

Are You Suffering From Burnout at Work?

One of the most common topics of conversation with coaching clients and colleagues these days centers around burnout. Interestingly enough, burnout happens as much to companies and businesses as it does to individuals.

Burnout is a state or condition where one experiences fatigue, exhaustion, or frustration as a result of an intense focus on or attention to a goal, a cause, a lifestyle or a relationship that fails to produce the expected reward. In other words, there is a burnout formula: expectations divided by a reality that does not meet your expectations, regardless of the effort you expend, equals burnout. There is no direct correlation or relationship between hard work and burnout. There is, however, a direct correlation or relationship between hard work that produces little or no reward, and burnout. In fact many folks do actually work to exhaustion and they do achieve recognition, acknowledgement and reward. For these folks, burnout is not a part of the equation.

Am I experiencing burnout?

Burnout is a slow burn. Burnout is not an event; it's a process. Burnout is similar to erosion. One day you view a huge boulder under the waterfall. One day you return and it's half its original size. Then one day it's become a small stone; then a pebble. Burnout is an insidious and pernicious internal erosion.

Early symptoms of burnout include a deep sense of fatigue, tiredness, or exhaustion that seems to extend from the surface of your skin, through the tissues, ligaments, muscles, and deep into your bones and into the very cells of your body. Emotionally, you feel you are at or near the end of your emotional rope. Psychically, you live in a realm of negativity — experiencing a sense of dread, helplessness, hopelessness, negativity, cynicism or frustration. Relationships in and out of work suffer, they become exhausting; they are no longer fun and enjoyable. Work, itself, becomes an effort. Concentration is challenging. Staying focused is a formidable challenge. You feel and become detached, maybe even unattached from work and from the people in your life.

In the extreme, burnout manifests as an "uncaring" about life in general, about work life, family life....life. In the extreme, one cannot even muster the energy of anger, or resentment, or frustration; there is no energy, period. No feeling on any level (mental, emotional, physical, psychological, or spiritual). Just a numbness. Exhaustion. Life itself. becomes a huge effort.

Curiously, burnout affects folks who once felt alive, enthusiastic, excited, energetic, juicy, passionate and wonderfully curious about life and living. The upshot is their intention, passion and efforting to reach unattainable goals destroyed them in the process.

Organizations as the cause of burnout

All too often individuals believe they are the sole cause of their burnout. They feel they somehow are at fault for not being able to achieve work-life balance, or harmony in the way they live, or their inability to plan, organize, prioritize, schedule and execute, or their efforting to be a 10 on a scale of 1-10, in

everything they do, or because they are working for a manager whose expectations are exceedingly high and demanding. Sometimes, folks can be their own worst enemy and the cause of their own burnout. But, not always.

In fact, recent research is indicating that companies and businesses are often one of the worst causes of burnout. Burnout today is often built into the organizational structure. How so? Some of the organizational characteristics that lead to burnout are: impossible goals, countless layers of bureaucracy and just-plain-stupid policies and procedures, lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities, cloudy and confusing goals, endless and pointless meetings, and a pure "this is a business" mentality that focuses on people as functions while leaving the "human element" out of the equation.

So, at work, people begin to experiencing burnout when they feel they're in a "no-win" environment — that they'll never achieve no matter how long and how hard they keep working. Burnout happens when the writing on the wall spells "impossible" and "irrational", when there is no honest or logical rationale for the way business is conducted, for the way expectations are defined, for the way goals and results are determined, for the confusion about roles. When there is no connection between working hard and seeing actual light at the end of the tunnel (i.e., results as well as "light" as in the form of "intelligence", "right action" and "meaning") folks become despairing, incredulous, and cynical.

One of the first behaviors that leads to burnout is confusion about what is expected. When responsibilities change from day to day, week to week, or month to month, burnout ensues. Folks end up competing against themselves. Workers become confused, foggy, frustrated and unhappy. They feel like they are swimming upstream. Soon, they begin to feel hopeless, helpless and exhausted. Burnout.

Another circumstance that creates burnout is having unclear role definitions, not having a clear idea of what expected of you. For example, an employee and their boss are not on the same page when it comes to the employee's role and responsibilities. Sometimes, this is a blind spot neither the employee or the boss is aware of. Each assumes what they know to be true about the other. Soon the boss sees his/her expectations not being met and assumes the employee is incompetent, lazy or uninterested; in turn, the employee accuses their boss of being unfair, a bully or overbearing. Either way, there is a major disconnect that leads to frustration, resentment, and ill will. Burnout.

A third circumstance that leads to burnout is simple overload. Pushing added expectations, added tasks and added responsibilities on to an employee does not automatically mean the employee can handle the overload. More work does not produce better results. The manager often makes assumptions that should not be made. When the employee takes on additional duties and becomes overloaded, the task load is not handled well. The result of overload is resentment and frustration. Burnout.

The solution

If the issue is you and the way you work, the solution lies in your own hands. If it's your organization and its culture, you'll need to consider whether anything is likely to change. The final solution, simple, perhaps not easy, may be to leave.

If you feel you're in the throes of burnout, your first action is to take time for yourself, to engage in some deep self-reflection and look for root causes of the burnout issue. Then, consider action steps to reduce or eliminate the degree of burnout you are experiencing.

Questions for self-reflection

Do you have a pattern of taking on more work than you can handle? If so, why?

Does your boss continue to give you more work than you can reasonably handle? If so, have you spoken with your boss? With what result?

Do you ever feel helpless or hopeless at work? Frustrated, resentful? Why?

Is overload a cultural issue at your organization? Why? How did that come to be? Do managers and supervisors feel overloading is fair? How do they justify overloading employees?

Are you and your boss on the same page when it comes to their expectations of you and your expectations of you? If not, have you had a discussion with your boss about the inconsistencies? If not, why not?

If you're feeling burned out, are you aware that burnout can have serious, very serious, physical, mental, emotional and psychological repercussions.....sooner rather than later? Is that OK? Are you choosing to let it be OK? Are you in denial about the burnout you are experiencing?

Do you feel you work hard with little to no reward? What action can you take to remedy this situation?

What one or two steps can you, or your organization, take this week and this month to reduce the intensity of the burnout you may be experiencing?

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