

keynote article

Burnout and engagement in the workplace: new perspectives

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A personal perspective on the work being done on burnout and engagement calls for a more active focus on developing interventions at social and organizational levels. Preventing burnout can be accomplished by a focus on building engagement and utilizing organizational assessments that include tools for early detection.

In this article, I want to share a new perspective on burnout and engagement, in terms of intervention—what can we do about these issues to improve the work experience of many people? Thus, I will not be providing a literature review, or a discussion of the latest empirical findings, but instead I will be focusing on how best we can translate what we know into successful solutions. For many years, my colleagues and I have been conducting research to try and understand both the sources and outcomes of this psychological syndrome. And for just as many years, people who experience burnout, or deal with its consequences in the workplace, have been asking for some solutions to this problem. We may not have the final answers, but I do think that we are in a position to work more proactively, and more collaboratively, with practitioners to develop new interventions, evaluate their effectiveness, and develop ways to disseminate the successful ones to more people and organizations.

One of the most important arguments I want to make is that we need to pay greater attention to the social and organizational environment in which individuals work, and to be more creative

about solutions at those levels, rather than just at the individual one. People often work in small groups or teams, which are part of a larger unit that is embedded within a larger organization. More importantly, organizations are designed and managed around work units. Managers are held accountable for large groups of employees, not individuals, and their performance as managers is evaluated on the basis of aggregated indicators, such as productivity and turnover. Interventions are often implemented across entire departments or business units. So our work on psychological issues, such as burnout and engagement, needs to address the question of how our findings can be relevant to interventions on multiple social and organizational levels. In particular, I want to focus on work that I have done with Michael Leiter, using two measures, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, & Jackson, 1996) and the Areas of Worklife Scale (Leiter & Maslach, 2004). Our basic mediation model for burnout, and its positive opposite of engagement, has assumed that the worker's internal experience of burnout plays a mediating role between the impact of external job stressors and work-related outcomes (such as absenteeism or illness). We have also focused on six key domains of worklife—workload, control, rewards, community, fairness and values—which are predictive of burnout and engagement. A consistent theme throughout this research literature is the problematic relationship between the person and the environment, which is often described in terms of imbalance or misalignment or misfit. For example, the demands of the job exceed the capacity of the individual to cope effectively, or

the person's efforts are not reciprocated with equitable rewards.

Given all of the research that has been done on burnout, what do I think we have learned about how to deal with it? In my opinion, there are three principles that should be guiding our future work on interventions. First, preventing burnout is a better strategy than waiting to treat it after it becomes a problem. The personal, social, and organizational costs of burnout can be considerable in terms of physical health, psychological well-being, and work performance, so it does not make sense to incur those before taking any kind of ameliorative action. Instead, taking steps to minimize the risk of burnout before it happens is a more rational and prudent strategy. This does not, of course, argue against the use of treatment for people who are actually experiencing burnout; rather, it argues that the primary strategy should be to reduce the likelihood that burnout will occur.

Second, building engagement is the best approach to preventing burnout. People who are engaged with their work are better able to cope with the challenges they encounter, and thus are more likely to recover from stress. So building an engaged workforce, before there are major problems, is a great prevention strategy. I also find that framing issues around the positive end of the continuum, i.e., the goal of "where we would like to be" is a more effective way to start the conversation about solutions to the problem of burnout. How do we make this a great place to work, and a "workplace of choice"? What would make people want to work here and be fully engaged with their job? In other words, it is easier to get people focused on how to make things better, rather than just talking about the problems.

Third, organizational intervention can be more productive than individual intervention. If improvements can be made in job conditions

that affect a lot of employees, then those interventions will have a much larger effect. And to the extent that such interventions make changes in the way the organization works, they can begin to change the organizational culture, or climate. As I mentioned earlier, people rarely work in total isolation from others – instead, they are embedded within a social network. Each person is affected by this social environment, but each person is also part of the environment that affects everyone else. There is a lot of ongoing social interaction, and reciprocal exchanges, which can either contribute to a supportive and engaging environment, or produce the downward spiral of an uncivil and mean-spirited work community that can lead to burnout.

Focus on engagement

So what are the implications for prevention strategies? First, the goal needs to focus on moving people from burnout to engagement. The practical significance of the burnout-engagement continuum is that engagement represents a desired goal for any burnout intervention. Such a framework leads people to consider what factors in the workplace are likely to enhance employees' energy, vigor and resilience; to promote their involvement and absorption with the work tasks; and to ensure their dedication and sense of efficacy and success on the job.

