

How to Prevent Employee Burnout



We all know what burnout looks like.

It's the stressed-out manager who proclaims they've "**had it**" and books the next flight to Cancun.

The start-up co-founder **working 130 hour weeks** who claims he "**can't take all this bullsh*t anymore**" and goes on a week-long bender in Miami.

The boss who **yells with such intensity** you fear he might have a heart attack.

It is so common that everyone in any career – engineers, sales managers, tech support personnel, etc. – is susceptible to burnout. Despite being so common, many managers aren't aware of why burnout happens or how to keep it from happening. But they need to know.

Being able to understand burnout, its causes, and how to prevent it is essential in order to maintain a positive environment and keep the best talent on the team.

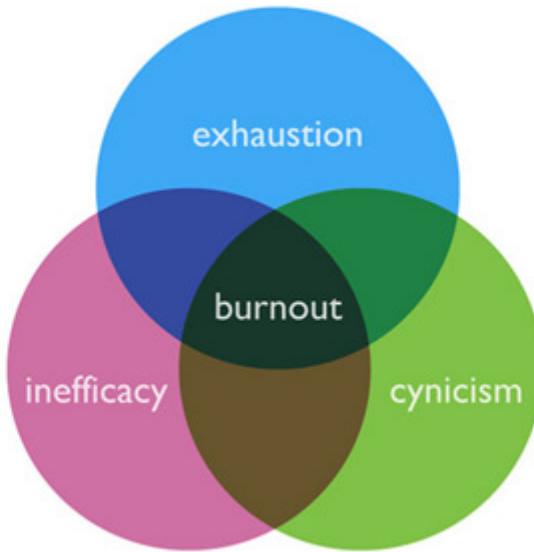
Burnout Defined

Burnout is an individual's response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors within the workplace (Maslach et al., 2001).

It doesn't simply result from working too many hours in a high-demand environment. Rather, it is a multidimensional response with many complex causes.

Below is information compiled from Maslach and colleagues (2001) on the three dimensions of burnout, its causes, and how to prevent it.

How to Know if an Employee is Burned Out:



1. Exhaustion results from the depletion of emotional resources to cope with the current work environment. This is the stressed out, overwhelmed employee.
2. Cynicism is an individual's distant attitude toward the job. This is the disgruntled employee.
3. Inefficacy is a reduction in personal accomplishment. This is the stressed out employee who has developed a cynical attitude and has given up trying.

Causes of Burnout

Below is a list of common things that cause workplace burnout:

Work-Related Factors

Job Demands – overwhelming job demands (aka overload). We all know the team member with a stack of papers on their desk, a to-do list that spans two pages, and a panicked look on their face.

Role Conflict – conflicting job demands. This is the start-up co-founder who is texting his engineering team under the table while at a meeting with VCs.

Role Ambiguity – a lack of adequate information to do the job well. Time to re-think your “VP of Disruption,” “culture leader,” and “anything ninja” job postings.

Lack of Appropriate Resources – improper training and/or inadequate resources to execute the job effectively. This is the new engineer told to “go for it” with a Dell from 1995.

Lack of Social Support – lack of social support from supervisors has more of an effect on burnout than lack of social support from co-workers. Ignore and ostracize your employees if you want them to quit.

Lack of Feedback – related to all three dimensions of burnout. Feedback is like hard work; if you don't give it, you'll never get exactly what you want.

Little Participation in Decision Making – the less involved employees are in decision making processes, the higher the rates of burnout. Time to delegate the choosing of which donuts to buy on Monday morning.

Personality Factors

Low Levels of Hardiness (a sense of control over events and openness to change) are associated with higher burnout scores. This is the co-worker who thinks everything is out of his hands.

Burnout is higher among individuals who have an external locus of control (attributing events and achievements to external events, other people, or to chance). This is the head of marketing who credits the success of the new campaign to luck.

Burned-out individuals cope with stressful events in a passive, defensive way. This is the stressed out employee who has given up.

Person x Context Factors

Workload Mismatch – overloaded with work or performing the wrong kind of work. An example of this is the engineer who is transferred to the marketing team and feels useless and unhappy.

Mismatch in Control – insufficient control over the resources needed to do their work effectively or insufficient authority to pursue their work in the most effective manner. This is an individual working for a non-profit who lacks the funds necessary to execute her strategy.

