



Preventing a New Kind of Burnout

If you Google “burnout,” you’ll see numerous articles citing anywhere from 4 to 12 stages of burnout, depending on the source. One thing these sources have in common is that they state that burnout begins with either a compulsion to prove oneself, a need to get the job done or an urge to demonstrate delivery. These behaviors are usually part of stage one, and they are increasingly prevalent in today’s current working environment.

As a board member, executive and the systemic coach of several new virtual teams, I am now seeing these behaviors across all industries — I have even recognized them in myself.

The rise of virtual work

In March, the world changed for many, and a majority of the workforce got tossed into a virtual working environment. Many of these companies had no experience working virtually.

Employees not used to working from home found themselves managing their assignments and organizing their jobs, all while juggling family life. Managers found themselves trying to figure out how to organize and communicate with their employees. Meanwhile, an invisible enemy continued to cause us stress, concern and the inevitable feeling of helplessness.

Tossed into this new situation, many employees want to prove they can still perform their jobs. They feel the need to demonstrate that they are truly working and not just watching Netflix. At the same time, managers struggle to prove they can manage under these new circumstances.

Driven by enthusiasm, employees and managers begin to work even harder than they did before, with an inability to switch off work mode. And this leads to a 24/7 work ethic.

Our new work environment — the home office — includes shared workspaces that generally belong in our private lives (dining rooms, kitchens) or quiet spaces that we usually associate with rest (the bedroom). These personal spaces have become our work areas because we weren’t ready for virtual work, and eventually, this lack of preparation will skew our values and our lives.

What’s more, the hobbies we had are now ceasing to exist, as we can’t go to the tennis court, work out at the gym or meet with friends and family at social gatherings — and this is dangerous. Without these distractions, we end up filling all of our time with work. This 24/7 work ethic will lead to burnout if we are not careful.

A new kind of burnout

Unlike classic burnout with its typical stages, this new kind of burnout has different, shorter stages. It begins with an even stronger compulsion to prove oneself, as trust plays such an important role in virtual environments. This compulsion to get the job done rapidly leads to the inability to switch off.

A feeling of isolation is a new stage, as social distancing

prevents us from communicating with colleagues as we did in the past. The feeling of frustration, another new stage, emerges from our inability to control the situation. Ultimately, we find ourselves depressed and burned out.

These stages progress more rapidly than in the past because of our restricted lives, and they will accelerate as more parameters are forced upon us. This burnout is emerging across all industries, as we plunge ourselves into a 24/7 work ethic just because there is nothing else to do.

The displacement of conflict is also changing. The current crisis is forcing us to deal with conflict differently, as we face situations like having family members and partners underfoot 24 hours a day.

In this case, the displacement of conflict may not be a stage, but conflict is certainly a contributing factor. Displacement, avoidance, confrontation or dealing with new conflict can lead one to shut themselves off from the world and work even more.

Burnout will ultimately hurt our performance during these challenging times and even after life returns to normal. So, what can we do?

Preventing burnout at work (and home)

One thing every person can do for themselves is to understand and become aware of what you are doing and how you are behaving. Set a routine and give yourself some space to do what you enjoy. If you cannot go to the gym, read a book. Also, don’t be afraid to reach out to your managers and ask them precisely what they expect of you.

Additionally, try to separate your workspace from your private space, no matter how small your living quarters are. This division will help you keep a balance between your work and your personal life, no matter how entangled they are right now.

For managers and companies, set parameters for working at home. Give your employees a day off. And don’t send out emails after work hours because employees may feel obligated to answer.

It’s essential that managers also receive training on leading virtual teams. Remind them that the leadership skills that apply in the physical workplace should also be used virtually. Overall, reduce job demands, increase support to your teams and be able to recognize stress.

It also helps to engage in some form of virtual socialization, such as a virtual birthday celebration. But most importantly, control the urge to work 24/7.

Final thoughts

We are all in an uncertain, stressful situation right now, and the last thing we want is more burnout. This new burnout will be more challenging to recognize because of our social distancing. Therefore, we must prevent it before it becomes an epidemic resulting from a pandemic.

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