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Burnout

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Burnout is typically conceived of as a general "wearing down" from the pressures of work characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, cynicism, and decreased personal accomplishment or sense of efficacy. Burnout is thought to stem from chronic work stress, overload, and work role complexity. Drivers of burnout also include an imbalance of too many demands coupled with not enough resources, and a clash between employees' personal values and the values enacted within their organization. The term is often used interchangeably with the term "stress," although the latter is also used as an umbrella concept, with burnout then considered a reaction to stressors that cannot be managed.

In the field of organizational communication, burnout refers to generalized and common problems associated with managing the work stress. In other fields and in some Scandinavian countries, the term has been associated with specific symptoms of depression and a distinct psychological disorder (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009). The topic is connected to (often grows from or leads to) studies of coping and co-rumination, social support, emotional labor, organizational complexity, social service employees, workplace bullying, work–life balance, toxin management, and compassion fatigue. More recently, many authors who previously studied burnout have turned their attention to more positively tinged solutions such as engagement, empathy, compassion, emotional intelligence, flourishing, and mindful communication.

The concept of burnout is pervasive and has a very long lifespan; more than 6000 books, chapters, dissertations, and journal articles were published on burnout through 2009 (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009). The staying power of the concept of burnout likely stems from its metaphorical vividness. Just as a fire can run out of flame and heat and thus "burn out," employees can run low on energy and vigor and thus experience "burnout" (Tracy, 2009).

Burnout is estimated to cost the United States up to $300 billion and the United Kingdom £46 billion every year. This price tag includes costs of lack of commitment, turnover, absenteeism (sick time and long-term disability), insurance, workers' compensation, legal matters, and decreased productivity (Leiter & Maslach, 2011). Burned out employees are less able to process information, be creative, and solve problems. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (1999) reports that most employees believe they have more stress than a generation ago, and that 40% of the US workforce is affected by stress. Problems at work are blamed for more health complaints – including heart attacks, heart disease, nervous breakdowns, addiction, sleeping problems, ulcers, and depression – than are family or financial woes. Together, burnout takes a toll not only on employees and their organization, but also on the relationships they can enjoy with friends, family, and coworkers.

Research history

The term "burnout" was coined in the 1970s in research that originated from applied qualitative case studies of human service employees who worked closely with troubled clients. In the 1980s, the research turned to quantitative assessments of burnout, its causes, mediators, and effects, with many studies using self-report surveys and structural equation modeling analysis techniques. The topic has also been studied qualitatively in case studies of emotional labor, and some recent studies have examined the physiological manifestations of burnout, such as heightened cortisol levels.

The instrument most commonly used to measure burnout is the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), first developed in 1981. The MBI conceptualizes burnout as a three-dimensional concept characterized by (1) emotional exhaustion, (2) cynicism (depersonalization or a negative shift in responses to others, particularly clients), and (3) inefficacy (a decreased sense of personal accomplishment). In order to better generalize the concept of burnout for non-service-related professions, Maslach and her colleagues revised and expanded their original burnout inventory to include a measure specifically targeted on educators and another focused on employees who do not work closely with people.

Another measure, the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (or CBI), differentiates personal burnout, work related burnout, and client related burnout (Kristensen et al., 2005). Meanwhile, another popular approach, the job demands–resources (JD–R) model of burnout, simplifies the MBI to two factors and suggests that job demands and (lack of) job resources result in exhaustion and disengagement, respectively, and that job resources buffer the impact of job demands (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005). Research within the JD–R model suggests that the way a demand is conceptualized – as either irritating hindrance or invigorating challenge – affects whether or not it is associated with burnout or engagement.

Emotional exhaustion is the most commonly discussed and thoroughly researched component of burnout. Emotionally exhausted employees distance themselves from their clients and their work, in part as a defense method to reduce their exhaustion. This detachment is associated with increased cynicism and callousness which, in turn, create alienation from clients, other employees, and from one's own emotions and identity. Being exhausted and depersonalized results in both decreased material effectiveness and lower subjective feelings of accomplishment.

