



Let's Talk

BUSTING JOB BURNOUT

Burned out workers are chronically exhausted, become cynical and detached from their work, and feel increasingly ineffective at their jobs, according to Christina Maslach, PhD, a professor of psychology and the original researcher to identify and describe the phenomenon of "burnout."

Often, the first sign of job burnout is a feeling of emotional exhaustion. When asked to describe how they feel, affected employees may describe feeling drained, at rope's end, and fatigued.

Six Categories of Work: A Burnout Watch-List

In their book, *The Truth about Burnout: How Organizations Cause Personal Stress and What to Do About It*, Maslach and her co-author

Michael Leiter, director of the Center for Organizational Research and Development at Acadia University, report that burnout occurs when there is a disconnect between the organization and the individual in six areas of work life: workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values.

WORKLOAD: Work that is "too much, too complex, too urgent, or too awful" often drives the exhaustion that is at the root of burnout.

CONTROL: Some workers are frustrated by their inability to make choices and decisions, solve problems, and fulfill the responsibilities for which they are responsible.

REWARD AND RECOGNITION: A meaningful reward system acknowledges contributions at work and provides clear indications of what the organization values. People who are unrecognized for their contributions often devalue their work and themselves.

VALUES: Problems arise when conflicts exist between an organization's values and the values of its staff, or when the organization does not practice its stated values.

The relationship between burnout and each of these categories reportedly varies according to the nature of the work and how employees relate to their jobs. "Burnout is always more likely when there is a major mismatch between the nature of the job and the nature of the person who does the job," Maslach says.

What to Do About It

While an employee often has little control over negative aspects of work, such as pressing deadlines and personnel shortages, here are tried-and-true ways for organizations to heighten job satisfaction and build a more productive work environment:

- Build trust: Encourage respect, openness, and honesty.
- Manage morale: Develop team spirit.

COMMUNITY: Mismatches occur when there is no sense of positive support, connection, and collaboration with others at work.

FAIRNESS: The extent to which an organization has consistent, easily understood, and equitable rules for everyone is pivotal. A lack of fairness indicates confusion in an organization's values and its relationships with people.

- Structure work fairly.
- Offer positive reinforcement.
- Build commitment: Invite participation, empower workers, and develop their potential.

The FOH EAP is available to help employees and organizations battle burnout. Contact the EAP for assistance and information. □



THE ART OF DELEGATING

Managers always seem to face longer “to do” lists and shorter deadlines. With too much work for one person to complete, delegating is often the only way to get the job done.

The benefits of delegating tasks go beyond lightening the workload. Delegation means giving your staff the discretion to make decisions for which you ultimately are responsible. Delegation communicates that you trust your subordinates and respect their ability to make independent decisions.

Delegation also promotes engagement and professional growth. Employees who feel that they are trusted and respected tend to have a higher level of commitment to their organization than those whose every move is micromanaged.

Delegation Does Not Come Easily

Skillful delegation takes practice and resisting the urge to do it yourself. To become skilled with the process, you need to ask yourself some hard questions.

After delegating, do you:

- Tell your employees how to handle the details of their work?
- Feel the irresistible urge to reclaim the task if an employee runs into a snag?
- Constantly offer advice out of fear that the results will not turn out as you envisioned?
- Constantly ask “how it’s going”?
- Rarely, if ever, ask what employees think would be a better approach?”

Obstacles to Delegation

Despite your best intentions, you may be reluctant to hand over your responsibilities to a colleague or employee. If the fear of losing control gives you pause, consider the following common fallacies:

- “I could do it better myself.”
- “I don’t have the time to show him/her how it’s done.”
- “They already have enough to do.”
- “I am the only one who can do this properly.”
- “I have no one to whom I can delegate tasks.”

Process for Successful Delegation

Delegating is a skill requiring follow-up at the right times, and in the right amounts. Here is a simple 4-step delegation model to help you get the desired results:

1. Identify the right person for the task:
Who has the right skills? Who can you groom?
2. Discuss your expectations, including:
 - Why you chose them.
 - What entails a successful outcome
 - Non-negotiable areas, such as budget, time, new equipment, or people/resources.
 - Performance standards/expectations
 - Milestones and dates for scheduled progress reports.
3. Explain that you will provide support, as needed, in task implementation.
4. Follow up with support and coaching:
 - Be sure to check in if milestones/dates are missed.
 - Acknowledge a job well done as appropriate.

Improving your delegation skills will increase your productivity and the satisfaction of your colleagues. Look to your FOH EAP for help and support in developing or enhancing these and other professional skills.



DOWN-SHIFTING ANGER

Stressors like rush hour traffic, bills, health care issues, personal conflict, and so forth, can be maddening. However, while anger is a natural emotion, it can get out of control, become destructive, and even become a risk to health.

