

Human Resources Topic Paper: Stress & Burnout

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Introduction

Stress leading to burnout has long been discussed and identified as a major issue within modern society. However, according to Heinemann (2017) “there is still heated debate among scientists and practitioners about what burnout actually is, what symptoms are associated with it, and whether or not the burnout syndrome is a distinct mental disorder” (p.1). While burn out currently is not classified as a medical condition, the World Health Organization (WHO) has included burnout in the 11th revision of the international classification of diseases (ICD-11) as an occupational phenomenon. WHO (2019) defines burnout as “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions: feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and reduced professional efficacy” (p. 1).

Many demanding professions today such as law enforcement or healthcare are experiencing the effects of organizational factors leading to burnout in the workforce. WHO’s definition of burnout only links it to work-induced stressors. However, there are many different factors that cause stress. While work is definitely a common stressor, personal and societal factors contribute to burnout as well. With the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the issue of burnout in the workforce has only been exacerbated. Numerous entities are using lessons learned from the pandemic to better control stress and burnout within their organizations. Leaders and managers of organizations need to be aware of this important issue to develop strategies and tools to ensure mental well-being is taken care of to avoid the burnout phenomenon.

Factors

Being able to understand and identify the various factors that cause stress and lead to burnout is an important initial step in preventing potential further human consequences, such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. Oftentimes, managers overlook the personal factors that cause stress. These factors are hard to identify at a level larger than that of an individual person and explain the difficulty of addressing these areas. What inspires, motivates, or stresses out one person will not be the same for every employee. Some personal factors can be having a Type A personality, illness, marital issues, financial struggle, grief, trauma, and social constructs. Dessler (2017) explains that Type A personalities are often “workaholics who feel driven to be on time and meet deadlines normally pace themselves under greater stress” (p. 539). Thus, the added pressure that those with Type A personalities feel themselves to be under can create an immense amount of stress. Acknowledging these personal distinctions between workers can help managers best facilitate personalized strategies to reduce stress for employees.

After identifying some base personal factors, the next step would be to realize that stress and burnout are not just employee problems, but organizational dilemmas that require an organizational resolution (Moss, 2021, p. 1). To help organizations with finding that resolution, Moss (2021) offers that “burnout has six main causes: 1. Unsustainable workload 2. Perceived lack of control 3. Insufficient rewards for effort 4. Lack of a supportive community 5. Lack of fairness 6. Mismatched values and skills” (p. 2). Ultimately, Moss illuminates that all of the aforementioned issues are not typically

changed in addressing burnout. Organizations tend to still prescribe self-care as the main solution, which pushes the problem onto the employee to handle on their own.

Moreover, acknowledging that societal factors play a role will help round out the holistic understanding of what causes burnout. The most obvious issue everyone has been facing for the better part of two years is the COVID-19 global pandemic. Nearly everyone on a global scale has lost something due to the pandemic, and it has only exacerbated the burnout phenomenon. As a manager leading an ever-increasing exhausted workforce, Abrahams et al. (2022) states that “leaders aren’t therapists and shouldn’t try to be. But people are coping with collective grief and trauma on a global scale, which means leaders have to learn and exercise new skills. There are steps you can take to foster healthy coping mechanisms and discourage unhealthy ones; and ensure you don’t cause additional anxiety on top of what people are already dealing with” (p. 1). By understanding and identifying these three factors, managers will be able to move forward with learning and implementing new strategies to prevent burnout in their organizations.

Strategies

After identifying the causes of burnout, managers should be able to focus on the areas required to change at an organizational level. One area is providing purpose to employees’ work. According to Moss (2021), “burnout scores declined as purpose scores increased: Twenty-five percent of people who felt a strong sense of purpose in their work had not experienced any burnout the previous three months” (p. 3). With purpose comes motivation, and this can be a great foundation for an organization to develop and accurately portray its purpose to increase employee enthusiasm.

Another strategy is to create a manageable workload. Moss (2021) asserts that “to help overburdened employees, organizations should communicate more about priorities and about what can be put on the back burner until time permits” (p. 3). When given clear priorities, employees can understand their workload better and can determine where to begin instead of feeling overwhelmed. If everything is a priority, then nothing is.

Another effective strategy for managers to be role models. If managers are burnt out, it is likely that their employees are too. Abrahams et al. (2022) states that “self-care is not a luxury: It’s essential. If you’re tense, irritable, withdrawn, or volatile, your team may suffer similarly” (p.1). If managers can show it is important to them as the leaders, the subordinates can receive proper demonstration on how to better care for themselves. This all helps create a more positive and less stressful environment.

Lessons Learned from Boston’s Massachusetts General Hospital

One such entity that is providing lessons learned from the pandemic to better control stress and burnout within their organizations is the emergency department team at Boston’s Massachusetts general hospital. While an emergency department team is used to a high pace and high stress environment, they weren’t not able to escape a global pandemic from compounding the problem. However, Baugh et al. (2021) describes how they “realized that burnout was a major risk. So, we leaned into what we knew to create pandemic-specific strategies to support our employees” (p. 1). Their strategy mostly focused on the organization and its leadership to support the staff. There are six categories they focused on do so. Baugh et al. (202) states that these categories are “rewarding work, autonomy, fairness and transparency, a reasonable

workload, a sense of community, and consistent values” (p.2). Using a combination of tactics focused in these six areas the organization was able to keep stress from transforming into Burnout.

Conclusion

Being able to identify all factors that cause stress whether is to be personal, societal, or caused by the organization is the first step in combating burnout. Leaders and managers of organizations that are aware of this important issue and use lessons learned to develop strategies and tools that ensure mental well-being is taken care of will help avoid the burnout phenomenon. As Baugh et al. (2021) states “While there are no easy answers or surefire solutions to burnout during a crisis, we hope that sharing our approach will help other organizations, both within the health care industry and beyond” (p. 3). Combing all of this knowledge managers and leaders will be best set up to protect, nourish, and keep their employees from burnout.

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