A growing interest among burnout researchers has been the concept of engagement, considered to be involvement, passion, and energy at work. Maslach and Leiter (1997) defined engagement as the opposite of burnout, with vigor being the opposite of emotional exhaustion, and dedication being the opposite of cynicism. Some research bolsters that of seeing the concepts as opposites along two distinct bipolar dimensions of "energy" and "identification" (González-Romá et al., 2006). Other research has argued that engagement is not just the antipode of burnout, but instead is an empirically distinct concept of its own related to employee well-being (Schaufeli, Taris, & Van Rhenen, 2008). This latter research suggests that someone could be simultaneously engaged and burned out. For example, a new teacher may have tons of energy and passion at work, but also feel emotionally exhausted and overwhelmed.

Although the research on burnout in organizational communication flourished in the 1980s and 1990s, it slowed considerably in the 2000s. Recent examinations of burnout in the communication discipline have coupled the examination of burnout with many other topics including co-rumination, empathy, and patient centered communication, organizational identification, employee layoffs, expressive behavior and optimism, and communication anxiety, communication competence, and perceived social support.

Organizational factors linked to burnout

The primary organizational or contextual factors linked to burnout include role stress, work overload, surveillance, organizational bad behavior, and change.

Role stress, made up of conflicting or ambiguous roles, has been consistently linked to burnout. Employees face role ambiguity when they lack adequate guidance and are confused about how to effectively succeed in accomplishing their work. Role conflict includes facing incongruent messages about organizational values and norms, and dealing with jobs in which complying with one set of mandates complicates the ability to comply with others. Indeed, employees who span a variety of roles or clients, or hold "linking" roles, are more susceptible to burnout due to the demands of information processing and juggling a multiplicity of relationships. Further, such employees face depersonalization and decreased personal accomplishment when they cannot fit their identity with their profession or work group.

Workload – both too much work and too difficult work – is another factor associated with burnout. That said, workload is subjective and what equates with too much or too difficult depends on employees' capacity and their resources of social support, information, material support, and feedback. Further, workload is related to how the work is framed. Burnout emerged as a salient concept when the helping professions were professionalized in the 1970s. Work that had originally been considered a calling – for example, monks in monasteries working with the poor, and nurses ministering to the sick – became increasingly professionalized and bureaucratized. People in these jobs faced increased caseloads, paperwork, and professional mandates, and the burdens associated with the job began to overload the capacities of people in the positions.

Another factor leading to burnout is when employees feel controlled, untrusted, and surveilled. Excessive monitoring of *what* employees are doing and *when* and *where* they are doing it increases employee stress, reduces the quality of their work, and hinders productivity. Employees thrive in spaces where they have control over their work environment. Being constantly watched by a supervisor or monitored by a digital monitoring system is related to increased anxiety, tension, anger, and fatigue. In contrast, employees will experience less burnout when they are given freedom and decision making power.

Burnout thrives in organizational environments that cultivate and allow bad behavior in the form of workplace bullying and strategically manipulating bosses. When employees feel ostracized, judged, and isolated, this leads to burnout. Given the feelings of powerlessness and confusion associated with organizational change, in order to avoid employee burnout, supervisors need to be especially vigilant, communicative, and caring when anticipating or leading organizational changes like downsizing and mergers.

Individual factors linked to burnout

Burnout depends, in part, on an individual's ability to manage organizational stressors. Individual factors linked to burnout include workload capacity and coping skills, personality dispositions, cognitive differences, and the ability to empathize without emotional contagion.

Some people, due to their background, personality, or skills, have more capacity to deal with organizational stressors than others. Increased workload capacity can be built through providing employees the resources to deal with their demands. When employees feel equipped to deal with a heavy workload, and see themselves as accomplishing organizational goals, they feel more accomplished. Personality also affects burnout. Candidates for high burnout tend to be idealistic high achievers who seek unattainable goals. When one's expectations are higher than what is met, burnout can result. This is one reason young people may be more prone to burnout than older people who have more realistic (or resigned) ideas of what to expect from themselves and others.

