valued member of the team you would hate to lose, having the conversation can be worth the risk.
 - A burnout conversation can result in improved productivity, engagement, team work, morale and loyalty. Only you can determine if having the conversation is worth the risk.
- Roadmap for a Burnout Conversation
 - **Clarity:**
 - Before approaching an employee about possible burnout, spend time to get clear about your purpose for having the conversation.
 - Burnout changes the behaviors and/or performance of a typically valuable employee. You would not have a burnout conversation with a chronically poor performer. Burnout conversations are reserved for when you see an unexpected change in an employee's performance, conduct, attitude or behavior.
 - Possible reasons to have a burnout conversation are when the following suddenly change:
 - Performance
 - Productivity
 - Morale
 - Attitude
 - Absenteeism
 - Spend time before the conversation to get clear with yourself why you think the employee seems burnt out and what you want to have happen as a result of the conversation.
 - Do you want to make sure the employee is going to stay?
 - Do you want to make sure a performance mishap doesn't become a bigger issue?

- Are you genuinely concerned about the welfare of the employee and don't want to see them suffer?
 - Do you want to make your star performer isn't bring the rest of the team down?
- **Build trust with truth.**
 - If you never discuss anything but work with your employees, the burnout conversation will be particularly awkward for both of you. You must first build some trust, especially if personal conversations are not the norm.
 - Let the employee know they are not in trouble – if that is true.
 - Let the employee know why and what you want to discuss. Your opening will be important to establish trust. For example,
 - “Sam I know you're a dedicated team member and we've got a lot of work right now. I also know we don't really talk about anything but work, but I'm concerned about you. I've noticed you're working really long hours lately, you look tired and you keep volunteering for projects. I wanted to make sure everything is ok and you're not burning yourself out.”
- **Be specific.**
 - Relay your observations of burnout and be as specific as possible.
 - If you have identified any of the behaviors described above, let them know.
 - “I noticed you're being more cynical than usual.”
 - “I've heard you venting a lot about other team members getting plum projects.”

- **Be vulnerable and empathetic.**
 - Let's face it, we have all likely experienced burnout at some point. Let your employees know that you've been there and that you can relate.
 - Also let employees know you are worried about them.
- **Listen.**
 - Once you have open the door on burnout, sit back and let the employee walk through it. At this point, your job is to listen.
 - Be sure to listen for any of the legal issues discussed above and let your human resources department know if any red flags were present.
- **Co-create a solution.**
 - Remember that burnout is the result of a lack of coping strategies. Do not be concerned that you are not a psychologist. You know enough to work with the employee to create a solution. That solution may be to talk with a trained professional. But more often, the simple act of you offering to discuss the problem and help them get to a solution will be enough.
 - Montero-Marín's research shows that simply talking about the issue can be a sufficient coping skill. Sometimes that discussion might be an emotional venting or a true problem solving discussion.
 - So often burnout results from feelings of being out of control. By co-creating a solution with the employee, you give them some control back over their work and career.
 - Never offer something you cannot deliver upon. If you cannot afford to have them take next week off, do not offer it. But do your best to find solution that helps you both get what you need.
 - Some ideas for helping employees overcome burnout include:
 - personal development tools, such as mindfulness training
 - taking time for exercise or other renewal activities. Walking meetings are a great option.

- building buffer time into deliverables calendars to allow time for renewal.
- What if the employee says nothing is wrong?
 - Unless their behavior is causing performance problems, there is not much you can do except reinforce that if there is a problem they can come speak with you.
- **Create A Burnout Resistant Mindset – More On Co-Creating Solutions**
 - The antidote to burnout is creating balance versus sacrifice, development versus stagnation and utilization versus neglect. Below is a model to help an employee build a burnout resistant mindset.
 - Step 1: Build curiosity
 - Regardless of the type of burnout an employee is experiencing, exercising an employee's curiosity muscle can help bring them back to life.
 - Have them reflect on the things they love to do, even if they are not work related.
 - Some questions to ask:
 - If you could do anything you wanted here, what would you would be interested?
 - Describe a time when you were most energized while working?
 - If you didn't have to work, what would you love to do?
 - Step 2: Experiment
 - Have the employee experiment with their interests. If necessary, allow them to dedicate a few hours a week to things they are curious about.
 - Step 3: Reframe problems
 - Often times the "problem" an employee has that is leading to their burnout is not the real problem. Have them go deeper than the surface answer of "there aren't any opportunities here."

