Preventing Staff Burnout

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Background

In May 2019, the World Health Organization **defined burnout** as *"a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:*

- *feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;*
- *increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and*
- *reduced professional efficacy."* [1]

World Health Organization

[1] World Health Organization - Burn-out an "occupational phenomenon": International Classification of Diseases

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Background

Harvard Business Review (HBR) cited six main causes of burnout[2]

1. Unsustainable workload
2. Perceived lack of control
3. Insufficient rewards for effort
4. Lack of a supportive community
5. Lack of fairness
6. Mismatched values and skills

[2] Harvard Business Review *Beyond Burned Out*, February 10, 2021

Background

HBR conducted a survey to analyze the state of burnout and well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic. They learned that burnout is a global problem:

89%	of respondents said their work life was getting worse
85%	said their well-being had declined
62%	of the people who were struggling to manage their workloads had experienced burnout "often" or "extremely often" in the previous three months
57%	felt that the pandemic had a "large effect on" or "completely dominated" their work
56%	said their job demands had increased
55%	of all respondents didn't feel that they had been able to balance their home and work life — with 53% specifically citing homeschooling

Background

Burnout was a problem before the pandemic and was made worse in several key areas because opportunities were missed:

We didn't adjust workloads	We didn't give people control and flexibility
We allowed more meetings and unhealthful levels of screen time	We didn't recognize the extent of people's struggles

Hope is Not Lost

HBR's research uncovered several factors that predicted <u>lower levels</u> of burnout:

1. Feeling a sense of purpose
2. Having a manageable workload
   - Organizations should communicate more about priorities and about what can be put on the back burner until time permits (or perhaps forever).
   - Address meeting fatigue
3. Foster a climate where people are comfortable discussing mental health and where they can express themselves
4. Empathetic and caring managers
   - Being active and engaged listeners
   - Asking and caring about challenges and difficulties individuals are facing
5. Having a strong sense of connection to family and friends

Recommendations

Recommendations

"...burnout is more than just an employee problem; it's an organizational problem that requires an organizational solution." - *HBR*

While these issues are ***organizational*** issues, we still prescribe ***self-care*** as the cure for burnout. Rather than put the burden of solving the problem squarely on the shoulders of individual employees, let's adapt to focus on what we can do as an organization.

Before We Get Started

Some prerequisites to making a meaningful and organization-wide change:

- Recognize that some of the recommendations require a change in mindset and culture
- Train and support our leaders to recognize and address burnout
- Model, champion and support the desired changes
- Be flexible, adaptable and learn as we go
- Listen more than talk

Healthy Practices

1. Unfocus your brain. Schedule some breaks into every workday and allow your mind to travel for a bit of freestyle riffing. That's the place where our minds find innovation and creativity and often make better decisions than the focused mind.[3]
   - **Tactic:** Block planning/focus time on your calendars

2. Communicate effectively.[4] Take the time to be sure your message doesn't come across frustrated or angry. Make sure emails and calls use clear and respectful language.

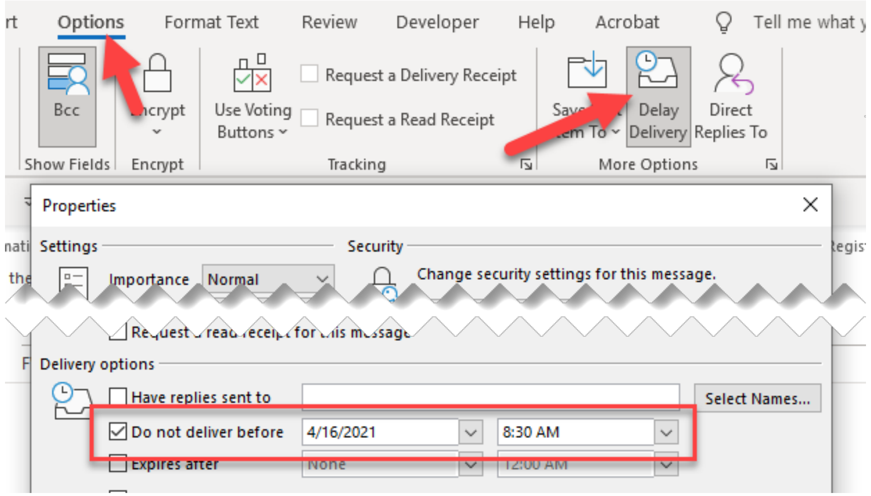
3. Manage your calendar wisely. Committing to too many meetings leaves us all stressed. If your role in the discussion is not clear, ask the meeting organizer if your attendance is necessary.