Employees' predispositions also affect their burnout. If employees hate organizational rules and structure yet find themselves working in a bureaucracy, they are more likely to be burned out. People who attribute events to chance or external others rather than to their own ability are also more prone to burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

Another individual dimension of burnout is how much the work aligns with a person's self-concept and values. When people feel as though their job is asking them to act in a way they do not identity with, or is asking them to behave or adhere to rules they deem objectionable, common results include anger, guilt, nervousness, and sadness. People experience pain when they feel they are being inauthentic or fake for a reason they have not internalized (Tracy, 2005).

Employees also differ in their ability to empathize with sufferers which, in turn, affects burnout. The empathic communication model of burnout (Miller et al., 1995) differentiates between *emotional contagion*, in which the caregiver is flooded with the client's negative emotion, and *empathic concern*, in which the caregiver provides empathy without being dragged into the client's suffering. Empathic concern is related to increased satisfaction. In contrast, the opposite poles of complete emotional involvement or complete depersonalization are related to increased burnout. Caregivers who can control their emotions so as to maintain a mood of optimism can better respond to distressed clients and resist burnout.

Interventions, resources, and remedies

Burnout can be ameliorated in several different ways. Overall, employees are much more satisfied when they are given opportunities to (1) physically renew and recharge, (2) feel appreciated and recognized, (3) focus on the tasks they feel are most important, and (4) do work that is connected to something they like and something they feel is connected to a higher purpose (Schwartz & Porath, 2014).

Leiter and Maslach (2011) provide practical strategies for banishing burnout and divide them into solving problems with six areas at work. These include (1) diminishing the workload (both the amount and types of work); (2) increasing employee control and freedom (which may include pace of work, when it gets accomplished, and participation in decision making); (3) ensuring proper reward (through recognition, perks, and pay); (4) creating community and high-quality relationships with other employees; (5) fostering fairness, justice, civility, and kindness in the workplace; and (6) considering values (e.g., "Do I believe in what I'm doing?" and creating workplaces that have integrity and honesty).

Many of the interventions recommended for burnout include individual strategies such as biofeedback, exercise, meditation, or seeking help from a therapist or employee assistance advisor. Meanwhile, communication scholarship has focused more on the interactional processes that can counteract and buffer burnout.

Supportive interaction with coworkers and supervisors can help employees make sense of demanding or confusing work. Talking allows for venting of frustrations, clarification of unclear goals, and a mutual definition of the work purpose. When employees' work requires interaction with populations that are stigmatizing, interaction with peers can help them reconcile and deal with identity threat. Social support comes in different forms, each of which affects burnout in its own way. As Tracy (2009) summarizes:

> *Instrumental support* (an exchange of time, resources or labor) helps prevent emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and as such, may enhance the care and treatment of clients. *Informational support* (related to role definition, general information about job, skills training) is related to increased retention. *Emotional support* (empathy, caring, acceptance and assurance) is directly related to retention, commitment and all dimensions of burnout. (p. 88)

The type and source of social support that are most effective depend on the situation. Employees who feel integrated in a communication network with like-minded peers are more satisfied than those who feel isolated. That said, some research suggests that the supervisor–subordinate relationship is the most significant factor for occupational commitment and reducing burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Although social support is helpful for buffering workplace demands, excessive negative problem talk about an issue can exacerbate burnout. Boren's (2014) research on co-rumination has found that social support is less than beneficial when the interaction focuses on excessive and negative problem talk.

Participation in decision making is another key communicative remedy for burnout. Employees who have a voice in creating their work environment feel more powerful and accomplished. Further, having a voice in the situation helps them deal with rules or regulations that would otherwise be framed as debilitating constraints or irritating hassles.

Future directions

Despite the fact that burnout research began with qualitative case studies, quantitative examinations now dominate its study. The bulk of the burnout research focuses on prevalence, relies on surveys, and statistically links causes and consequences. Burnout

research could be bolstered by fieldwork that shows the richness of what burnout looks like, and in-depth interviews or discourse analytic methods that show how burnout is talked into being. Studies using narrative and qualitative approaches could elucidate whether "burnout" as currently conceptualized still usefully illuminates today's workplace woes. Perhaps other concepts – such as fear of missing out (FOMO), digital information overload, or decision fatigue – point to issues that researchers should examine for causing today's alienation and exhaustion at work.