- Step 4: Radical collaboration
 - Connect the employee with each other.
 - In a 2015 study at the Mayo clinic with burnt out physicians, they found that connecting employees helped reduce burnout.^{xv} The program consisted of bringing together groups of 6-8 employees for meals once every two weeks, paid by the employer. Participants were required to participate in a discussion for part of the meal time. The topics included: work-life balance, medical mistakes, meaning at work, and resiliency.
- **Connect Employees To Their Purpose**
 - We miss a huge opportunity by seeing our employees only as company assets to be leveraged. Every human has a purpose on earth and when they connect to it, burn out is never a factor. If you can connect your employees to their purpose, you have accomplished not only a noble feat, but also gained an engaged and purpose driven employee.
 - When the company purpose and the employee purpose align employee morale, engagement and productivity rise.
 - Connecting your employees to their purpose should happen throughout the employee life cycle.
 - Begin with the interview.
 - During the interview, ask the employee why they want to work at your company. This allows you to see if their mission and the company's mission are aligned. If an employee is interested because they simply want a job, they are at greater risk for burnout. But if they see their purpose in your company's mission, they will have greater resilience and loyalty and be a better cultural fit.
 - Do not be afraid to discuss an employee's purpose during an interview. You are hiring not only knowledge, skills and abilities, but an energetic being who will either infuse or rob your work environment of its productive energy.
 - Continue to help employees pursue their purpose until they leave.
 - Understanding ones purpose is a process of constant reflection. Questions for you to explore with yourself and your employees include:

- Why do I work?
- What is the purpose of work?
- What does work mean to me?
- What defines good work?
- What makes work worthwhile?
- What does money have to do with work?
- What does fulfillment have to do with work?
- What do I enjoy doing?
- What gives me the most energy?
- What is important in my life?
- For those who are burnout (especially the frenetic), it's also important to explore the question of work-life integration:
 - Where do your views on work and life complement one another? Where do they clash?
 - Does one drive the other? How?
- If exploring purpose with your employees feels awkward, start slow. It can be as simple as asking "what did you most enjoy about work this week" during your weekly 1-1 meeting. Then follow up with "would you like to do more of that" (assuming they did not answer with "lunch").
- The point of talking about purpose with your employees is ultimately two-fold
 - Discussing purpose humanizes the workplace.
 - At the end of the day, we work to accomplish a goal and receive remuneration. That does not mean, however, that work has to be cold, antiseptic and inhuman. No one wants to work for the untransformed Ebenezer Scrooge.
 - Humanizing the workplace – whether by knowing the name of our employee's spouse or by knowing their purpose for work – we create connections that build trust, loyalty, engagement and results.
 - Discussing purpose helps you develop your employees wisely.
 - A growing organization grows more effectively and efficiently by growing its people. If you grow an employee into a position that is not aligned with their purpose, you have wasted your money.

