

The Burnout Challenge

Tags: [#burnout](#) [#organizational-culture](#)

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Dialogue

Analogy --> canary in the coal mine.

What is burnout?

For people with burnout, the challenge of seeking help is compounded: not only are they stigmatized for having the problem in the first place, but it is assumed that fixing the problem is also their own responsibility. The judgment is that burnout is dispositional— which is to say, it results from a person's natural tendencies as an individual. If someone needs help, the cause of the problem lies within her or him.

Fixing the person should not be the focus of burnout.

Distinction --> figure and ground

Mismatch is a word that comes up a lot in the book.

Burnout is first and foremost a management issue.

Shifts away from person-only:

First:

Shift from focusing on what may be wrong with the person and focus instead on what may be wrong in the relationship between the person and the situation.

This isn't either/or but instead the relationship -- or mismatch.

Second:

Burnout is "both-and" It's both the individual and context.

Third:

Focus on what could be right rather than what is wrong.

What have you changed your mind on?

Reserve

Coping mechanisms for individuals

- Stay healthy
- Relax
- Understand oneself
- Develop new skills
- Get away from the job
- Get social support

Quotes

Burn-out is 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.
- reduced professional efficacy.

Where major advances in workplace well-being occur, they come through better workplace design, not through supplying organizations with tougher employees. When the canary begins to fade in the coal mine, the response is not to toughen up the bird, trying to make it more like a buzzard. It is to address the issues in the coal mine. In other work environments, too, we need to focus on the situations in which people work and make sure that surrounding job conditions support them in doing their jobs well.

Remember that popular saying we mentioned earlier, about people working in adverse conditions: "If you can't take the heat, then get out of the kitchen." It is helpful to help people cope by figuring out how to adapt to the heat. But why not also figure out how to turn down the heat to a more reasonable temperature? Or provide better ventilation, or a more spacious kitchen design, or other changes that would make the kitchen conditions less onerous and more accommodating to all the people who work there? Coping strategies are good, but they are not enough; we also need to focus on prevention strategies if we want to truly lower the risk of burnout. And that means changing the way we think about people in the workplace.

This tendency to focus on the person rather than the situation turns out to be a basic feature of human perception and understanding. It has often been described in terms of figure and ground— meaning that a person's attention naturally focuses on a main object of interest, or figure, while relegating other parts of the scene to the background, or ground. For example, a statue in a museum gallery may be the figure, and the wall hung with art behind it may be the ground. The page you are reading is the figure, and the setting you are peripherally aware of beyond it is the ground.

One important criterion is, of course, that the first change should be something meaningful—in an area people really care about. At the same time, it should represent a “doable” change, with good prospects for successful implementation in the near term. It is always a challenge to change something that has become established in an organization. It takes time and effort and there are glitches and course corrections along the way. But it is especially important for people to see the first steps of a long-term initiative working out successfully. Early victories are cause for celebration, provide motivation to take on more challenging changes, and build hope for a better future.

By collaborate, we mean that managers in organizations should not act unilaterally on their own conclusions as to what would help. They should ask employees to be a part of making things better. Ask for ideas and feedback on various alternatives, and then listen to what people contribute. If employees do not see the potential benefit of a proposed change, it will not happen.

Also important is being willing and able to customize. This is particularly true of “best practices” observed to be working in other organizations. In reality, it is never true that one size fits all, and there must be thoughtful adaptation of proposed changes to each local culture and type of occupation. Encouraging creative modifications also helps a solution become more accepted, because it is “ours.”

Organizations must also be prepared to commit. Achieving positive improvements will require sustained effort, with cycles of making positive interventions, evaluating their results, and proceeding with further modifications. Work toward creating better job-person matches may not succeed at first, but it is important that the people of the organization keep on trying until they get it right.

References