Lack of Appropriate Awards – is associated with burnout:

1. Insufficient financial rewards – not receiving salary or benefits commensurate with achievements.
2. Lack of social rewards – when hard work is ignored and not appreciated by others.
3. Lack of intrinsic rewards – lacking pride in doing something important and doing it well.

We all know the hard-working, underappreciated employee who quit after receiving news that he will be denied a raise (again) due to budget cuts.

Loss of a Positive Connection with Others – feeling ostracized and/or not sharing similar values with the group. We all know the employee that has gone rogue is usually burned out.

Unfairness – unequal workload or pay, cheating, and/or evaluations or promotions that are handled inappropriately. This is the frustration that results in the workplace when the super-friendly but under-qualified staffer is promoted by her buddy, the boss.

Conflict between values – doing something unethical or not in accordance with their own values. This is the jaded young attorney who quits his job at a cut throat firm to “fight the good fight” as a public defender.

Burnout is an individual experience that is influenced by social, organizational, personality factors, and/or an interaction among all three. The relationship of the individual with their work can be disrupted by any one, or a combination of, these factors resulting in burnout.

Effects of Burnout in the Workplace

Burnout not only affects the employee's performance, but impacts the performance of

the team and work environment. Below are 7 effects of burnout in the workplace (Maslach et al., 2001):

1. Job withdrawal: Intention to leave the job, Absenteeism, Turnover
2. Lower productivity
3. Ineffectiveness
4. Decreased job satisfaction
5. Reduced commitment to the job and/or organization
6. Greater personal conflict with colleagues
7. Disrupts coworkers' job tasks

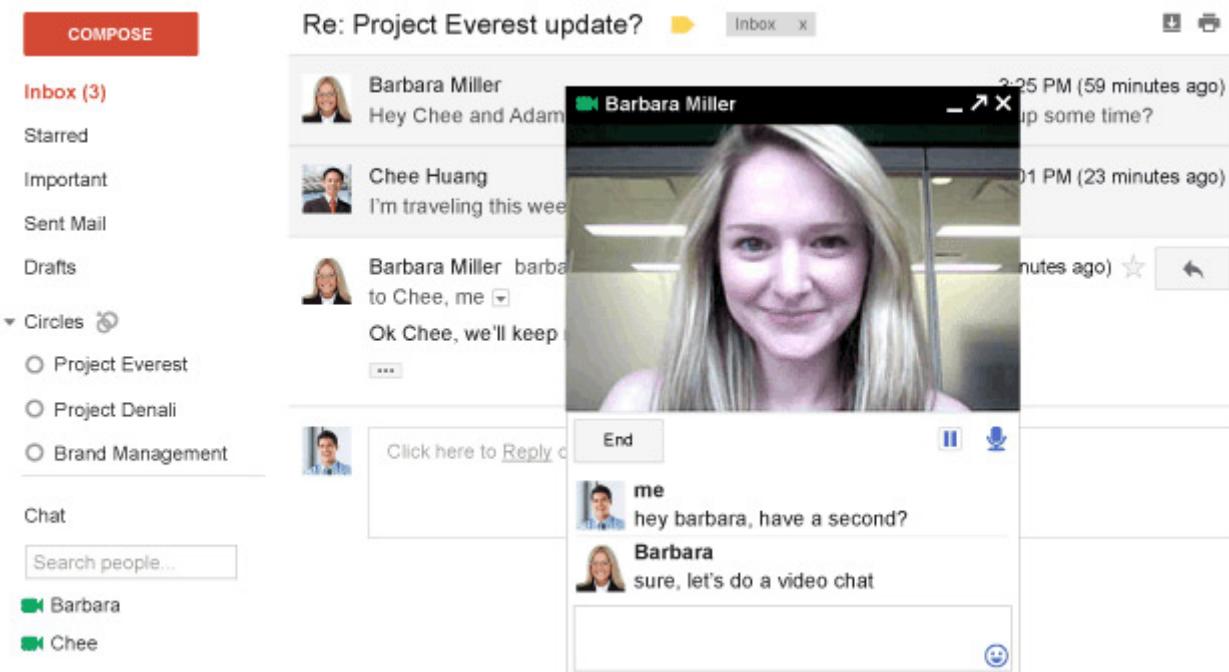
Creating a work environment that prevents burnout and is conducive to productivity, employee engagement, and overall satisfaction is critical to having an amazing team.