- An employee's purpose should be part of your development discussions to ensure you are spending your dollars wisely and creating realistic succession plans.
- **Do Not Ignore Employee Assistance Programs.**
 - Employee Assistance Programs are valuable in addressing burnout. The professionals your employee can access through those programs can help your employees gain the coping skills they need. However they are not enough.
 - Don't discount the value of an employee assistance program in helping employees with burnout. Good programs include counseling, coaching, stress management, as well legal and elder-care advice.
 - Unfortunately, EAP utilization rates are about 3%.^{xvi}
 - Because burnout is so misunderstood, even by those suffering from it, it is unlikely an individual will think to reach out to your EAP for help.
 - Improve your EAP utilization.
 - Simple internal marketing campaigns can increase EAP usage, even amongst the burnt out.
 - Consider running a series in your regular employee newsletter about the features of your EAP. Increased awareness will result in increased usage.
 - No matter how well advertised your EAP program is, however, do not rely solely on your EAP to address individual or wide-spread burnout. The simple act of connecting with your employees one to one can have a powerful effect on them.

How To Create A Burnout Resistant Workplace

- Burnout as a Skills Gap Issue
 - Burnout is a personal and workplace culture problem. On the personal side it's a matter of not having the coping skills. To build a burnout resistant workplace
 - There are several skills that we are never taught before becoming a working adult. Burnout coping and resilience skills fall in three categories, although can be a great deal of overlap: Intra-personal, Interpersonal and Purpose and Meaning

- Intra-personal

- Stress Management

- Stress management is a large topic and can mean many things. Here we are talking about the following
 - Learning to put things in perspective.
 - Self-care (see below).
 - Reduce exposure to stressors, i.e., work from home to avoid a stressful commute or change work hours; avoid contact with stressful people; reduce your obligations.
 - Pursue relaxing activities such as breathing exercises, yoga, tai chi, massage, watch a comedy, etc.
 - Connect with friends and/or make new friends
 - Get your feelings of burnout and stress out by journaling or talking to someone.

- Mindfulness

- Research shows that we spend almost 47% of our waking hours thinking about something other than what we are doing.^{xvii}
 - This disconnection from what we are doing can mean more errors, longer task time and detachment from the meaning of our work.
 - Mindfulness leads to greater focus, efficiency, problem solving as well as lower stress.
 - How to build mindfulness:
 - Breathing exercises
 - Single or mono task
 - Focus on priorities
 - Create email boundaries
 - Take one minute mindfulness breaks every hour
 - Reduce interruptions
 - Body scan

- Energy Management

- We are not only constrained by 24 hours a day, but by our physical and mental energy. Often times in throws of burnout, we are working against our energy limits and not doing anything to replenish our energy stores. We can deplete our energy faster than we can produce it.
- Energy management is a skill that builds an employee's capacity to perform at their peak.
- Training employees how to better manage their energy can boost a company's financial performance.^{xviii}
- Energy management consists of three areas of focus:
 - Physical energy
 - Physical energy comes from adequate nutrition, exercise and sleep.
 - Emotional Energy
 - Emotions impact our effectiveness at work. To boost emotional energy, start by becoming aware of the impact.
 - A simple strategy to build emotional resilience and energy is pause before reacting.
 - Expressing appreciation for others can also boost emotional energy as well as learning to change the stories we ourselves.
 - Mental Energy
 - Our brains function best when we do not multi-task.
 - Productivity and problem solving abilities begin to falter when we work for long stretches of time.
 - You can boost mental energy by:
 - Focusing on task at a time.
 - Taking breaks every 90 minutes.
 - Check email only a few times a day.

- Energy of Purpose and Meaning
 - Work can drain us all, especially if we are not using our strengths.
 - Work can also compete with other priorities of our life like family, volunteering and other pursuits.
 - To build energy of purpose and meaning:
 - Understand and use your strengths
 - Understand your priorities
 - Devote time and energy to your priorities
 - Live our values
- Time Management
 - Stress and burnout can be driven by our seeming lack of time to get all our work done. Then add all this stress management and self-care stuff on time, and it can make things worse. That's why time management is an essential skill for avoiding burnout.
 - It is important to know that there is no perfect time management system for everyone. People should experiment to find the system that works for them and use it.
 - Knowing what you value in life and work is at the core of making wise decisions about how to prioritize and use your time.
 - Much of today's time management challenges are really a problem of focus and distraction management.
 - When thinking of time management, think of these three components:
 - Clarify the priorities of the role instead of specific task priorities.