[3] NPR - *Too Much Focusing Is Draining. Here's A Better Strategy*
[4] American Institute of Stress - *Using Key Communication Skills To Manage Stress*

Healthy Practices

4. Realize that not every email or IM is urgent. Don't allow incoming messages to distract from focus time. Set aside specific blocks of time to work through your inbox. [5, 6]

- **Tactic:** Turn off sound and pop-up notifications to all instant messaging platforms, work and personal
- **Tactic:** Schedule time or use the time between meetings to answer IMs and emails
- **Tactic:** Be respectful of other's status and refrain from messaging them when they are busy, away or at lunch
- **Tactic:** If sending emails after hours or when someone is OOO, utilize the Outlook delayed send feature for low-priority or non-urgent messages



[5] The New Yorker - E-Mail is Making Us Miserable
[6] yahoo!finance – Is instant messaging at work stressing us out

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Managers and Leadership

1. Model the behavior you are looking to encourage

2. Prioritize and encourage time-off
   - Everyone needs time to re-energize and decompress
   - Model the desired behavior by actively scheduling and taking time off
   - During one-on-ones ask about upcoming/planned time off
   - Encourage people to disconnect from email and Teams when they are OOO
   - Respect boundaries and avoid contacting individuals when they are off work

3. Respect your employees' schedules. "Flexible work boundaries" does not mean "work without boundaries."
   - Avoid sending late night or early morning messages, and respect scheduled time off

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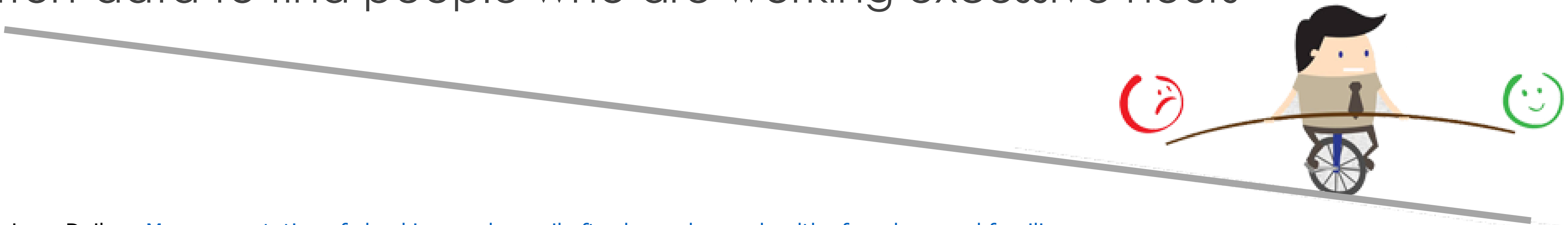
Managers and Leadership

4. Support flexible schedules where possible. Some employees may need certain parts of the day to take care of family, supervise schoolwork, etc.
5. Create equitable workloads
   - Staff who already have a full (or overflowing) plate cannot be expected to take on additional work for other team members
   - Set a reasonable pace and workload, and adapt timelines as needed to support absences
   - Don't arbitrarily spread additional work to other team members
6. Be clear about priorities. Every team member should be able to prioritize their top three initiatives. Use the 80/20 rule [7]:
   - Spend 80 percent of your time on the 20 percent of your tasks that are deemed most important
7. Review effort data to find people who are working excessive hours