How to Prevent Burnout in the Workplace

No manager, co-founder, or CEO wants to lose their best talent to burnout. However, most don't know that their employee is burned out until it is too late.

Below are 30 ways to prevent burnout in your company. They have been compiled from the leading researcher in the field of burnout (Maslach, 2001) and supported by interviews with corporate CEOs and lessons I have learned from co-founding a startup.

- 1. Be Realistic When Assigning Tasks.** Delegate an amount of work that is challenging, but not overwhelming.
- 2. Follow the Passion.** Ensure that each member of your team is in the position they feel most passionate about. Create new positions or be willing to move skilled employees to different positions if they feel more passionate about them.
- 3. Allow Side Projects.** Allow your employees to spend some time working on a work-related side project that they feel passionate about. Some of Google's most innovative ideas came from an employee's side project.



- 4. Keep Reasonable Work Hours.** While developing Macintosh, Steve Jobs made "working 90 hours a week and loving it" t-shirts. Employees differ on how many hours they can

work. Some will devote 120 hours a week and love it. Others will try to get out of working a full 40. Don't ask too much of your employees. Allow for sick days, paid time off, and vacation days.

5. Schedule Breaks. Allow and encourage your employees to have a full one hour lunch as well as 15 minute breaks throughout the day. They should use the time to take a walk, socialize, make personal phone calls, or stretch.

6. Grant Each Employee One "Must Have." When Marissa Mayer suspects an employee might burn out, she allows them time off if they need to be "home for Tuesday night dinners," or on time for their daughter's soccer games.

7. Be Flexible. When a deadline or goal is unrealistic, change it so it is attainable. If someone who is assigned a task isn't the right person for the job, re-assign it.

8. Don't Spread Your Team Too Thin. Reduce the number of parallel tasks that an individual or team is working on. Ensure that they are not overwhelmed with their to-do list.

9. Define Concrete Roles. Ensure that each team member has a specific job description, understands their role, and is aware of their expected contribution to the company.

10. Equip Your Team With Proper Tools. Set your employees up for success with the right tools to execute flawlessly.

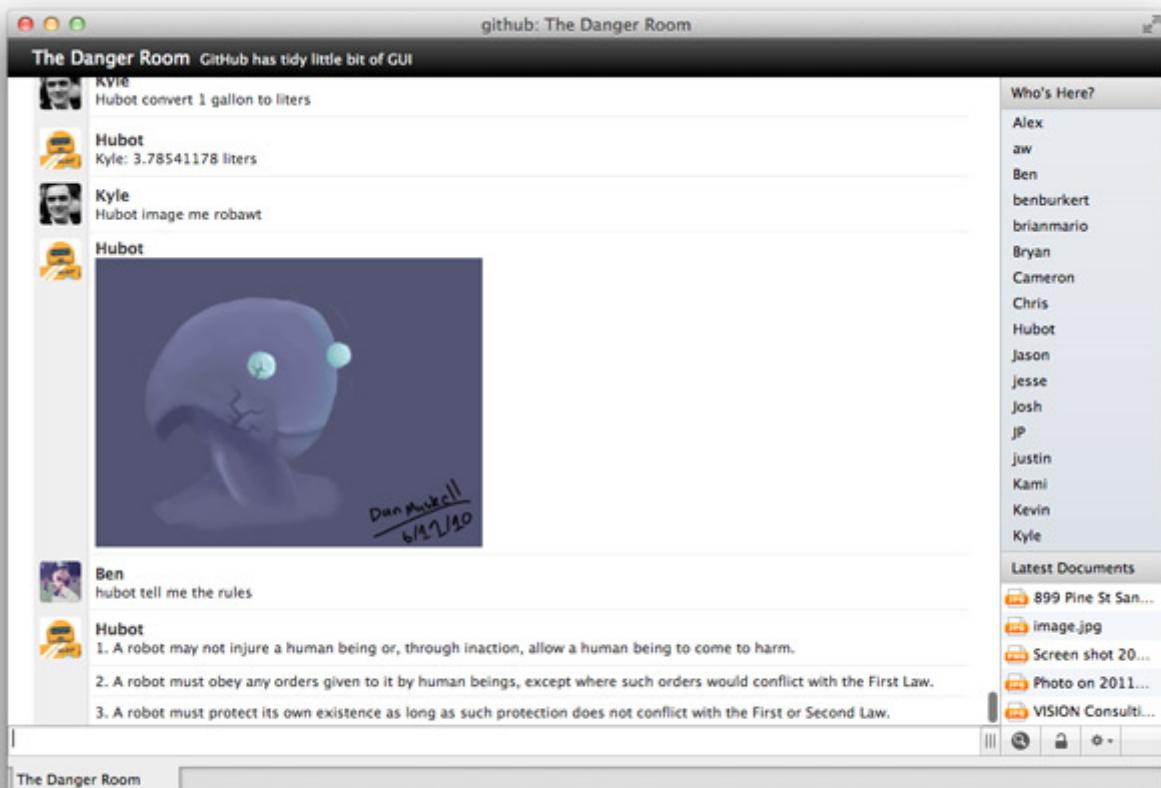
11. Provide Adequate Resources. Ensure that there are sufficient funds to execute strategies effectively.

