Understanding and Avoiding Burnout as a Manager

Many factors contribute to feelings of burnout in the workplace, including organizational change, demanding workloads, competing priorities, poor communication, and interpersonal conflicts among individuals or in the group. Burnout may also result from personal issues or family problems that can make workplace pressures worse. Whatever the cause, burnout can have a negative effect on job performance, safety, retention, morale, commitment, health, and absenteeism. At some point, almost all managers face the risk of burnout. Burnout can have more serious effects on you and your company than everyday stress does, so it’s important to recognize and try to avoid this common problem.

The difference between stress and burnout
Stress generally builds when you have too much work and too little time or too few resources to do it. A certain amount of stress is normal -- and may even be desirable -- for any manager. Peak periods of workload may come and go -- for example, during your company’s busy seasons or in times of major workplace change. If you’ve developed healthy ways of coping with pressure, this kind of stress isn’t necessarily harmful and can even be invigorating. In fact, many professionals report feeling most energized when they have the challenge of completing somewhat more work than they have time to accomplish.

Helping your team achieve a big goal under tougher-than-usual conditions can be exciting, but finding outlets for stress and allowing the body to relax and recover from “crunch times” is crucial to your long-term health and well-being. Over time, sustained stress that is not recognized and managed can lead to burnout. Burnout tends to involve the following:

- a loss of passion, motivation, or interest in your work
- physical or mental exhaustion, including sleeping disorders as well as other physical symptoms
- feeling “dried-up” or out of ideas
- feeling that you just don’t care as much about your work or that you’ve lost track of what matters most to you
- feeling that you are just “going through the motions”
Unless you take steps to deal with it, burnout can cause difficulties for both you and your organization. In extreme cases, burnout can lead to health problems and problems in your personal life. It can put your job at risk or cause you to lose valued employees who have picked up on the stresses that you are feeling and have become reluctant to continue to work with you.

**What causes burnout in managers?**

Sometimes burnout has an organizational cause. In many organizations today, almost everyone is doing more in less time, and the pressures can build up. Low value work, flawed work processes, or excessive performance expectations also contribute to negative stress, which, if unresolved, can lead to burnout. Some of the common organizational causes of burnout include the following:

- the fast pace of work in general, especially when your work has a global component
- increased demand for instant information and communication, driven by technologies such as e-mail, instant messaging, and PDAs
- downsizing, restructuring, or change in priorities that makes extra demands on employees
- a lack of resources, information, or staff needed to meet your responsibilities
- lack of recognition of all of the things an employee is “juggling”
- a constantly changing work environment, including frequent changes in policies and procedures or in company vision, priorities, staff, or location, and having little ability to influence the changes being made
- changes in industry and the need to keep up with new types of market demands

Burnout can also have causes that relate more to your own needs or approach than to your organization. This is especially likely to be true if other managers at your company don’t seem to have the same kinds of frustrations that you do -- for example, if you and other managers have similar resources, but you have a much harder time meeting deadlines or staying within a budget. Some of the personal causes of burnout include the following:

- difficulty delegating (or managing people to whom you have delegated work)
- trouble adjusting to added responsibilities (especially if the demands on you have increased or you are less experienced at managing people)
- lack of a work management system that enables you to juggle a variety of priorities as well as determine which are the most critical
- problems at home that carry over to work
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- work that spills over too much into your personal life
- long periods of high demands without adequate time to rest and recharge
- losing touch with your basic values and priorities

Keep in mind that a combination of both organizational and personal factors may contribute to burnout. If you’re spending a lot of time caring for an aging parent or a child with special needs, you may find it harder to cope if your organization asks more of you as a manager. If this happens, finding a solution to burnout may involve taking several steps -- some at home, and some at work -- to ease the strains.

Coping with burnout
Easing or preventing burnout begins with taking an honest look at your concerns. Do your frustrations relate more to what’s going on in your organization or in your own life? Depending on the answer, you may want to seek different solutions for your concerns. Here are some suggestions:

- **Ask for honest help and support from your manager.** Talk frankly about the pressures you’re facing. Ask your manager for suggestions on ways you might handle things differently. Make sure you have a clear understanding of your manager’s work expectations for you. It may also be helpful to get your manager’s input on which work priorities are the most important so that you focus your time productively.

- **Rethink the work flow or processes your team or department uses.** If you have to do more with fewer people or a smaller budget, you may have to change how the work gets done. This can mean doing such things as eliminating processes that no longer serve a need but are still in place because “we’ve always done it that way.” Perhaps work can be reprioritized or reassigned. Maybe temporary help can be arranged to handle the workload.

- **Work proactively and plan for contingencies.** If you don’t know next year’s budget or whether you’ll be able to add new staff members, do a “best-guess” estimate and see how people respond. Use data to suggest, “Here’s how we might do things in circumstances X or Y,” but always develop a “Plan B” -- a contingency plan -- as well. This will allow you to anticipate different scenarios and keep you from getting caught off guard (and feeling added stress) in a worst-case situation. Always attempt to “play to your strengths.” Build from what you do know, have control over, or can influence. These are your “leverage points.”

- **Ask your employees for ideas and solutions.** If you’re always operating on overload, you may be too close to a problem to see a solution. You may not realize that a subordinate is eager for more work or has fresh ideas on how to solve a problem.

- **Look into management-training programs geared toward your specific needs.** If your concerns seem to relate more to your own behavior than to changes or pressures
in your organization, you might look into programs that focus on building
personal effectiveness, such as time management, delegation, dealing with
difficult employees, or adjusting to corporate change. Some local hospitals and
health care providers offer free or low-cost stress-management training programs
that could be quite beneficial. Your employee assistance program (EAP) or the
program that provided this publication can help you find stress-management
resources.

- **Make time to think seriously about your personal and professional priorities.** Your
  company may have a career planning program to help managers reevaluate their
goals. You might also look into retreats sponsored by religious or civic
organizations that would help you think about your basic values over a weekend
in a relaxing setting.

- **Discuss your physical and mental condition with your health care provider.** Chronic
  stress can affect your overall health. If it has been a while since your last physical
exam, it may be time now to have one. Use that opportunity to tell your provider
about the amount of stress in your life, and ask for suggestions on ways to reduce
feelings of stress. Many health care providers offer comprehensive health-and-
wellness programs tailored to the unique needs of busy managers and executives.

- **Get the support you need to balance work/life issues.** Succeeding as a manager is easier
  when you have the support you need in your personal and home life. Your
company’s EAP or the program that provided this publication offer extensive
help with work/life needs. Take advantage of this benefit.

- **Take the vacation time you’ve earned.** Sometimes managers become burned out
  partly because they never take a vacation. If you’ve fallen into this pattern, you
might start simply by planning a great four-day trip (instead of trying to take a
full two weeks) and working up to longer vacations.

The key is to balance your own needs against those of your organization and
make adjustments when you need to. The more you can manage the inevitable
stresses of life and work, the less chance these will burn you out and drain you of
the positive energy you feel when you are productive and motivated by what you
do.

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