An innovative example of this approach is a project on civility among coworkers. Incivility is characterized by a lack of consideration and by demonstrations of disrespect. Because of its milder nature and greater frequency, incivility provides a better research or intervention focus than relatively rare instances of abuse or aggression. A structured process, CREW (Civility, Respect, and Engagement at Work; Osatuke et al., 2009), has been demonstrated to improve civility among coworkers; these positive results suggested that improved civility would in turn affect employee burnout. Using a waiting list control

design, Leiter, Laschinger, Day, & Gilin-Oore (in press) demonstrated that CREW not only improved civility (replicating the Osatuke et al, 2009 findings), but that improvements in civility mediated improvements in the cynicism dimension of burnout, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and management trust. This analysis provided strong support for the assertion that improving working relationships plays an important role in alleviating burnout. Furthermore, interventions at the organizational level can effectively alter the organization's culture and improve civility among employees.

Organizational assessments

Second, there is a real value in providing organizations with the tools to carry out regular organizational assessments. Our research usually requires that we set up a contractual arrangement with an organization that is willing to collaborate with us and that meets our research requirements (e.g., large number of employees, repeated measures). Our collaborative process follows ethical research guidelines (e.g., confidentiality, full disclosure of results to all participants), but is also designed to provide added value to the organization and its employees, in return for their involvement in the process. What has emerged out of these repeated organizational collaborations is an organizational "check-up" process that provides evidence on the overall health and well-being of the organization, as well as indicators of areas of strength and areas of possible problems that need to be addressed (Leiter & Maslach, 2000). The organizations can use this information to determine how well they are doing, and where they could improve.

In particular, the six areas are critical for identifying areas of improvement. I have found that people often think of burnout simply in terms of exhaustion and work overload—and indeed, those two elements show a consistent rela-

tionship. But burnout is more than just exhaustion, and there are five more domains of job stressors than workload—and the organizational checkup process is one effective way of showing organizations what the other possibilities are. Although most people predict that workload will be the primary factor for burnout, it usually is not—other areas, such as fairness, or control, or workplace community, often turn out to be the more critical points of strain in the organization. The advantage of the AWS data for the six areas, both for the overall organization and for separate units within it, is that it provides a more individualized indicator of strengths and weaknesses, and points to more customized intervention strategies (rather than a "one-size-fits-all" approach).

Not only have organizations found this checkup process to be useful (one of the first organizations to work with us has now been doing these checkups annually for over ten years), they have found ways to adapt our research process to one that better suits their practical needs. For example, one organization came up with an innovative way of presenting the aggregate results, using percentage of positive scores and a color coding, so that all employees could immediately understand the message of what was working well and what was not.

Early detection strategies

Third, any attempt to prevent burnout has to rely on some sort of process to detect early signs of potential problems before they develop into major issues. Some of our research studies have found that the MBI and AWS measures have that kind of predictive power, in that certain patterns of scores at Time 1 can predict what will happen a year later. More specifically, we found that high scores on one dimension of burnout (i.e., either cynicism or exhaustion) were "early warnings" that those people were in a state of transition and change, but that if these people also

showed mismatch scores (“tipping points”) on at least one of the six areas, then their transition was to burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). In another study, we found that exhaustion scores at Time 1 were predictive of unit injury rates a year later (Leiter & Maslach, 2009). The predictive power of these two measures was demonstrated very dramatically to us when we were in the midst of a longitudinal assessment with an organization. When we looked at the Time 1 scores by unit, we were struck by the pattern of multiple “tipping points” in one of them, and we asked the organization what was going on there. Their response (after a long silence) was “how did you know?” It turned out that this particular department was having major problems, and that several employees were being dismissed.

The possibility of adapting our research measures into indicators of practical use is a very exciting one; although the measures were designed and tested for a different purpose, it would be a great example of “giving psychology away” if we could establish how these measures could best be interpreted at Time 1 so that interventions could be put in place to prevent the predicted negative outcome.

Conclusion

The goal of preventing burnout and building engagement is one of major importance, and one that researchers should be actively working to achieve. We already have knowledge and tools to contribute to this cause, but we need to be developing new partnerships with practitioners and conceptualizing our work on multiple levels, especially the social and organizational. ■

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*The program for organizational renewal, and all versions of the MBI, including the MBI-GS are now published online by Mind Garden, mindgarden.com



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