

Are you burned out?

Employee burnout can spell trouble for a company's bottom-line



Are you at your wits' end?

According to a study done in the UK, 48 per cent of respondents had reported increased individual workload against the backdrop of today's global recession. The study, conducted by Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and KPMG, also showed that stress levels had risen among workers who had survived the axe. Because of a leaner headcount, employees are expected to work harder and perhaps, even clock longer hours.

Such circumstances, combined with other stress-inducing factors, govern the occurrence of employee burnout. And like any high-powered machine, highly stressed staff can quickly lose steam and break down when put under constant pressure.

Caution - burnout ahead

General feelings of malaise at work can take root from a host of reasons - monotonous routines, heavy workload, office politics, and dissatisfaction with management. However, while these issues are often written off as part and parcel of working life, they do impact employee productivity.

A chief cause of burnout is poor leadership and its danger lies in its influence over other factors. Irresolute leadership effects confusion where managing expectations are concerned. Vague job descriptions and unclear expectations can initiate feelings of insecurity among employees about how their work and worth is measured. And when an individual's unrealistic expectations about the organisation jars with actual organisational experience, it can produce a "reality shock".

Leadership that lacks awareness in preventing and spotting such situations often aggravates employees' growing discontent. Employees will feel increasingly unappreciated of their efforts, uncertain in their positions, and disappointed with management. Additionally, employees who feel they are constantly being policed and unable to exercise personal control over their daily tasks can fall victims to burnout.

And in jobs and industries with high "crunch times" - where staff are required to work longer hours and handle more intensive workload - employees would become easy victims of burnout if there is little "down time", and their extra efforts go unrecognised and uncompensated. Coalesced with lack of communication between staff and their leaders, staff will grapple with work stress while companies face dwindling employee engagement.

Burnout is hazardous to organisational health

Organisations are never perfect; job burnout is inevitable for some. What is more critical is employers understand the serious bearing of workplace stress and burnout, and employees recognise the signs.

With stressed and burned out employees, productivity dies a long and painful death. The signs may emerge subtly, such as employee withdrawal - late arrivals at work, long breaks and early departures. Employees generally stay away from the office as much as possible and the frequency and length of absence would only lengthen with time. And even if they are sitting at their desks, the quality, if not quantity, of their performance will diminish. Managers who become burnout victims are especially harmful to organisations because such managers create a ripple effect, spreading burnout to their subordinates and co-workers.

Burned out employees would also lapse into general lethargy and apathy and show little enthusiasm at work. Work relationships become more strained as they develop short tempers and grow more impatient with their colleagues. Highly-stressed and burned out employees are more prone to falling ill, insomnia, and more drastically, depression.

Maintenance required

While employers can take steps to prevent staff from burning out, employees should also not suffer in silence the stress they face at work.

Communicate. Be informed of your job expectations, scope of responsibilities and opportunities for career advancement. Have constant dialogue with your manager to better manage everyone's expectations. Managers are also able to identify career growth opportunities and recognise your work and contribution through regular communication.

Manage your workload. If you think you have enough on your plate, politely turn away projects to give yourself breathing time in between deadlines. If you are working with a team, delegate the work. Otherwise, set realistic deadlines to avoid overloading yourself.

Have fun at work. Find little pleasures at the workplace that helps you to relieve tension and put you in a more relaxed state. Socialise more with your colleagues, go for short coffee breaks or increase tasks that you enjoy doing.

Take time off. Take a short break from work to rejuvenate yourself. Time away from the office can help to revive motivation, seek new inspiration and refresh your attitude towards work.

Find support. Build a support system with those whom you can talk about your problems and help you look for solutions.