

How Managers Can Reduce the Risk of Burnout During Hard Times



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As the public sector receives funding cuts and the private sector pursues productivity gains, organizations risk burning out part of their human capital. Although few people succumb to full-fledged job burnout, most are affected by resource reduction in ways that take the edge off of their energy, dedication, and confidence. They become less engaged, withdrawing part of their potential just when their teams need even more from them.

Despite the rather all-or-nothing quality of its name, burnout is more a matter of degree than a definitive diagnosis. Surveys of large organizations will find people all along the continuum

of experiencing exhaustion every workday to never feeling exhausted at all. The data will show a smooth range from people who continually interpret their worklife through a cynical filter to those for whom a cynical thought never enters their mind. More frequent signs of burnout are increasingly problematic. Burnout's defining qualities—exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy—have linear relationships with major indicators of employee wellbeing and productivity.

From this perspective, actions that nudge employees in the positive direction, away from burnout, can be meaningful. The challenge for managers is not the intimidating goal of preventing burnout per se, but the more modest one of promoting a bit more energy, involvement, and confidence among employees.

Core Concepts

Six areas of worklife are especially powerful in pushing employee towards burnout or engagement:

1. Manageable **Workload** through a reasonable balance of demands and resources;
2. A sense of **Control** through timely information and participative decision making;
3. **Reward** and Recognition for personal contributions to the mission;
4. A sense of **Community** among the people whom one encounters regularly;
5. **Fair** treatment through transparent and respectful procedures; and
6. Congruence of personal **Values** with those of the organization.

Resource reduction increases the risk of employees experiencing the core elements of burnout. Unmanageable workload saps energy. Disruptions to the other areas of worklife increase the risk of employees becoming *cynical* or *discouraged*.

Research to Action

Resource reduction does not inevitably aggravate burnout but it certainly increases the risk of burnout. The advantage to leaders is that the impact is straightforward. No one could be surprised that resource reduction may discourage employees. The challenge is to develop an effective plan to anticipate the impact, to contain its negativity, to build team resilience, and to move towards establishing a new, viable, and sustainable balance. Resiliency builds upon the capacity to thrive with the available resources. Constraints prompt a problem-solving perspective instead of discouraging employees.

In the renewal of my Tier 1 Canada Research Chair in Occupational Health and Wellness with the Psychology Department at Acadia University I will be concentrating on the qualities that define resilient workgroups. This focus builds upon my previous work on job burnout, work engagement, and workplace civility/incivility. An objective of this work is to contribute to the evidence base for programs to support mental health at work. In their attempts to address workplace health, organizations often invest in programs that have not received a rigorous evaluation.



Civility and Respect as Burnout Deterrents. Working relationships shape how people feel about their jobs. People can be the most attractive quality of a job or the thing that drives people away. A variety of researchers have established connections of burnout with coworker and supervisor relationships. This perspective represented a major shift from the earliest views of the syndrome as reflecting professionals feeling overwhelmed by the emotional demands of the therapeutic relationship with their service recipients. More recent research has found that relationships with the clients were the most manageable part of a job; relationships with colleagues were a more likely source of distress.

In light of this strong connect, could improving relationships at work be a viable method for reducing burnout? This question was address by a collaboration based at the Centre for Organizational Research & Development at Acadia University (Lisa Spiegel, Manager) including researchers from Saint Mary's University (Arla Day, Debra Gilin-Oore), the University of Western Ontario (Heather Laschinger), Dalhousie University (Sheri Price, David Persaud) with hospital leaders (Maryellen Gurnham, Jocelyn Vine). The project demonstrated that improving the civility and respect within working relationship makes a difference on a variety of measures including burnout.

Resiliency. A resilient workgroup is one with the capacity to thrive during tough times. Its members make creative responses to challenges. Our research team is currently evaluating an approach to strengthening resiliency through a peer mentoring program for first line managers. The approach emphasizes leaders' capacity to manage the social environments of their teams. The project's objective is to evaluate the extent to which this program can make a difference for leaders and for the members of their workgroups.

Employees' psychological connections with their work have broad implications for their physical and mental health at work and in their personal lives. Research to date has clearly established factors that contribute to whether that experience is more like burnout or work engagement. Research has also considered the downstream consequences of these experiences on employees' health and wellbeing. The primary challenge in the 21st century is developing ways to enhance the quality of worklife and evaluating the efficacy of these interventions. Doing so requires collaboration among researchers and organizational leaders determined to make a difference.