12. Train Your Team Well. Ensure that they know their job and they know it well.

13. Provide Ample Support. Managers should spend time listening to and addressing employees' concerns.

14. Create a Supportive Culture. Make sure that being supportive is a company value. Model supportive behavior and reward employees who exemplify your supportive culture.

15. Encourage Socializing. A moderate amount of socialization is optimal for team bonding to occur. Allow for employees to freely socialize on breaks, at lunch, or after work. At Talkdesk, we have a channel on HipChat dedicated to posting funny content. A little laugh goes a long way.



16. Give Them a Treat. Surprise your team with a treat you know they will love after a tough week or meeting a stressful goal. Mix it up with food, gift certificates, allowing them to leave early, or having a party at work.

17. Stock Your Kitchen Well. Take a lesson from the Google playbook and make your workplace feel a little like home. Make sure that your team is well fed and revved up!



18. Be Hands On. Spend time getting to know each employee on a personal level. Take them out to lunch individually and talk about non-business related topics.

19. A Team That Plays Together Stays Together. Build team morale, inclusiveness, and job satisfaction by scheduling company activities like snowboarding, go-kart racing, laser tag, or kickball. Be creative and make it fun!



20. Don't Tolerate Cattiness. Address any behavior that is not in line with the company value of supportiveness immediately.

21. Be Fair. Always make sure that decisions are fair and ethical. Never ask an employee to complete a task that may challenge their values or elicit ethical concerns.

22. Provide Ample Feedback. Employees must know when they have hit a grand slam and when they struck out. Take time to meet with each employee to provide direct feedback.

23. Acknowledge, Reward, and Promote. Each employee's contribution to the company should be acknowledged. Reward excellent performances with bonuses, awards, and/or promotions.

24. Allow Each Employee to Make Company Decisions. Make each employee a master of a certain domain and allow them to make decisions that affect the company.

25. Make Their Voice Heard. When an employee expresses frustration or concern, address it immediately. Make sure that they know you are taking appropriate action or give an explanation as to why you can't meet their needs.

26. Educate Employees on Burnout. Provide information about burnout and how employees can prevent it. Hold a seminar where employees can ask relevant questions about burnout. Consider asking a mental health professional to mediate the discussion.

27. Increase Coping Skills. Help employees increase their ability to handle and prevent stress. Hire a professional to teach coping skills and relaxation techniques.

28. Allow for Paid "Mental Health Days." This is time that employees can choose to spend doing something that makes them happy. A little paid time off will go a long way.

29. Make Every Employee Responsible for Preventing Burnout. Have a "when you see

something, say something" policy. Encourage employees to alert a manager when they suspect a co-worker might be burning out.

30. Create a Fun Environment. Any workplace where an employee is excited to come to work will help reduce burnout. Buy Nerf guns, foosball tables, mini-helicopters, dart boards, and ping pong tables. Encourage good times, laughs, and a super-fun environment.

Burnout is a common phenomenon that no one is immune to. It is important to structure your work environment so that every employee feels happy and motivated and has the tools and support they need to succeed. Because the last thing you want is the stressed out, disgruntled employee stealing the company credit card and going on a binge in Vegas.

Works cited: Maslach, C., Schaufeli, W.B. and Leiter, M.P. (2001), "Job burnout," Annual Review of Psychology, Vol. 52 No. 1, pp. 397-422.

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