



Burnout



When Your Employee Tells You They're Burned Out

A guide to responding with compassion — and a plan.

by **Noémie Le Pertel**

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Published on HBR.org / May 10, 2023 / Reprint [H07MOD](#)



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Amidst record-breaking job turnover ([50.5 million Americans](#) left their jobs in 2022), more and more leaders have been feeling pressure to pay attention to the well-being of their workforce. These days, many professionals — [one Deloitte study](#) puts the number at 77% — have experienced burnout at their current job.

When an employee comes to you expressing burnout concerns, it can feel challenging to know whether — or how — to deal with it. Lacking

training in well-being, many managers don't know how to respond in the moment, much less how to address the systemic drivers of burnout.

This may prompt leaders to suggest traditional Band-Aid approaches, such as recommending some time off, an afternoon yoga class, or better time-management skills. While these may be helpful for releasing stress, they're unlikely to address the root causes of burnout, such as workload, difficult workplace relationships, or a lack of autonomy.

It can be challenging for even the most enlightened leaders to have conversations about employee burnout while managing the needs of the business. "I was trained in business, not therapy," as one of my CEO clients put it. "How do I have this conversation in a way that will be productive and show I care about my people?"

Based on my work advising C-suite leaders on workforce resilience and change initiatives, I've identified five steps leaders can take when an employee comes to them feeling burned out.

1. Treat your employee's burnout concerns seriously.

It may be tempting for a manager to dismiss an employee's self-described burnout as an exaggeration, reflecting a general sense of overwhelm or a lack of resilience. But whether or not their situation meets the official definition of burnout, it's important to take them seriously, because something is going on.

Many employees feel unappreciated by their leaders — in fact, only one in four employees feel their employer cares about their well-being. Make time to address the situation as soon as possible through a one-on-one-conversation, not a rushed hallway chat. This shows that you're concerned and that you care. Taking the time to listen deeply will strengthen the relationship.

In order to ensure your employee feels heard, make sure to allow them to fully express their thoughts without interrupting them. Try to wait seven seconds, or approximately two slow deep breath cycles, before responding. Allow their words to sink in. It's also important not to make assumptions about their feelings or the causes of their burnout. Practice active listening by repeating back what you've heard. Ask if you've understood them correctly, and make sure you don't end the conversation until your employee feels that they've expressed what they need to say.

2. Understand their experience of burnout.

When an employee is upset, it can be hard to determine whether they're temporarily feeling negative emotions, are exhausted in the moment, or are truly burned out. Through my research and consulting, I've developed three questions that can help leaders quickly assess how their employees are experiencing burnout:

Do you feel competent and effective in your job?

This determines how the employee feels about their efficacy, job performance, and ability to fulfill their job responsibilities. Their answer will help you understand if they would benefit from extra support, training, or coaching in order to be more effective.

Do you feel emotionally exhausted in your job and/or do you experience physical symptoms?

This covers negative emotions, fatigue, and physical health symptoms, such as stress-related headaches, frequent illness, insomnia, or anxiety. High-driving performers sometimes continue to perform well while their health suffers, and this can lead a productive employee to leave your organization.

Do you find yourself feeling cynical or caring less than you used to about your colleagues or clients?

This captures a change in the employee's connection to the work at hand, which often shows up as a general sense of cynicism. People who are normally inspired and dedicated to a cause may notice they're burned out when they experience a loss of meaning in what used to be purposeful work for them.

Ask your employee how often they experience each of these phenomena: rarely, some of the time, or often. Moderate experiences of all three dimensions might indicate the employee is at risk for burnout, while "often" means they may already be burned out.

3. Identify the root causes of their burnout.

Identifying the type of burnout your employee is experiencing is crucial for creating solutions. For instance, investing in an employee's development can help counter feelings of cynicism about whether their organization really values them.

Start by asking what their biggest stressors are. Most often, your employee has a decent sense of what's provoking their feelings of burnout. If they don't, you can prompt further by asking them to think about a specific time they felt most stressed or burned out. What was happening at that moment? For instance, they might say they're feeling understaffed on a project, which is causing them to work late and disrupting their sleep. This enables you to get a quick sense of whether the sources of their stress are coming from home (for instance, financial pressures or caregiving responsibilities) or workplace demands (a mismatch between expectations and the time or resources they have to deliver on them).

4. Consider short- and long-term solutions.

As a leader, you need to address your employee's challenge in the here and now, as well as over the longer term, and those solutions may differ.

To start, ask your employee: What would make this better now? They might have suggestions — for example, extra support for a project, renegotiating an unrealistic deadline, or time off. Listen to their ask and see whether you can make a short-term accommodation.

Next, ask them: What will make this better in the long term? After all, an employee may need a week off to reset, but they'll eventually need to come back to work. They may have suggestions for more substantive changes, or you can start ideating on your own. Depending on their needs, possibilities may include giving them more flexibility in how they work, shifting who they work with (moving them to a different team or project), or reconfiguring their job responsibilities. You don't need to solve all their problems at this point, but it's useful to start thinking about options.

For instance, one client I was advising had an associate who appeared disengaged and said he was experiencing burnout. He had debilitating migraines and was missing deadlines. After talking to him, my client discovered the employee had recently acquired a diagnosis of a neurological condition that was aggravated by environmental factors (such as fluorescent lighting and lack of airflow). In the short term, my client worked with him to create a remote-work solution. This relieved stress and allowed him to perform better while his manager worked on longer-term solutions, including control over lighting, air flow, and ergonomic support. This enabled him to return to the office and improve his engagement.

Another client firm of mine included a senior partner who experienced a death in the family, placing him in a primary caregiving role. He went from being a top performer with infectious energy to making cynical comments in meetings. Year-end reviews showed he was impacting team morale. We helped the partner increase staffing on his client engagements so he could step back and take some time off to put care structures in place, while we provided coaching to address his leadership behaviors.

5. Create a monitoring plan.

Solving burnout isn't a one-time fix; it's important to recognize that changes have to be sustained over time. Work with your employee to define what their ideal state of well-being and engagement looks like in the long term — for instance, feeling energized after work or engaging in meaningful high-quality connections daily in the flow of work. From there, work backwards to identify clear steps that you and your employee can act on, such as setting aside distraction-free time for deep work. Plan regular check-ins to monitor progress.

Burnout is affecting both leaders and employees — and contributing to a talent shortage that's challenging and costly to navigate. When an employee comes to you saying they're burned out, you need to be prepared to deal with it. By following these five strategies, you'll be better equipped to solve your burnout problems and retain your talent.

This article was originally published online on May 10, 2023.



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