Addressing Burnout in the Workplace

WHAT IS BURNOUT?
Burnout has become a major global concern in the workplace, especially as awareness of mental health as a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issue grows.1 Heightened by external pressures and uncertainty, including the Covid-19 pandemic, burnout is a psychological and physical exhaustion caused by prolonged stress that goes beyond everyday difficulties at work.2 To support workers and help them thrive, organizations will need to tackle burnout as a systemic issue.3

NOT JUST AN INDIVIDUAL ISSUE
Burnout can seem like an individual problem, but it has become so widespread that organizations need to recognize their role in creating burnout as well as their ability to prevent it. In 2019, burnout was officially recognized by the World Health Organization as an occupational phenomenon,4 and research continues to show its prevalence. In Catalyst’s 2021 global pulse survey, a whopping 92.3% of respondents said they were experiencing burnout, ranging from 34.5% reporting “some” level of burnout to 57.8% reporting a “high” level of burnout.5 While individual employees may find some relief in self-care practices like meditation, exercise, or improved sleep habits, personal efforts alone cannot effect change on the scale of an entire workforce. And while burnout affects people of all genders, races, and ethnicities, women report more workplace burnout than men—a gap that has only increased due to the Covid-19 pandemic.6 A 2021 US survey revealed that 42% of women reported feeling “often” or “almost always” burned out at work, a 10% increase from 2020.7 In Europe, more than half of people reported concerns about or had already experienced burnout.8 For men and women of color, burnout can be compounded by the emotional tax imposed by exclusion and bias.9 Facing pressure or challenges at work is normal and can even be motivating,10 but when it leads to unmanageable amounts of stress, total exhaustion can follow.

The causes of burnout are often systemic and can in turn cause disruption in the workplace. In 2019, burned-out employees were 2.6 times as likely as others to be looking for other employment and 63% more likely to take a sick day.11 The problem can even cause a vicious cycle: as more employees leave, those remaining are left to shoulder additional responsibilities without adequate assistance.12 And for groups like women of color that are already underrepresented at every level among professional occupations in the US,13 these conditions won’t help a leaky pipeline. Without adequate systems in place to address burnout, additional turnover, lost workdays and lower productivity, and more money spent on healthcare costs are some of the challenges employers can expect.14

To better support their employees, companies must start to assess burnout as a product of the organizational environment rather than an individual condition.15 By examining existing practices and addressing the causes of burnout, organizations can strengthen both their employees’ well-being and company culture.
RECOGNIZING BURNOUT

Burnout is characterized by overwhelming, chronic, prolonged stress that can't be adequately managed, and can cause employees to feel ineffective, disengaged, and even cynical. The more overt signs of burnout may be obvious: irritability with colleagues, extreme displays of anger or sadness, decreased work performance, missed deadlines—their cause are all clear outward signifiers.

However, many problems caused by burnout are harder to spot among individual workers. It sometimes can be difficult to tell when employees are experiencing emotional symptoms such as hopelessness or inadequacy. Burnout can also cause physical symptoms like brain fog, fatigue, sleep disruption, headaches, or digestive issues. It can even manifest in harmful eating habits or substance abuse that may not be visible. And unfortunately, along with other mental health issues, stigma can keep people from obtaining or offering help.

Managers who develop and demonstrate inclusive leadership qualities have a better chance of identifying the signs of burnout and addressing them before the morale of the team is damaged. People managers who are accountable for the well-being of their team should learn how best to accommodate and work with each team member's needs and direct them to resources as needed.

PREVENTING & ADDRESSING BURNOUT

Preventing burnout is the one of most important things that organizations, leaders, and people managers can do, since by the time burnout needs to be addressed, it's often too late.

Managers

Managers are key to identifying and preventing employee burnout. Inclusive managers regularly take the temperature of their teams and demonstrate empathy. They create a team culture where employees are comfortable talking about their stressors. By building authentic relationships, demonstrating curiosity and humility, and getting to know their team members as people, managers can spot changes in employees' typical attitudes.

Even employees who are engaged at work may experience burnout, especially if they are dealing with stress in their personal lives. People managers should check in with employees individually on a regular basis. Private communication, when paired with genuine concern, may encourage colleagues to be more open and honest about struggles they may be facing.

People managers help their employees navigate and prevent burnout when they:

- Give people control:
  - Give employees ownership and flexibility to job craft, allowing them to apply their strengths and interests to their work.
  - Engage employees in decision-making instead of micromanaging. This grants a sense of control and autonomy.

- Improve people’s day-to-day:
  - Send meeting information out in advance of meetings so that everyone has adequate time to prepare. Consider shortened meetings and eliminating back-to-back appointments.
  - Communicate clear expectations and guidelines. Being accountable as a manager also entails ensuring workloads and deadlines are reasonable.

