

Battling Burnout

“Oh I couldn’t get to it...I was too burnt out.” We’ve all heard or used some variation of this phrase as a rationale for our inability to complete a task or attend to a pressing matter that requires our attention. In many cases the term is being applied somewhat melodramatically. However, “burnout” is a real condition with often devastating consequences that affects countless people every year. The cost to companies can be significant, even dramatic. Health Examiners estimates that one in four of the thousands of professional business women examined each year show significant problems due to stress. Stress and stress-related illnesses cost U.S. business and industry approximately 200 billion dollars each year in absenteeism, increased insurance claims, on-site accidents, burnout, decreased employee morale, and lowered productivity.

It is vital that organizations not only recognize the validity of this condition, but that they implement effective measures to prevent or reverse it. Whereas in the past, a company may have simply regarded this issue as a “personal” problem (or even a flaw in an employee’s character), organizations are coming to realize that “burnout” is a medical condition, as real as cardiovascular diseases or physical impairment. The major difference is not one of validity or severity but rather that burnout is a preventable phenomenon if the warning signs are heeded and addressed.

In some cases it may well be a company’s policies and approaches that are the primary cause of this syndrome. A popular mantra among management is that they prefer “people who live to work” as opposed to people who “work to live”. On the surface this may seem the ideal description of employee work ethic. What manager or owner doesn’t desire a “nose-to-the-grindstone” employee who is always willing to put their professional responsibilities first, regardless of the personal sacrifice? Yet it is this very lack of “balance” that most contributes to the burnout factor. A self-described workaholic may be a boss’ dream; however, candidates fitting this description are in fact at higher risk for future burnout.

More than ever, it is imperative that management and HR professionals be educated and alert to indicators of potential or existing burnout. The telltale signs include:

- chronic exhaustion
- detached or cynical approach to work, loss of interest
- increased absenteeism
- changes in work patterns (good performers suddenly start slacking off)
- feeling overwhelmed, depressed mood, irritability, sleep deprivation, headaches
- workaholic tendencies (commonly a predictor of future burnout).

Furthermore, managers and HR professionals should be aware that prevention and treatment of burnout is in their best interest and can be achieved or at least aided by addressing the issue in their company's internal practices by including policies such as:

- providing programs/workshops on the issue of burnout
- encouraging communication between management and staff regarding difficulties/stressors that exist in the workplace and formulating plans to improve conditions
- rotating/introducing new duties (without overloading) and providing training where needed to foster intellectual stimulation and growth among employees
- being proactive/building awareness
- introducing fitness programs/leisure time activities
- encouraging balance (family, personal, work) in employees lives
- creating an ergonomically sound environment
- fostering an appreciation for childcare issues by offering a daycare or allowing for flexible work schedules where feasible

In addition, companies must recognize that burnout may manifest itself in a variety of ways; no two employees are exactly alike. HR professionals in particular need to be able to identify an employee's individual working style and where possible introduce policy changes or measures that remove or lessen the various burnout triggers that exist. While it may not be feasible for many companies to address stress effects on an individual basis, organizations with physically or psychologically demanding positions should monitor the overall stress or burnout levels. Such company-wide assessment may pinpoint problem areas and allow the organization to introduce specific preventive measures or offer targeted employee assistance programs. In addition, for positions where stress is part of the job description (medical personnel, teachers, firefighters, police, military etc.), administering a Hardiness Test during pre-employment assessment allows the organization to select candidates who are likely to tough out stressful periods without crumbling.

There's no denying that the issue of employee burnout is a complex one that requires a strong commitment from management in order to be properly addressed. While this may seem an overly altruistic or idealistic endeavor to some, the high cost of not addressing it will almost certainly impact your bottom line and in some cases, perhaps even the very future of your organization. However, conquering this problem is not as insurmountable as it may first appear and does not necessarily have to be a costly undertaking. As with all life's challenges, the key to resolution is in acknowledging that the problem exists and resolving to face it head on.