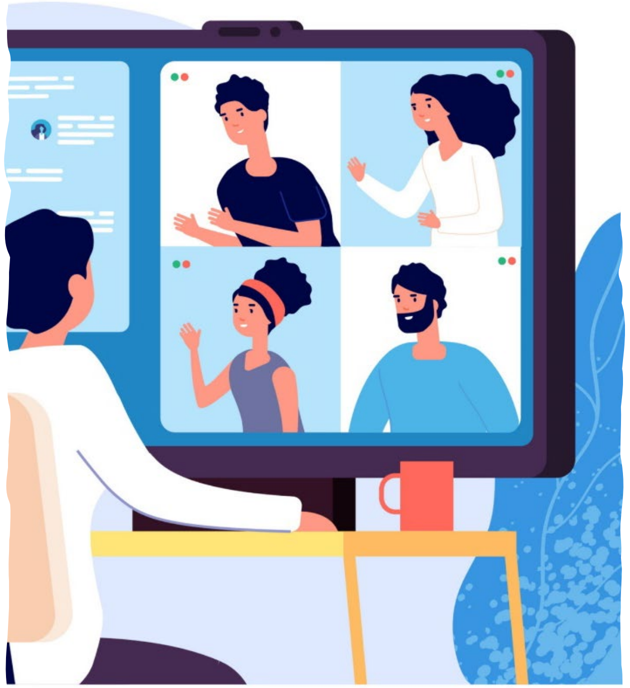


[7] ScienceDaily - Mere expectation of checking work email after hours harms health of workers and families

Meetings

Meetings have become an increasing part of our day and have reduced the amount of available "work time"

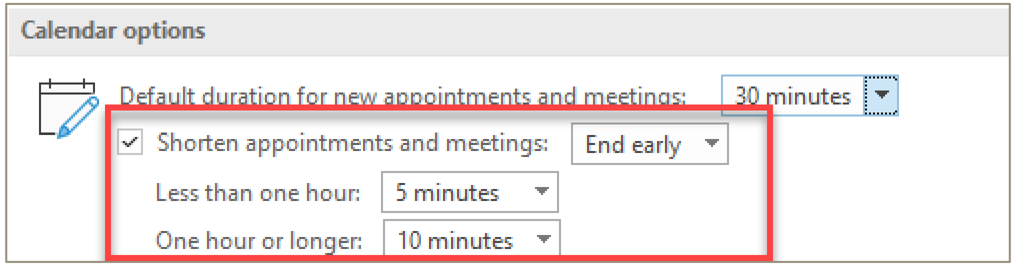
1. Before scheduling a meeting, determine if the meeting is truly necessary.[9] Can you collaborate asynchronously using Teams or a OneDrive + O365 Apps, Google Sheet or a Google Doc? Does everyone really need to be present all at the same time?
2. Be open and flexible to cancelling or rescheduling depending on the participants' workloads and priorities
3. This is especially true of some standing meetings where the agenda is not clearly defined for each session



[9] HBR - Do You Really Need to Hold That Meeting?

Scheduling Meetings

1. Schedule meeting durations based on the agenda, rather than an arbitrary default block of time
   - Having shorter 15- or 40-minute meetings is acceptable and probably appreciated
2. Include time after meetings to give folks a break
   - **Tactic:** change the default behavior of Outlook to schedule meetings outside the default 30/60-minute durations:



3. Be considerate of the participant list. Avoid carpet bombing the attendee list.
   - **Tactic:** If you're not sure if someone is needed, check with them or their supervisor
   - **Tactic:** Structure the agenda so people can leave early or join in where they are needed

Conducting Meetings

1. Start meetings by asking the participants if they have a commitment directly following the meeting, and be diligent in ending the meeting a bit early or at a minimum on-time
2. Especially in one-on-ones, ask folks how they are doing. If their response seems unconvincing, probe deeper and ask, "Are you really fine? It's OK if you're not." Listen carefully, collaborate on solutions, connect them with HR, Wellness Resources, or the EAP if they need additional help.
3. Stick to the agenda and scheduled time limits for topics and the overall meeting
   - Remember to dismiss folks early who don't need to hear the whole agenda
4. Video has been shown to be much more draining on individuals[10] so be thoughtful on when it is really needed:

[10] TED: Ideas worth spreading - Zoom fatigue is real – here's why video calls are so draining

Staff Survey

Gather data through a brief pulse survey of all staff to:

- Assess general level of fatigue and burnout
- Identify top challenges and issues
- Solicit suggestions and opportunities for improvement
  - Align and prioritize feedback to what best supports our OIT values & culture