Rushing to anger can activate the body's emergency response system – the “fight-or-flight” response – which is normally reserved for dealing with real physical threats. When this happens, hormones increase heart rate, cause blood pressure to spike, and suppress “nonessential” functions like digestion and the immune system. In seconds, your body shifts into a temporary state of metabolic overdrive so you can either beat a hasty retreat or stand and fight!

When this response is activated at the workplace, where neither fighting nor flight is appropriate, “downshifting” to your pre-anger baseline can take hours, with some processes taking days. If these physical changes are triggered every day over a period of years, they put your health at risk by overworking the heart and blood vessels.

The Eye of the Beholder

Clearly, keeping anger bottled up can have serious health consequences in the long run; however, tossing your desk out the window is a poor way to work off anger-induced adrenalin. The key to managing your anger, and consequently your health, is to pay attention to your immediate reaction to difficult situations as they arise.

Anger is normally based on how we perceive things. Our perceptions may be accurate, or they may not; sometimes our personal biases and emotions take over. Raise your level of anger tolerance by changing your perception about situations that make you angry, and keep your metabolism and emotions coasting along in healthy “third gear.”

Try these tips the next time you find yourself in a problem situation:

- Ask yourself questions like: Is the situation important? Is my anger appropriate? Is it worth taking action? Asking yourself these questions will help you to convert anger into rational thought, which will allow you to gain perspective and get your anger under your control.
- Imagine various alternate responses, even silly ones. This will help calm you. Humor and laughter actually changes your body chemistry and can lift your mood.
- Develop (and practice) an immediate physical/mental anger response technique.
 - **Physical:** Take five slow deep breaths.
 - **Mental:** Concentrate on the situation itself. Focus your attention away from the feelings about being hurt, discounted, or overlooked.
- If the event occurred at work, take time to organize your thoughts in writing to develop a professional way to handle the issue. Consider what steps you could take. Decide what might result from addressing the issue. And remember, after you have taken control of your feelings, “letting them go” is not the same as suppressing your anger.

Is your anger out of control? Is it having an impact on your relationships and on important parts of your life? If so, the EAP can work with you to develop and practice a range of techniques to help change your thinking and behavior when it comes to dealing with difficult situations. □



WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU CALL EAP

Employees and their family members have around-the-clock access to a menu of EAP services, but they're sometimes uncomfortable about calling. Understandably, it can be awkward to share your concerns with someone you don't know and can't see. Our goal is to make using the EAP easy for you, anytime a need arises.

When you contact the EAP, you will always speak directly to an EAP staff member—you'll never be asked to navigate a menu of telephone options or to leave a voice message. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, you'll be greeted by an EAP customer service representative.

When you call, you'll be asked a few simple questions about your concerns and preferences. The questions you are asked will be similar to these:

- What is your name? – With which agency do you work?
- What is your date of birth? – What is your grade level?
- In which city would you like to meet with a counselor?
- What are the telephone numbers at which you can be contacted?
- Is it OK to leave a message for you at those phone numbers?
- Generally, what is the issue or concern you'd like to discuss?
- Is this a crisis situation?

Once the EAP staff member has taken the time to carefully understand your questions or concerns, he or she will identify a professional counselor in a location of your choice who will contact you by phone to offer dates and times for an initial appointment. Speaking with the provider by phone gives you the opportunity to ask questions about their background, training, and style.

The quality of the match between you and the provider is very important. The EAP customer service representative will ask you to let him or her know if the EAP counselor is - for any reason - not a good match for your preferences and concerns. While that situation is rare, the EAP knows that the quality of the connection makes all the difference, and will identify another provider if needed.

Finally, rest assured that no information will be revealed to anyone other than the EAP provider. With certain exceptions in which a counselor is compelled to notify authorities to save a life, neither counselors nor the EAP will ever contact your agency or supervisor unless you provide written authorization to do so.

Contact the EAP whenever you need, and let us pave your way to resources that can help you decide how best to respond to the conflicts, demands, and opportunities that arise in life. □

TAKE THAT BREAK

Working through lunch isn't the best way to get the job done well. People need breaks in order to perform optimally, according to research published in the April issue of the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*. This is important advice at a time when people are spending more and more time at work.

After concentrating on a specific task for too long, people begin to lose focus, and performance declines. Breaks have a restorative effect, but only if employees are able to "switch off" and clear their minds. So whether you take a walk, eat a meal, work out, or meditate, take yourself out of your work area to feel most refreshed. □



The FOH EAP provides assessment, counseling, referral, training, and consultation to Federal employees and agencies throughout the United States. For administrative details about the program, contact Chiquita Cooper at 404.562.7950, ext. 125, or e-mail at Chiquita.Cooper@foh.hhs.gov. To visit us on the Web, please go to www.FOH4You.com.

Help is available all day, all week, all year. 800.222.0364, TTY: 888.262.7848.

This newsletter is brought to you by Federal Occupational Health (FOH), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

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FEDERAL OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH (FOH)

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