

Screw 'Just Checking In'—This is What We Really Need to Cure Burnout

Fast Company | Kelly D. Parker | Feb. 26, 2022

Kelly D. Parker unpacks what leaders need to do to build community and boost engagement to combat team burnout.



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It's not just you. Science explains how your focus is more scattered now and how to get it back.

Several years ago, I realized a startling truth: I was officially burned out.

"How are you?" my boss asked.

It was a question she asked every morning, likely out of habit more than anything else, since she rarely looked up from her keyboard when she said it.

Usually, I'd pipe in with, "I'm fine," or, "Pretty good. Thanks for asking," but on this day, when I opened my mouth to speak, nothing came out.

Instead, I burst into tears.

I'd been conditioned to show unwavering strength at work, hold it together at all costs and never let anyone see me sweat, particularly as a woman of color.

But I'd been drowning in a tailspin of overwhelm for so long that I finally reached my breaking point. Everyday, my inner dialogue was a jumbled mix of:

How am I going to tackle three new projects this week when I haven't finished the five from last week?

Did my daughter remember her shoes for gym class?

Will I need to work late again?

What's for dinner tonight?

When's the last time my husband and I had a date night?

What day is it?

The weight of it all was just too much to carry.

Across industries, burnout is prevalent. In a recent study of U.S. professionals, 77% of respondents said they have experienced employee burnout at their current job. Add the pressure of managing a personal life to the mix and the result can be devastating.

Devastated was certainly what I felt that day. Fresh out of options, I threw caution to the wind and shared with my boss what I'd been feeling. We didn't come up with any real solutions, but I felt a bit of relief, just getting it off my chest.

But the relief was short-lived.

The following week, a coworker told me my boss had shared our conversation with him in detail, telling him how upset I was and repeating direct quotes from what I'd said. What's more, he said he wasn't the only person she'd told.

Disappointed but undeterred, I pursued other means to achieve equilibrium in my life. I took more days off. And more lunch breaks. Even though it was subtly frowned upon, I made sure I ended my workday at a decent hour.

These changes were steps in the right direction, but there was still something missing.

The Secret Ingredient

If you're a leader looking for strategies to alleviate burnout and disengagement in your organization, your experience may be similar to mine: you've tried several plans of attack, but you're still not sure what will solve the problem once and for all.

While "Cry at Work Day" was a low point for me, it wasn't the only time I'd felt stressed. In fact, there were plenty of other times I'd felt similarly and recovered quite well.

That's when I discovered the missing ingredient.

Community.

When I've had the benefit of meaningful connections at work where I could safely share my heart and receive support, it's allowed me to regain balance and thrive.

For leaders looking to ease burnout and boost engagement, creating avenues for community might be the antidote. Here are three ways to facilitate meaningful connections in the workplace.

Listen

Listening creates connection by showing the speaker he/she is worthy of your time and attention. But in our fast-paced, multitask-'til-you-get-it-done world, active listening can feel like a lost art.

Foster connection by being fully present, asking clarifying questions, and not interrupting. Above all, remember that your primary goal is to listen for understanding, not to form a response.

Learn

In many organizations, senior leaders rarely cross paths with their employees beyond simple pleasantries. To foster authentic connections throughout the organization, venture to build relationships across job levels.

This is the premise of the popular reality show series Undercover Boss. Leaders learn the stories of individuals in their organization they wouldn't otherwise know and experience the impact of their leadership firsthand. In turn, employees see a more personal side of their leader.

Senior and junior team members alike have powerful insights to share. Creating spaces to swap stories about what's working, what's not working, and desires for the future will reveal tangible ways to support one another.

Respond

Listening and learning are essential, but here is the true test: How will you respond to what you've heard?

Leaders can champion the cause by boldly taking action. Unpopular or controversial measures might be in order, like changing long-standing policies, shifting personnel, or challenging cultural norms.

When leaders take massive action to address the root cause of issues that affect their employees' well-being, it builds trust and a sense of safety, hallmarks of a healthy community. Then, it is as Simon Sinek writes in his book, *Leaders Eat Last*: "Work is no longer a place to dread. It is a place to feel valued."

I'm thankful for the community of colleagues and leaders who have listened to me, laughed with me, and challenged me over the years. Many of them had no idea their presence was the lifeline I needed to stay afloat. May we be the people who work together to build radically authentic communities that see each other, hear each other and help each other.