

Snuffing Out Burnout

It's not just the physical exhaustion. It's the sense of dread in the morning when the alarm clock goes off. The lack of interest in work tasks. The uncontrollable desire to snap at a client or colleague. Burnout can turn the best employees into a shell of their former selves, too tired to care about what happens to their job, their clients, their projects, or themselves. And long before the body shuts down, a person with burnout will have already "signed off" on a mental and emotional level.

Aside from the fact that burnout increases the risk of cardiovascular disease, type II diabetes, infertility, sleep problems, and musculoskeletal disorders¹, managers can also look at burnout from a business and bottom line perspective: a stressed out worker force means less productivity, increased absenteeism, increased risk of accidents, turnover, and insurance expenses. The company cost? \$300 billion annually in the US alone². A pretty large incentive to nip burnout in the bud.

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". What manager doesn't desire a "nose-to-the-grindstone" employee who is always willing to put their professional responsibilities first? Someone who comes in on day's off, calls to check in while on vacation, or voluntarily works extra hours. It's a noble work ethic but a seriously short-sighted one, because it's this very lack of balance that contributes to burnout. A self-described workaholic (one of the common answers to the clichéd "What is one of your weaknesses?")

¹ Burnout harms workers' physical health through many pathways (2006). *Psychological Bulletin*, 37(6).

² Job Stress. The American Institute of Stress.

interview question) may be a boss' dream, but candidates fitting this description can become a company's liability.

The ideal approach to burnout would be to prevent it before it starts. Policies that can be implemented include:

- ❖ Providing programs/workshops on burnout and stress management.
- ❖ Encouraging workers to discuss occupational difficulties/stressors with management, and collaborate on solutions to improve work conditions.
- ❖ Nurturing balance (family, personal, work) in employees' lives by reducing overtime, or encouraging certain employees to take a day off after the completion of a difficult project.
- ❖ Rotating particularly difficult duties (e.g. answer customer service calls in shifts), introducing more variability in tasks, or depending on the employee's preference, more routine and structure.
- ❖ Introducing fitness programs, social activities, or team-building programs.
- ❖ Fostering an appreciation for childcare issues by offering a daycare or allowing for flexible work schedules where feasible.
- ❖ Creating an ergonomic work environment – sufficient light, work space, air quality; desks, chairs, and computer screens that reduce physical strain, etc.

It is also important to educate managers on the signs and symptoms of burnout. These include:

- ❖ Fatigue, lethargy.
- ❖ Loss of interest in work; sense of detachment.
- ❖ Cynicism, irritability.
- ❖ Increased absenteeism.
- ❖ Changes in work pattern (e.g. good performers suddenly start slacking off).

Managers have to also recognize that burnout may manifest itself in different ways - no two employees are alike. HR professionals in particular need to be able to identify an employee's individual work style and, whenever possible, introduce measures that lessen burnout triggers, like heavy workload and long work hours.

While it may not be feasible to address stress effects on an individual basis, organizations with physically or psychologically-demanding positions should consider monitoring overall stress levels on a regular basis. A company-wide survey, for example, may pinpoint problem areas and allow the organization to introduce specific preventative measures or offer targeted employee assistance programs.

Burnout issues require a strong commitment from management in order to be properly addressed. 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 of life's challenges, the solution starts with acknowledging that the problem exists and resolving to face it head on.

PsychTests' **Burnout tests for service and non-service industries** can also help identify employees at risk. In addition, the **Coping Skills Test** and **Emotional Intelligence Test** can help you identify employees who are particularly ill-equipped to deal with stress. ☘

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