- Talk about the issue:
  - Ensure employees know about the organization’s employee assistance program (EAP).
  - Model healthy behaviors such as taking time for self-care and be open to discussing your own struggles with work-life challenges, mental health, and stress.

- Help team members support one another:
  - Recognize employees for their contributions, no matter how minor they may seem. Let team members know how their work matters to the team and the organization.
  - Encourage teamwork and shared accountability, which makes challenges seem more manageable.

Leading by example

EY Teams across the firm are engaged in conversations to establish more predictable flexibility options. Managers connect with their team members for short check-ins and intentional career conversations, provide resources, communicate about the company’s flexibility policies, and mitigate against “insider/outsider dynamics” (i.e., situations where individuals or groups are subject to exclusion and potential inequity).
Organizations

Often organizations take a piecemeal approach to tackle burnout by offering more benefits and perks, like gift cards or additional paid time off. More paid time off without reducing workload often fails, as employees often worry that more time off will result in even more work upon their return. Some studies have shown that the restorative benefits of vacation and time off are real but temporary. Without broader organizational changes, these methods only address the symptoms and not the root causes of burnout. They can even backfire when an employee leaves, as managers then must spend more time looking for their replacement.

Set Culture From the Top

- Leaders should develop and practice empathy and other interpersonal skills such as active listening and self-reflection when making decisions that will impact organizational culture.
- Don’t glorify overwork, unsustainable scheduling, or self-sacrificing behaviors as going “above and beyond.”
- Reinforce team values and the organization’s mission in order to create a shared purpose. Employees want to connect to and find meaning in their work.

Drive Engagement With Communication

- Upskilling managers in interpersonal skills will help them become better people managers and stay engaged, while also strengthening their resiliency.
- Senior leaders should communicate clearly and regularly about priorities and business updates so that managers can better focus on employee engagement.

Consider Shifts in How Work Is Done

- No-Meeting Fridays and extra PTO are popular ways organizations are tackling burnout in the short term. These can still be welcome respites if workloads are adjusted so employees don’t continue to feel overwhelmed.
- Be willing to consider fundamental shifts in how work is done. Some UK companies are testing out a four-day workweek to prioritize employee well-being while others reconsider how to balance priorities with existing resources.

Leading by example

Dentons Canada Dentons is conducting a series of 25-person workshops for people leaders. In one module, a behavioral psychologist assists employees in transitioning to the new hybrid work model, including how to cope with stress, communicating with people leaders and teams across platforms, and managing mental health. In another module, managers learn how to inclusively support hybrid teams. These training modules will be integrated into Dentons’ learning management systems so that, once trained, leaders can assign courses to specific people and teams.

SUPPORTING MANAGERS FROM THE TOP

If managers are the key to identifying and addressing burnout on their teams, what happens when they burn out? According to a Gallup poll conducted in March 2020, the number of people managers who self-reported feeling burned out “very often” or “always” was slightly higher than that of individual contributors and leaders. In the same poll conducted in March 2021, however, people managers reporting burnout increased significantly, while it remained the same for individual contributors and even dropped for leaders.

Manager stress cascades to the people they manage, weakening the strength of the team and contributing to organizational turnover. Organizations have a responsibility to support managers in leading their teams without overlooking managers’ own health and psychological well-being.
CONCLUSION
Burnout is quickly becoming a widespread issue, but it is fixable. The causes and conditions that allow burnout to spread are systemic, and so must be tackled with a holistic approach. Adopting inclusive leadership behaviors across the organization and recognizing the needs of employees builds a strong company culture and increases employees’ well-being. Companies that take these steps are well-positioned to not only address burnout but prevent it from taking hold.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
• Supporting Mental Health in the Workplace (Topic Overview) - Catalyst
• Leading With Empathy (Knowledge Burst) - Catalyst
• Local Websites and Emergency Contact Numbers - CheckPoint
• Beating Burnout at Work: A WorkWell Podcast with Paula Davis. Strategies To Increase Resilience - Deloitte
• Maslach Burnout Inventory™ (MBI) - Mind Garden
• Burnout Response for Leaders - Workplace Strategies for Mental Health
• Career Burnout - The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
• Mental Health at Work

ENDNOTES

30. Handle, L. (2022, January 25). The rise of the 15-minute meeting – and how to run one. CNBC.
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37. Kuter, H.L. (2021, June 30). Managers, here are 3 warning signs your employees are burnt out. Forbes.
40. Harter, J. (2021, November 18). Manager burnout is only getting worse. Gallup.
42. Shapero (2021).
43. Mellor, S. (2022, January 20). 4-day workweek trials are going global as the Great Resignation rages on. Fortune.
44. Schwantes, M. (2021, May 10). What companies are getting wrong in addressing burnout, and what to do instead. Inc.