Employee burnout management

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Abstract

Employee burnout is a state of physical and emotional exhaustion. It has negative consequences on the productivity of a staff in an organization. The present discusses the factors responsible for employee burnout as well as the various management strategies for addressing it.

Introduction

Employee burnout is a psychological process involving series of attitudinal and emotional reactions exhibited by an employee due to job related as well as personal experiences (1). Often the first sign of burnout is a feeling of being emotionally exhausted from one's work. It can occur when employees experience long-term stress in their job, or when they have worked in a physically or emotionally draining role for a long time.

For such employees, they might experience the feeling of being drained or used up and physically fatigued. Waking up in the morning may be accompanied by a feeling of dread at the thought of having to put in another day on the job. For someone who was once enthusiastic about a job and idealistic about what could be accomplished, feelings of emotional exhaustion may come somewhat unexpectedly, but the boss or co-workers may see the person's emotional exhaustion as a natural response to working too hard.

In turn, their natural response is to tell the victim to "Take it easy," or to say "You need a vacation." Instead of doing either of these things (neither of which would provide permanent relief anyway), the victim does what many employees in similar situations have done - she or he copes by depersonalizing relationships with the boss and coworkers. She or he develops a detached air, becomes cynical of relationships with others, and feels callous toward others and the organization.

Managers who become victims of burnout are especially harmful to organizations because such managers create a ripple effect, spreading burnout to their subordinates (2). Unfortunately, for the friends and family of an employee who has reached this stage, the cynical and uncaring attitudes that develop toward co-workers, boss, or subordinates could also be directed at non-work contacts, having a negative effect on all of the person's social interactions.

In addition to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, is the burnout feeling of low personal accomplishment. Many individuals begin their careers with expectations that they will be able to make great contributions to their employer and society. After a year or two on the job, they begin to realize they are not living up to these expectations. Many reasons could be attributed to the gap that exists between a new employee's goals and the veteran's accomplishments, such as unrealistically high expectations because

of a lack of exposure to the job during training, constraints placed on the worker by organizational policies and procedures, inadequate resources to perform one's job, co-workers who are frequently uncooperative and occasionally rebellious, and a lack of feedback about one's successes (3).

These factors almost guarantee that employees will be frustrated in their attempts to reach their goals, yet these employees may not recognize the organization's role in causing their frustration. Instead they may feel personally responsible and think of themselves as failures. When combined with emotional exhaustion, feelings of low personal accomplishment may reduce motivation to a point where performance is in fact impaired and that, in turn, leads to future failures (4). The present discusses about the various ways of managing burnout among employees.

Factors responsible for employee burnout

Two major factors including organizational and personal, may lead to employee burnout (5).

Organizational factors responsible for employee burnout include: a lack of rewards; excessive and outdated policies and procedures, work-paced jobs, and close supervision which undermine an employee's feeling of control, a lack of clear-cut expectations and job responsibilities, combined with conflict -both of which prevent an employee from being productive, and the lack of support groups or cohesive work groups, which, in turn, prevent an employee from acquiring information needed to cope with the other three conditions.

Personal factors leading to employee include:

· *Idealistic expectations:* The employee has unrealistic expectations about how the organization will work, and these, when combined with actual organizational experience, produce "reality shock." For example, the employee might expect rewards for good work, the chance to influence decisions affecting the job, friendly and understanding co-workers and supervisors, a clear understanding about what's expected, and adequate resources (including time and money) to get the job done.

· *Idealistic job and career goals:* Organizational conditions that interfere with performance are bothersome only to employees who want to attain high levels of performance. An employee who thinks it is possible to do everything becomes a natural target of burnout. Employees in mid-career crisis reflect burnout reactions, especially feelings of low personal accomplishment. Although many of these employees may have been doing well by others' standards, by their own standards they may regard themselves as failures.

· *Personal responsibility for low personal accomplishment:* Employees with feelings of low personal accomplishment, those who feel most personally responsible for their own failure, experience the most burnout. Essentially, the employees who care the most can experience burnout the most.

Effect of employee burnout on both an organization and the employee

Employee burnout could lead to the following:

· *Development of withdrawal behaviors:* Employees want to avoid what discomforts them, and those organizational conditions that can cause burnout are certainly discomforting. Under these circumstances a logical reaction is to withdraw-leave work early, arrive at work late, take long breaks, and stay away from the workplace as much as possible.

· *Interpersonal friction:* As employees begin feeling cynical and callous toward others, small differences lead to monumental arguments, work assignments begin to seem like insurmountable challenges, and friends begin to look like foes.

· *Decline in performance:* As a subtle result of burnout, the quantity of an employee's performance may not diminish but the quality may.

· *Setback in family life:* Just as burnout leads to behaviors that have a negative impact on the quality of one's work life, it can also lead to behaviors that cause a deterioration of the quality of home life. In a study by Susan Jackson and Christina Maslach, burnout was assessed in 142 married, male police officers (6). Their wives were asked, independently, to describe how these officers behaved when interacting with their families at home. Emotionally exhausted officers were described by their wives as coming home tense, anxious, upset, and angry, and as complaining about the problems they faced at work. These officers were also more withdrawn at home -preferring to be left alone, instead of sharing time with their families. The wives' reports also revealed that officers who had developed negative attitudes toward the people they dealt with also had fewer close friends.

· *Health-related problems:* In the study of police families described above (6), burnout victims were more likely to suffer from insomnia and to use medications of various kinds. The officers also reported using alcohol as a way of coping with their burnout as did female nurses in an unpublished study, suggesting that using alcohol to cope with burnout is not unique to police officers or to males.

Management of employee burnout

Employing burnout can be tackled and resolved using the following strategies:

· *Promoting time off:* Employees need free time dedicated to family, friends, and hobbies to relax and recharge their emotional batteries, so reassure staff that the center will run fine without them on their day off.

· *Appropriate staffing:* Understaffed workplaces lead to overworked employees. Keep staff levels appropriate to the workload and demand to prevent taxed workers and excessive overtime hours.

· *Flexible schedules:* Sometimes, a healthy work-life balance means working longer hours one day and shorter the next, or starting a shift earlier or later depending on the day. Give employees the opportunity to "flex" their schedule when appropriate.

· *Providing a nurturing culture:* Frequent check-ins with staff to ensure they are doing fine, creating team and buddy systems, allowing for "vent sessions," making time for fun and humor, and regular acknowledgement of excellent performance can go a long way toward creating a less stressful workplace.

Conclusion

Employee burnout has negative consequences on employees and employers. The study has highlighted the factors affecting employee burnout and strategies for addressing it. By introducing a healthy work-life balance, burnout can be dramatically reduced, resulting in a happier, healthier and productive staff.

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