

The Link Letter

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Preventing Executive Burnout

The atmosphere at work has changed in recent times. The pace of change keeps accelerating. As companies continue to search for ever higher levels of quality, service and overall business agility, the pressures are felt on individuals at all levels of the organization. The treadmill moves faster, companies work harder, improvements are made only to be changed again and again. Today's managers are experiencing a whole new order of exhaustion.

Performance targets become tougher to meet in each succeeding quarter and

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Resource Link Corp.

Vox: 972-394-7111
Fax: 972-394-6038
info@resource-link.com
www.resource-link.com



fiscal year. Managers have ever-widening spans of control. In the boundary-less organization, work goes on round the clock. The post-dinner time zone has become prime time for answering e-mails, voice mails, faxes and the rest of what didn't get done during office hours. Thanks to technology, work is now very portable.

It's easy to see why many managers feel overwhelmed. The only way they can get it all done is to take the writing, reading and reviewing tasks home. Finding personal fulfillment through one's work is becoming more of a challenge. Job burnout is a reality for many people.

The incidence of job burnout has reached epidemic proportions as –

- corporations merge and the interests of the stockholders come to predominate business policies,
- jobs are eliminated or combined because of technological innovations,
- individuals often cover two or more jobs because of shortages in the labor market,
- more production moves overseas where labor costs are cheaper,
- layoffs occur with alarming frequency.

Managing people is the most difficult administrative task and is an unending source of stress for executives. The manager must cope with the least capable of the employees, with the depressed, the suspicious, the rivalrous, the self-centered and the generally unhappy. He or she must balance conflicting personalities and create from them a motivated work group. He or she must define group purpose, organize people around it, resolve conflicts, establish priorities, make decisions about other people, accept and deflect their hostility, and deal with the frustration that arises out of the continuing interaction. That frustration causes many to burn out.

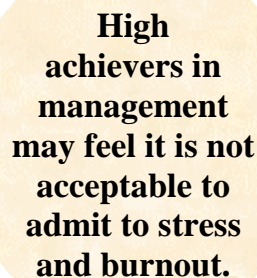
Adding to the stress at work is the complexity of modern organizations. The bigger and more intricate organizations become, the longer it takes to get things done. Along with increasing complexity comes an increase in the number of people with whom a manager has to deal. As companies grow, merge, or reorganize, some managers feel as though they are adrift. There is a threat of obsolescence when a position or assignment demands new skills and they are put into a position of “not knowing.”

Change can also mean that managers have to trim jobs and demote people or even discharge them. Managers whose job it is to close a plant or a department may feel enraged at having to pay for the sins of their predecessors. At the same time as this, a rapidly changing marketplace means intense pressures on managers to come up with new products, innovative services and novel marketing and financing schemes.

Burnout occurs when managers are deluged with sets of competing demands. Not only is work intense, but there are also demands to participate in family life, keep up with friends, and complete normal chores of everyday living. Managers may feel a decreased ability to set limits on these various demands. They then begin to feel a vague sense of just not caring so much about work, or maybe anything, anymore. They feel overwhelmed and retreat.

Unfortunately, it is often those who show the most promise early in their careers who later succumb to burnout. They are idealists, perfectionists and highly conscientious. They are achievers who have high energy levels and positive attitudes. They are dedicated and committed to doing well. Over time, however, stress and the inability to cope with the demands of the job lead to dissatisfaction and pessimistic attitudes.

High achievers in management may feel it is not acceptable to admit to stress and burnout. This compounds the problem because there is no room to talk about it. With whom is the executive going to discuss a personal sense of discouragement?



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Hopefully, with an executive coach who can spot and deal with the issues before they become severe. Even then, denial may be too strong and personal pride too great to fully explore the possibility of encroaching burnout until after it becomes a serious impairment.

What can help to prevent executive burnout, either in yourself or in the people you manage and work with?

The first step is to become more aware of the signs of burnout. The next is to recommend talking with someone, preferably a trained coach who can help make a plan to turn the process around. Dealing effectively with the symptoms of burnout can lead to increased self-awareness and a renewed sense of direction, energy and enthusiasm for career and life.

Some Common Signs of Burnout

Interpersonal Problems – When emotionally drained at work, it becomes more difficult to deal with other people. When conflicts occur, a person may overreact with an emotional outburst or increased hostility. Because of this, they may then start to isolate from other people.

Emotional Fatigue – It is common to feel dissatisfied, angry, frustrated or depressed from time to time. When caught in the burnout cycle, however, these negative emotions become predominant. Maintaining oneself throughout the day becomes tiring – a person can lose the ability to face challenges with a positive attitude. They may eventually experience numbness and have difficulty in feeling much of anything.

Low Productivity – During the burnout phase it is common to experience boredom and a loss of enthusiasm for projects. A manager may feel disillusioned or cynical. They may find it difficult to concentrate and harness the energy required to produce quality work. They begin to question whether work is meaningful.

