

# Spotting employee burnout early

By Sue Bowness

## First, understand burnout

Burnout is a feeling of emotional, creative, and physical exhaustion. "When people are burnt out, they have a difficult time getting involved outside themselves and caring about somebody else's problems, like a patient's or a client's," says Michael Leiter, director of the Centre for Organizational Research and Development at Acadia University in Wolfville, N.S., and the author of three books on burnout. "People who are burnt out are very distant and cynical. They feel ineffective and they don't have confidence." Leiter says burnout can be seen in employees' levels of energy, involvement and effectiveness.

## Recognize outward symptoms

"The first signal you might pick up on is chronic exhaustion," says Leiter. The second, he says, is cynical remarks about work. Also keep an eye out for sleep disruption, ulcers, headaches and high blood pressure, says Beverly Beuermann-King, a Little Britain, Ont.-based stress expert who runs the wellness-training website WorkSmartLiveSmart.com. Watch out, too, for predictors of future burnout, such as workaholicism. According to Beuermann-King, workaholics are at risk because while they enjoy their work, they can allow it to become too large a part of their lives. "Having balance means that other areas of your life besides work are also giving you satisfaction and self-esteem."

## Broach the topic casually

Beuermann-King suggests that burnout is a topic to be approached conversationally, rather than confrontationally. Focusing on the employee's specific actions rather than their personality increases the chances that they will see you as a sympathetic problem-solver and not an accusing employer. "Say 'I've noticed that you've been away more, you don't seem as enthusiastic, there seem to be more things getting to you,'" advises Beuermann-King. Burnout is where a person is feeling overworked and underappreciated so figure out what their sources of burnout are; as a team leader it may be very easy to deal with."

Paul Gibbons, managing partner in the Vancouver-based recruitment and retention firm People First Solutions, says it can come down to just offering a sympathetic ear. "It sounds like a cliché, but communication is key," says Gibbons. "Ask them about how things are going, how's the workload. Just allowing employees to have a voice takes a lot of the mental fatigue away."

## Find the cause and treat it

In his new book *Banishing Burnout: Six Strategies for Improving Your Relationship with Work* Leiter and co-author Christina Maslach identify six burnout factors to evaluate on both an individual and organizational level. They include size and manageability of workload; whether a worker has control or autonomy in their job; whether there exists a system of rewards and recognition; whether the workplace community is supportive; the perceived fairness of the organization; and whether the organization's values are in line with the individual's values.

Take note: the definition of burnout can be very subjective. While one employee might feel like he has the energy to keep working even after 8 p.m., another might be exhausted by half past five. Similarly, one employee might be able to juggle multiple projects easily, but another would feel overwhelmed with the same combination. That's why it's good to get to know your employees' individual working styles. If possible, match employees with projects for which they are most suitable. Better yet, recommends Leiter, give employees choice in the projects they take on rather than foisting assignments on them. "If they feel like they don't have control,

people are more vulnerable to being burnt out," says Gibbons. "If you decide to take on a big project, you can manage your energy better than if it is dumped in your lap."

Successfully addressing one employee's unhappiness can ultimately improve the whole workplace environment, since burnout is often a matter of degree. If you've had an employee burn out or even suspect burnout within your workplace, the future of your company could depend on your ability to take action right away. Says Leiter: "It's hard to build a strong business on people who are even a little burnt out."

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*Sue Bowness is a contributing writer for Canadian Business Magazine.*