- Attention management skills versus time management skills, e.g., how to control distractions
 - Comprehensive workflow management to empower employees to make their own time management decisions.
- Self-Care
 - Self-care is another large subject. It will also look different for everyone.
 - The core idea behind self-care as a coping strategy is that when we are burnout we release basic activities such as exercise, healthy eating, and sleep that keep us engaged, energized and productive. Self-care is a tool that helps us refocus our priorities and perform our best.
 - Sample self-care activities:
 - A balanced, healthy diet with lots of fruits and vegetables.
 - Adequate sleep, typically 7-8 hours a night.
 - Movement of some sort. Whether dancing or running, movement keeps the body healthy and mind alert.
 - Spending time in nature.
 - Taking vacations.
 - Taking a walk.
 - Visiting with friends.
- Inter-personal
 - Speaking up with confidence
 - If you don't know how to say no, or live in constant fear of the consequences of saying no, you will burnout.
 - The inability to say no stems from a prior "bad experience" the employee needs to let go of.
 - Start by practicing saying no to small things to boost confidence.

- Reframe saying “no” as saying “yes” to their personal power and to something that will provide more energy.
- Life Igniting tips:
 - Say what you want to say.
 - Use positive language.
 - Heal any past experiences with saying no.
- Set boundaries
 - Some individuals suffer from a need to please everyone. The result is no boundaries whether it is a request to perform a task or a co-worker who holds them hostage, which can leave the employee feeling powerless.
 - The employee will benefit from embracing boundaries.
 - Reframe from saying “yes” to everything to “no” as a way to preserve energy and respect.
 - Life Igniting tips:
 - Develop healthy boundaries in and out of work the workplace.
 - Release the need to please everyone.
 - Become your own advocate.
- Collaborate don't compete
 - Burnout can grow from a need to prove ourselves right or worthy so we can get ahead.
 - The employee will become more resilient by letting go of doubts about their worth and work with others as colleagues instead of competitors.
 - Reframe from “I need to be better than others” to “I can accomplish more with the help of others.”
 - Life Igniting tips:
 - Look at the cost of winning at all costs.
 - Release the need for competition.
 - Recognize your self-worth.

- Purpose and meaning
 - Be in service
 - Being in service is the quickest way to get out of your own problems.
 - When burnt out, however, we often are not in a mental space to think we can be in service. We must resist the story that we cannot make a difference.
 - Reframe from “I have nothing to offer” to “any action, even a smile, can make a difference.”
 - Life Igniting tips:
 - Help others in and out of the workplace.
 - Recognize the preciousness of life.
 - Trust you can help others.
 - Move beyond finances
 - Certain types of burnout can occur when we value money over all else. To overcome burnout in these cases, we must examine our financial beliefs.
 - Reframe from “I won’t be happy, safe or successful until I have enough money” to “I can fulfill my financial needs *and* honor who I am.”
 - Life Igniting tips:
 - Learn what you want to do and honor it without letting money hold you back.
 - Heal your relationship with money.
 - Use your real talents
 - For some burnout types, there is a feeling of being disconnected from their strengths.
 - Resilience comes from recognizing, valuing and utilizing our strengths.
 - Reframe from fear of failure and inadequacy to believing in the value of your talents.
 - Life Igniting tips:
 - Know your talents and strengths.
 - Build self-confidence.

- **An Organizational Approach To Burnout Resistance**
 - Through training, coaching and EAP programs you can help employees learn the skills of burnout resilience. For employees to be successful in using those skills, they need an environment that honors the physical, emotional, mental and purpose needs of the employee. In short, employees need an environment where it is safe to create boundaries, manage their energy and use their strengths.
 - It is important to remember that stress is contagious.^{xix} A team, department or organization can be impacted by the stress of a few people. It is the role of leadership to step in and help those effected overcome and manage the stress to the entire group can get back on track.
 - On the flip side, well-being is also contagious.^{xx} This is great news because it means that fostering employee well-being creates burnout resistance.
 - An organizational approach to burnout resilience is a humane approach. An organization must recognize that its “most important asset” needs more than pay for performance and award programs to thrive and provide their best. This is a paradigm shift.
 - Recognize that the organization needs to honor and foster the use of coping strategies. This will require resistant leaders to trust the research that shows employee well-being is good for business.

