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Burnout: Why it Happens & How to Respond

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In early February, a senior leader named Jeanette came to me concerned about one of her employees. “They’ve always been a solid team member,” Jeanette said. “Reliable, collaborative, good-humored. But lately they’re short with people and impatient in meetings. I’m getting feedback that they seem frustrated and that’s just not like them.”

The employee was still meeting deadlines, working the same hours and getting everything done. Nothing was “wrong” on paper, so Jeanette wasn’t sure how to bring up the change in temperament.

“Is it even any of my business?” she wondered. “I don’t want to intrude and it might just go away on its own.”
In fact, Jeanette’s intervention was important. Why? The shift in her employee’s behavior pointed to a common and often overlooked experience in the workplace: burnout.

Burnout isn’t simply “being stressed” or “having a bad week.” It develops when the demands of the job repeatedly exceed a person’s capacity to recover. Over time, that ongoing strain drains emotional energy, sharpens irritability and makes even routine tasks feel heavier than they should. Many people describe burnout as feeling drained, depleted and unable to refuel.

At its core, burnout appears when there’s a persistent gap between what people need in order to do their best work—such as a reasonable workload, clarity, support, autonomy and trust—and what their environment actually provides. When someone is expected to deliver without enough time, resources or control over how the work gets done, the nervous system eventually stops bouncing back. The body and mind shift from resilience into depletion.

Burnout is not limited to struggling employees. Even top performers are at risk, and since they’re used to pushing through, they often carry the strain the longest before anyone notices.

When I shared this with Jeanette, she nodded.

“He’s had a lot on his plate for a very long time,” she said. “I’m not sure he has enough support.”

Jeanette decided to check in with him—not with an accusation, but with care. She simply said: “I’ve noticed you seem more tense lately. I value you and wonder if there’s anything I can do to support you better?”

It opened the door.

The employee shared that their workload had quietly increased, they felt pressure to be “always on” and they’d let their own recovery practices slip. Together, they adjusted priorities, clarified expectations and created more realistic boundaries. Within weeks, the tension eased and the employee’s warmth and steadiness returned.

Burnout is not always obvious, in employees or even in ourselves, because it can look different from person to person. Whether you’re noticing burnout in yourself or in your team, it helps to understand the common causes and what you can do to address the underlying causes.

Lack of Purpose

People want to know their work matters and to stay connected to the “why” behind the hours they put in.

For example, if someone joined your garden center because they believe in the power of plants to bring joy, how are you reinforcing that purpose? Do you regularly share customer testimonials? Do you celebrate ways your plants benefit the community, such as being used in the landscaping of a new hospital? Do you offer paid volunteer days so employees can take part in projects like planting flowers at local retirement centers?

When employees regularly feel connected to the impact of their work, their sense of meaning and resilience grows.



Misaligned Values

Mercer’s Workforce 2.0 2024 Global Talent Trends study, which surveyed more than 12,200 C-suite executives, HR leaders and employees across industries, found that one in five employees who feel at risk of burnout cite a misalignment between their values and their company’s.

For example, nearly 99% of those surveyed value sustainability, expect their employer to pursue a sustainability agenda and believe leaders should be accountable for sustainability outcomes.

When a company’s actions align with what people care about, morale increases. When there’s a disconnect, trust and engagement erode, which increases the risk of burnout.

Disconnection from Colleagues

People don’t just need coworkers; they need a sense of community in the workplace.

One of the companies I work with went through a difficult period where several key team members had to be let go. To support the remaining staff, they created a “vibe squad” focused on restoring morale and strengthening relationships. The squad introduced weekly team-building activities, from casual lunches to movie nights, and began celebrating wins more intentionally in all-hands meetings. Gratitude and appreciation became part of the culture, and the shift was palpable.

Lack of Challenge

People also want to feel like their work is helping them grow. When employees feel stagnant or underutilized, motivation declines and burnout risk rises.

Look for ways to stretch people appropriately. Offer new responsibilities, rotate roles, create learning opportunities or shift people into work that taps their strengths. Growth fuels engagement.

Toxic Workplace

The McKinsey Health Institute found that employees who experience toxic behavior such as unfair treatment, manipulation, gossip, gaslighting, unethical conduct or abusive management are eight times more likely to report burnout symptoms. These conditions lead to exhaustion, reduce a person's ability to regulate their emotional and cognitive responses, and significantly erode engagement.

A toxic workplace requires triage. Problematic behavior must be addressed quickly and transparently. Employees need safe channels to voice concerns without fear of retaliation. Leaders should partner with HR and, when appropriate, outside facilitators or mediators to intervene immediately and develop a longer-term plan to rebuild trust and psychological safety.

Whether you're watching for burnout in yourself or your team, remember this: burnout is not a personal failing. It's a signal.

A signal that something in the system—such as workload, clarity, support, values or culture—needs attention.

When leaders treat burnout as feedback rather than a weakness to push through, they create workplaces where people can sustain great work and stay healthy. **GP**

Megan Taylor Morrison is a Professional Certified Coach who's worked with leaders across many industries—from space to horticulture to interior design. Her clients include trailblazers at Meta, Syngenta, NASA, Columbia University and beyond. She's served as a professional coach for more than 10 years, after work as a science journalist. Her work is holistic and based in well-researched approaches to change. She works one-on-one with clients, creates bespoke trainings for companies and runs a women-in-horticulture leadership program. To learn more about Meg, visit megantaylormorrison.com.

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> Megan Taylor Morrison will speak at Cultivate'26 in Columbus, Ohio, in July on burnout, personal branding and more. Watch cultivateevent.org for her session times and days, and block off your calendar for July 11-14.