

Preventing Burnout Is Now the Number One Job for Bosses. These 7 Strategies Can Protect Your Teams

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Illustration By Pete Ryan

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Between layoffs and hiring freezes and a newfound laser focus on profits and productivity, today's employees are being asked to do more with fewer resources—a one-way ticket to burnout. As a result, managers are tasked with a seemingly impossible job: motivating their teams while managing them during turbulent times. The key, according to experts, is understanding that investing in empathy is an investment in performance.

"Leadership can be so focused on rallying people around a new goal that they don't give people space to process, or a chance to ask questions and voice concerns," explains Liz Fosslien, a bestselling author, illustrator, and head of communications and content at Humu, a human

resources company. "But there are these lingering consequences because people are exhausted."

In fact, 42% of global workers reported feeling burnout in winter 2022, according to a survey from Future Forum—a 2% increase from the previous quarter and the highest since the survey began in May 2021. But that doesn't have to be the case for your team.

Creating space for open and honest conversations—whether in person or virtual—is just one way managers can help employees process change, while also setting the team up for future success. Quick and empathetic action is vital to ensure high performers aren't tempted to search for employment elsewhere.

"People assume the primary driver of anxiety in the workplace is layoffs, and they certainly cause a lot of concern," says Fosslien. "We've done research at Humu that shows the biggest driver of anxiety is a complete lack of direction. One key piece of supporting employees during times of uncertainty is to provide clarity where you can."

Below are seven ways managers can foster stability amid growing workplace anxiety:

1. Make emotional proofreads a habit.

"Before sending an email, we should be asking, How would I feel if I received this?" Fosslien says. "It would save people so much anxiety."

2. Set clear goals and celebrate mini-milestones.

"If you don't have a clear vision of where the entire organization needs to go, you can train your managers to rally the team around a three-month mission," she continues. "Three months is usually a short enough period where you can set a goal that shouldn't change too dramatically, and provide some stability when everything feels up in the air."

Creating goals to improve the company culture can also help teams acknowledge that times are hard but you're actively working to make the situation better. "By orienting your team around a shared goal, you give them something more positive to focus on—and can rekindle their motivation and hope that things will start to look up again," says Fosslien.

3. Acknowledge what people are feeling.

A study published in *Administrative Science Quarterly* found that increasing psychological safety—the idea that you can openly and honestly share ideas, questions, and concerns without being judged or humiliated—improves workplace performance and productivity.

"Even just saying something like, 'I know a lot is changing, and that can be stressful. Let me know what I can do to support you,' can go a long way," says Fosslien.

4. Invest in your team and their well-being.

During tough financial times, monetary rewards such as raises and bonuses may not be possible. But that doesn't mean your team's efforts and hard work should go unrecognized. Carter Cast, clinical professor of strategy at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern

University, recommends managers invest in their direct reports with tangible benefits, such as professional development funds, additional paid time off, and flexible work options.

5. Praise your team openly and often.

"If they're not getting a financial reward, make sure they're getting a psychological award," he says. "Let people know when they're doing good work. Acknowledge it, praise it, and let other people know."

In hybrid or remote-work situations, public Slack channels specifically for praise are helpful, as are shout-outs in the company's internal newsletter. Doing so creates a culture of recognition and encourages colleagues to pay it forward.

6. Focus on professional development.

"When budgets get tight, you don't want to cut professional development because that signals to your employees it's not important, and that's a terrible signal to send," Cast explains.

Fosslien agrees. Every year she encourages her staff to look at jobs they'd like to be doing in the next three to five years and highlight the responsibilities or requirements they don't have yet. "And we find opportunities for them to do that," she says. "It's a really nice way to say, 'I would love to throw money at you, but I can't. But I still want you to feel like you got a lot out of this position.'"

Additionally, Fosslien recommends that companies conduct "stay interviews" to help reduce employee turnover following disruptive changes. Unlike an exit interview, which typically takes place after an employee has submitted their resignation, a stay interview is a more forward-looking conversation that aims to uncover employee dissatisfaction.

"Stay interviews are something your company should be doing regardless of layoffs," she says. "Anniversaries are a good time to ask people, 'What's making you stay? What's making you think about leaving?'"

7. Set aside time to gather outside of work.

Whether it's a post-work happy hour or off-site retreat, Cast suggests carving out time and space to focus on personal renewal. "During tough times, it's even more important to make sure you get together," says Cast. "Doing so does a lot for morale when you can't offer financial perks. People want to feel part of something bigger than themselves."

Above all, experts recommend managers lean into empathy during tough times at work and check in on how people are feeling first and foremost.

Listen to what people are saying, then ask for feedback and advocate for their needs, says Latesha Byrd, chief executive officer of Perfqta, a talent development agency.

"We have to make sure we're treating people as humans and not just employees."

Liz Fosslien of human resources company Humu encourages managers to make it a top priority to check in with employees about how they're doing, ideally in weekly one-on-one meetings. "But if there's a concern almost everyone raises, it may be worth setting aside time in a broader

team meeting to discuss it," she says. Here are some sample questions you can use to get the conversation going:

- What can I do to better support you?
- What was a challenge this week?
- Is anything unclear or blocking your work?
- What could our team do differently?
- What should we keep doing?