Health Problems – As emotional reserves are depleted, a person may begin to experience physical problems. They may feel constantly tired and run down. Some common physical symptoms include headaches, back pain, colds, insomnia, rashes or hives, chest pains or palpitations, gastrointestinal problems, and nervous tics. Sleep problems are common. Research shows that when people are

experiencing stress in their lives, they are more prone to not only illness, but to accidents. Car accidents are an increased risk since thoughts are not focused on driving.

Addictive Resolutions – To cope with the chronic stress, some may resort to substance use. An increased intake of caffeine on the job is common, along with nicotine, and drugs such as prescription medication and/or alcohol. Some people resort to illegal drug use. Normal activities such as television or computer use can also become addicting. An increase or decrease in food intake may accompany job burnout. These attempts at self-soothing, however, further compound the problem and fail to address the real issues.

Obsessive Thinking – During non-working hours, work continues to preoccupy the mind, even when one is physically involved with other pursuits. Usual spiritual, religious or recreational practices fail to offer relief. Thoughts continually focus on problems rather than on solutions. Some people “work harder,” increasing time spent on tasks, just to try to increase a sense of satisfaction. Often the tasks completed are not the most essential, as judgment becomes impaired with increased stress.

What can executives do to prevent burnout, either in themselves, or in the managers and people they work with?

First, they must recognize that burnout can, does and will happen. This ought to be acknowledged upfront by the people in charge of orientation programs, management training courses and discussions. Let people know that the organization recognizes and cares about preventing it.

Personnel managers should be candid with new employees about the psychological aspects of the work and the intense pressures they may come to feel. The more people know, the less guilt they are likely to feel about their own perceived inadequacies when the pressures begin to mount.

Managers can also keep track of how long people are in certain high pressure jobs and rotate them out of potentially exhausting positions. Don't allow people to work extended hours for any length of time. Changes of pace and demands can shift energy and allow people to replenish and revitalize themselves.

Make sure the organization has ways of letting people know that their contributions are important.

Many performance appraisal programs actually contribute to people's sense that their efforts are unrecognized.

Managers should provide avenues through which people can express not only their anger but also their disappointment, helplessness, hopelessness, defeat and depression. Salespeople, for example, face defeat everyday; others experience frustration when a contract is lost, a product fails, or when competition is strong. When people in defeat deny their anger, it contributes to burnout.

Executives may have a need for peer support. In recent years several groups have formed with members from non-competing industries. The purpose of such groups is to exchange ideas, get feedback, discuss challenges and opportunities, establish compelling goals and to take action. This offers executives an opportunity to receive support that can stave off burnout.

Offering recreational breaks can help. Informal off-site retreats can help revitalize teams as well as individuals and they serve as reward and recognition for hard work.

Offering workshops and regular retraining to upgrade skills is vital. Leaders must actively offer opportunities for people to keep up with rapidly changing demands in order to offset feelings of “not-knowing.” When people feel they lack knowledge and skills, they are prime candidates for helplessness and burnout.

One of the most effective measures against burnout is offering the services of a professional coach. Through weekly sessions, the individual is allowed to express things that might otherwise be repressed and denied because of organizational politics. The person can explore what really matters the most, what strengths and needs are available, and how best to handle stress and challenges. When there is a mismatch of an individual and the job, an effective plan can be made that benefits both the individual and the organization.

If executives fail to see these problems as serious, they may worsen. If executives fail to see that organizational factors can cause burnout, their lack of understanding may perpetuate the problem. Sufferers need to know that their problem has to do with the nature of the job and not their capacity to handle it.

Burnout As a Gift

Burning out at work can be a frightening experience. After all, most people spend the majority of waking hours on the job – more hours, in fact, than is spent with families and friends. When this enormous part of life brings stress, worry, self-esteem issues, anger, depression and detachment, a major personal crisis is generated.

The first impulse is to deny that job stress is finally getting to us. To persevere and keep doing the same things every day, working even harder, is not the answer to finding relief. The cycle is

futile. More work is not going to alleviate the problem of working too hard.

Think of a job burnout crisis as a gift. This is a gift, which tells us that something is wrong. We must look to find answers. Without the burnout crisis, we may never feel prompted to finally answer some critical questions about career and life. See the questions listed below.

It helps to address these questions with a professional coach who provides a safe, nurturing and enlightening setting for exploring these critical life issues.

Critical Career and Life Questions

- What really matters to me?
- What do I like the most about my work?
- What part of my job am I really good at?
- What causes me the most stress and fatigue?
- What can I do about delegating or teaming the parts of my job I dislike the most?
- What do I enjoy doing at work so much that I'd do it even if I weren't paid for it?
- What natural strengths and abilities do I carry into this work?
- Are my strengths and talents applied in my present position, and if not, how can they be?
- If my present position were to disappear, what would I create for my next ideal project?
- What can I do to change my present responsibilities to match my natural abilities?
- What can I do to eliminate the stressful energy drains?
- What can I do to get my personal needs met in light of organizational demands?
- How will I look back on this present situation at the end of my career or life?