

How to Make the Workplace Less Stressful and More Engaging

Author: Tatenda Sayenda . February 2020

We all know that excessive stress is a health hazard. The effects of employee burnout in the workplace have been seen to affect business performance. Workplace stress has been seen to make people nearly three times as likely to leave their jobs, temporarily impairs strategic thinking and dulls creative thinking. Research has therefore shown that burnout is a threat to an organisations bottom line. In the US alone the cost of burnout was more than \$300 billion a year in absenteeism, turnover, and diminished productivity, medical, legal, and insurance costs. Burnout in the workplace usually creeps in subtly, over time, impacting workers in a way that they almost do not notice.

According to the World Health Organisation, burnout is defined 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;
- reduced professional efficacy.”

Causes of Workplace Burnout

There are many things that can lead to job burnout, and it differs for every person. But there are common factors that have been identified as reasons behind burnout and stressors at your workplace. Areas of Worklife model (drawn from research by Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter of the University of California at Berkeley and Acadia University, respectively) identifies six areas where one could experience imbalances that lead to burnout:

- 1. *Workload***- When you have a workload that matches your capacity, you can effectively get your work done, have opportunities for rest and recovery, and find time for professional growth and development. When you chronically feel overloaded, these opportunities to restore balance don’t exist.
- 2. *Perceived lack of control***- feeling like you lack autonomy, access to resources, and a say in decisions that impact your professional life can take a toll on your well-being. If you find yourself feeling out of control, step back and ask yourself, “What exactly is causing me to feel this way?” For instance, does your boss contact you at all hours of the day and night, and make you feel like you need to always be on call? Are the priorities within your workplace constantly shifting so you can never get ahead? Or do you simply not have enough predictability in terms of your physical or people resources to effectively perform your job?

3. **Reward-** If the extrinsic and intrinsic rewards for your job don't match the amount of effort and time you put into them, then you're likely to feel like the investment is not worth the payoff.
4. **Community-** Who do you work with or around? How supportive and trusting are those relationships? In many cases, you can't choose your colleagues and clients, but you can improve the dynamic. It could be as simple as taking the time to ask others how their day is going — and really listening. Or sending an email to someone to let them know you appreciated their presentation. Or choosing to communicate something difficult in a respectful, nonjudgmental way. Burnout can be contagious, so to elevate your individual engagement, you must shift the morale of the group. If you've found that once you've done all you can, others can't improve or don't want improved relationships, then you may want to consider a job change.
5. **Fairness-** Think about whether you believe that you receive fair and equitable treatment. For example, do you get acknowledged for your contributions or do other individuals get praised and your work goes unnoticed? Does someone else get regular deadline extensions or access to additional resources when you don't?
6. **Values mismatch-** If you highly value something that your company does not, your motivation to work hard and persevere can significantly drop. Ideals and motivations tend to be deeply ingrained in individuals and organizations. When you're assessing this element of burnout, you need to think carefully about how important it is to you to match your values with those of the organization.

Workplace Burnout Solutions

In a recent study, researchers found that while there is an expectation that wellness programs will improve issues of absenteeism and employee healthcare, they often do not. Instead, employers need to shift to organization-level approaches for reducing stress at work, ones that foster employee well-being while simultaneously improving business performance. According to Natalia Peart, a clinical psychologist and Fortune 1000 executive leadership consultant, burnout prevention requires reducing workplace stress while also improving employee engagement. She recommends the following in dealing with issues of burnout in the workplace:

1. **Create a Work Environment That Decreases Stress-** When employees are put in a high-stress situation their ability to think, strategize and innovate decreases. Organizations need to build a secure work environment and incorporate stress reduction habits into your team's daily workflows.
2. **Increase psychological safety-** When an organization lacks psychological safety it is likely to cause stress for employees as they are not free to share their opinions and ideas. In her book, *The Fearless Organization*, Amy Edmondson describes three steps you can take to build psychological safety. First, make your expectations obvious by giving your employees clear goals. Second, make sure everyone feels like their voices are heard, and that everyone knows that you want their voices to be heard. You can do this by inviting people to speak up in meetings and conducting brainstorming sessions more than you impose top-down decisions. Third, develop a work environment that is both challenging and unthreatening. Let people know it is okay to fail.

Recognize team members who think outside the box, and ask your employees for feedback regularly to show you're all in it together.

3. **Build regular break times into the workday**- The human brain can focus for around 90-120 minutes before it needs to rest. It's important to encourage your employees to take occasional breaks to allow them to mentally reboot. During the regular break times, employees can engage in fun activities such as classic board games. [Solitaire Bliss](#) and [Play Solitaire](#) are 2 excellent games that stimulates your brain and passes the time.
4. **Encourage the use of private workspaces when team members need to focus**- Open offices are prone to distractions, increasing stress and decreasing productivity. Encourage employees to find private spaces when they need to focus and get work done without distractions. They can use a meeting room if available and put a 'do not disturb sign.
5. **Look into flexible work policies**- If you want a highly adaptive team, then create an adaptable work environment. Give your employees flexibility by allowing them to work staggered hours, taking into account their varying needs. This approach will help employees maintain a work-life balance.
6. **Build Employee Engagement**- Decades of data have confirmed that higher employee engagement, or the strength of the mental and emotional connection an employee feels toward their workplace, has many positive benefits — including reduced stress, improved health and job satisfaction, as well as increased productivity, job retention, and profitability.
7. **Be Transparent**- If your team members are confused about how their work connects to and serves both the short- and long-term company goals, they will naturally become more stressed and less productive — especially in times of uncertainty. Part of your job is to help them see the big picture or the role they play in helping the company achieve its larger goals.
8. **Make sure people are in the right roles**-If your team members loathe doing their jobs, then they are naturally going to be less engaged. To ensure that their talents and strengths are aligned with the expectations and responsibilities of their roles.
9. **Give as much autonomy as you can**- When possible, give your team control over how they manage their projects. Employees are 43% less likely to experience high levels of burnout when they have a choice in deciding what tasks to do when to do them, and how much time to spend on each.
10. **Demonstrate a commitment to your employee's growth and progression**-Give people the chance to move around, or move on, if it's the right next step for their careers. Your commitment to their growth will deepen the sense of trust between you and them.

Burnout may originate within the workplace, affecting productivity and creating a hostile work environment- its effects go beyond the walls of the workplace. Research has shown that burnout goes as far as affecting an employee's home life. To battle this growing epidemic and create healthier work environments, leaders need to commit to changing what "workplace wellness" looks like.

Tatenda Sayenda-Havire is a consultant at Industrial Psychology Consultants (Pvt) Ltd a

*management and human resources consulting firm. Phone +263 4
481946-48/481950/2900276/2900966 or email: tatenda@ipccconsultants.com or visit our website at
www.ipccconsultants.com*

<https://thehumancapitalhub.com/articles/How-To-Make-The-Workplace-Less-Stressful-And-More-Engaging>