Future researchers would also do well to further study how employees viewing their work as a spiritual calling or as their purpose in life may help them deal with work demands. As noted earlier in this entry, burnout emerged as a salient concept at precisely the same time that jobs which had traditionally been considered "callings" (nurses, teachers, priests) began to be professionalized (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009). Future research could examine whether burnout would recede if today's tedious or bureaucratized jobs were reframed or recreated as callings.

Another area for more study is examining burnout across cultures and ethnicities and considering how the very phenomenon is raced, classed, and gendered. Just 30% of American employees feel engaged at work, and this dips to 13% across the world (Schwartz & Porath, 2014). What is unclear is whether burnout is appropriate when studying non-Western cultures. The study of burnout emerged in Western countries – and, although the Maslach Burnout Inventory has been translated and used in many cultures, burnout and related concepts like cynicism and emotional exhaustion may not be salient cross-culturally. Indeed, even though many Western employees have reported burnout and alienation from faking emotions, internalizing organizational emotion norms and deep acting may actually decrease burnout in non-Western populations.

Future researchers should also continue examining the role of digital media and information technology and their relation to burnout. On the one hand, technology allows employees to do more tasks at a quicker pace. On the other hand, access to digital media has greatly increased the sheer amount of information employees can entertain and must manage. The more the information, the more employees must make decisions about which information to attend to, and how best to prioritize it. Along the way, employees must learn new technology such as online calendaring functions and teleconferencing systems. Past research suggests the higher exposure people have to a certain technology, the more positive the appraisal and the lower the burnout levels – including less cynicism, more self-confidence, and a greater sense of goal attainment (Salanova & Schaufeli, 2000). Future research could usefully study the consequences of digital media on work overload and decision fatigue, as well as examine how distinct pieces of technology can either mediate or ameliorate burnout.

Another important area to examine in the future is how supervisors might be motivated to foster trust so as to provide employees with more breaks, control over their decision making, and flexibility about when and where to work. These activities bring energy, focus, and productivity to employees, and result in more work being accomplished in less time. Nonetheless, many workplaces cling to face time as the best or only way to measure productivity and reward employees. Future research could examine

positively deviant workplaces where managers have mastered trusting employees and found alternatives to face time for measuring output and rewarding employees.

Relatedly, burnout research would benefit by better understanding the effects of well-being and work-life balance programs. Increasingly, workplaces are providing everything from nap rooms, to organic cafeterias, to fitness breakout sessions. Research in the medical field suggests that participation in mindful communication programs is associated with improvements in well-being and patient centered care. Communication scholars have an untapped opportunity to develop and test such programs. Researchers could also examine which workplace perks decrease burnout, and whether those perks ultimately serve to primarily benefit the employee, the stockholder, or the organization.

Finally, a question that future researchers could fruitfully consider is whether burnout is really all that bad. Burnout often happens to people who are the most idealistic and hold high expectations. Maybe the advantages of idealism are worth the cost of burnout. Researchers could examine whether it is better to have emotionally healthy employees who do not expect much of themselves or their jobs, or idealistic employees prone to burnout. Further, burnout may be productive inasmuch as it prompts employees not well suited to working with people to seek a position that better fits their abilities. Burnout may trigger a teacher to become an interior designer and a nurse to become an organic farmer. Along the way, these employees can escape from the emotional demands, chaos, and suffering of their previous jobs – and their clients can be served by employees who find meaning in working with children or sick people. Future research could build upon Maslach and Leiter's (1997) research on mismatches between employee expectations and capabilities and the organizational environment. Indeed, employee–organization mismatches may not necessarily be negative, but rather may be quite valuable in prompting transformative change and catalyzing employees to find the best match for their talents.

SEE ALSO: Bullying in the Workplace; Change, Organizational; Communication Load; Conflict, Organizational; Contradictions, Tensions, Paradoxes, and Dialectics; Emotion and Work; Healthy Workplace; Identification, Organizational; Incivility/Civility; Meaningful Work; Mindful Organizing; Office Politics; Organizational Climate, Communication Climate; Participation; Positive Organizational Communication Scholarship; Resilience Processes; Social Support; Stress; Trust; Turnover; Work–Life Balance

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