- **Culture Trumps Strategy In The Long Run**
 - Make stress management a part of the organizational fabric
 - Improve communication and transparency
 - Provide relaxation opportunities
 - Yoga, meditation, tai chi
 - On site massage
 - Game rooms
 - Reduce exposure to stressors
 - Flexible work schedules
 - Work from home options
 - Job-sharing
 - Value people’s time and outside commitments
 - Create social opportunities

- Create a mindful culture
 - Provide mindfulness training
 - Ban multi-tasking
 - Introduce walking meetings.
 - Set certain times for meetings, email, etc.
 - Create workplace norms regarding email response expectations, multi-tasking, block calendaring, etc.
- Honor the energy in all of us.
 - Make it easy for people to honor their physical needs
 - Provide healthy food options.
 - Institute fitness and wellness programs.
 - Nap rooms.
 - Boost the emotional intelligence of your organization
 - Create awareness of various emotional needs. Meyers-Briggs is a great tool for this.
 - Create a culture of appreciation.
 - Honor the energy needs of your employees
 - Create meeting norms that allow for breaks for any meeting over 90 minutes, processing time, preparation time, etc.
 - Limit multi-tasking and encourage focused time.
 - Speak to employee's sense of purpose
 - Adopt a strength-based approach to employee development.
 - Align goals across the organization.
 - Know your employee's values and honor them as much as possible.
- Establish time management norms
 - Manage priorities by role, not task.
 - Establish norms regarding email (e.g., no emails after 6 or on weekends); meetings (e.g., when and for how long to set meetings); multi-tasking (e.g., no multi-tasking during meetings) and other technology usage (e.g., no instant messaging when busy, etc.).

- Establish a workflow management protocol so employees don't waste time and are empowered to prioritize.
- Encourage self-care
 - Many workplaces celebrate employees who work long hours. What if you also honored those who did great work while also taking care of themselves.
 - Wellness competitions can encourage healthy eating, exercise even sleep.
 - Group hikes.
 - Mandatory vacations.
 - Walking meetings.
- Encourage people to speak up and take care of their needs.
 - Encourage people to be honest about their capacity to take on more work, as well as their needs.
 - Establish a zero tolerance policy on bullying, harassment and retaliation for saying no, setting boundaries or other needs.
 - Listen to employees with respect.
 - Accept, reject or renegotiate employee's needs with respect.
 - Use and encourage positive language while still being authentic.
 - Understand employee's boundaries and needs and do your best to honor them.
 - Do not penalize an employee's development and growth because of their needs.
 - Support your employee's boundaries as much as feasible. When you can't explain why.
 - Advocate for your employee's needs.
 - Discourage competition and encourage collaboration
 - Seek win-win solutions at all times.
 - How you treat vendors and customers teaches employees how they will be treated when they make requests.
- Operate with a sense of purpose and meaning
 - Establish volunteer days and service projects.
 - Demonstrate that you care about more than the bottom line

- Care about your employees as people; e.g., make sure they don't feel like cogs in a wheel.
- Live your values and the values of the organization with every decision and action.
- Refrain from using your mission as a blunt instrument.
 - In social good organizations, the mission can be used to manipulate employees to over work and burnout. That is why the medical and education fields have such high rates of burnout. You can still motivate employees without holding them hostage to the "kids", "patients" or "animals."
- Develop your employees
- Utilize your employee's strengths even if that is for tasks beyond the employee's position.
- Allow your employee's to fail without repercussion (within reason of course).



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